

ANALYSIS

My Heart and My Flesh (1927)

Elizabeth Madox Roberts

(1886-1979)

"In *My Heart and My Flesh* Miss Roberts invaded Faulkner's world of miscegenatory degradation (before he had created it), but she handles her subject-matter so obliquely that the impression of horror is softened and dulled. This novel anticipated the interest in abnormal mental states that was to mark the fiction of the 1940s; its experimentation in matters of form--with dialogue printed sometimes like the speeches in a play--recalled Melville. It was much too 'unpleasant' a book to achieve the popularity in store for *The Great Meadow*, which is generally regarded as one of the finest historical novels of our time....

It is inside the mind that Miss Roberts's world--and that of her characters--lies, and once they have laid hold upon it they cannot be dispossessed. After Conway has been burned to death, the heroine of *My Heart and My Flesh* finds herself not deprived but possessed of him thrice over: 'the Conway of the first fact,' whom she had known in life; the 'charred, shrunken ember,' lying in his coffin, half a mile up the street; and the 'third fact,' which 'had already begun to supplant the first,' and which is 'the fact of him as a memory, as finished, as perpetual now and unchanged.' To Jocelle the presence of one man makes another seem more real. 'She looked at the fact suddenly and saw the hidden and absent one.' Looking back into the life of her forebears, Diony sees herself 'as the daughter of many, going back through Polly Brook through the Shenandoah Valley and the Pennsylvania clearings and roadways to England... She even sees her own life as it might have been if the Indians had succeeded in taking her.'

Edward Wagenknecht
The Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 391, 394-95

"Miss Roberts began thinking of her second novel as early as 1923, while she was engrossed in the writing of *The Time of Man*. Finishing *The Time of Man* in February, 1926, she set immediately to the writing of *My Heart and My Flesh*, and completed it a year and a half later. Of this second novel she wrote: 'The method was a steady taking away until there was nothing left but the bare breath of the throat and the simplified spirit.... Out of the icy waters of the frozen pond...she experienced a resurrection. Spirit asserted itself over the necessities of death.' She evidently thought of *The Time of Man* and *My Heart and My Flesh* as anti-theses during the period of the writing. She referred to the 'process of accretion' in the former novel and the 'continual subtraction' in the latter, going on to say: 'Perhaps it is pleasanter to identify oneself with addition than with subtraction. As mathematics, the two processes are of equal value for art.'

Miss Roberts' evident design was to present Theodosia Bell at the beginning of the novel as one of those fortunates on whom all opportunities have been bestowed with a lavish hand: wealth, family position, social prestige, education, musical talent; and then, by the process of 'continual subtraction,' to shear away, one by one, these cultural appurtenances until the naked soul is laid bare to the bone. And then, for Miss Roberts, the human spirit will assert itself by the faith drawn from its own soul, to ascend laboriously from the depths into life. The plan was an ambitious one, not made more workable by the characteristic subjective techniques which Miss Roberts used. The main difficulty she faced was that of avoiding sentimentality, on the one hand, and unintelligibility, on the other. An oversimplified handling of such material could easily dissolve into syrup, and sentimentality seems to have been one of Miss Roberts' chief horrors. On the other hand, to render in full the subtle complexities of the situation from within was to take the very real risk of sacrificing lucidity and confusing the reader past endurance.

Miss Roberts attempted to circumvent this latter danger by introducing the action with a long Prologue, narrated through the mind of Luce Jarvis, a neighborhood contemporary of Theodosia Bell... The Prologue, which fills thirty-three printed pages and is forcibly reminiscent of Marcel Proust's 'Overture' in *Remembrance of Things Past*, contains some of Miss Roberts' finest writing. The girl Luce Jarvis has a

sensitivity and an alertness of impression even more acute than that of Ellen Chesser. Her mind weaves up and down the streets of Anneville, meeting all the major characters of the novel, Anthony, Horace, Charlotte, and Theodosia Bell, Stiggins, Ross, and even, with an exalted leap over miles, Caleb Burns. She gathers and records her impressions of dancing class, Sundays at church, and schooldays at the Seminary with a poetic charm and accuracy which establishes her character securely in the mind of the reader....

But more importantly, Luce is presented as a seeker, a searcher into the underlying reality of appearances; her character and her function are suggested by her name. She is not satisfied with the seeming aspect of things, and although she lacks the maturity to seek into the depths of being, she habitually attempts to. In a remarkable passage of sustained intensity, she tries to discover the 'something within' Charlotte Bell, 'searching down through blood and veins, liver and lights, smelt and kidney.' She knows about Horace Bell's alliances with Tennie Burden and Dolly Brown, and she feels a compassion which she cannot understand for Stiggins, the halfwit stableboy son of Horace Bell. Through the use of juxtaposition, innuendo, and ominous overtones, the development of the story is confusedly foreshadowed: the pride of Theodosia, the decline of the Bells, the miscegenation theme, and even the regeneration of Theodosia.

One of the finest achievements of the Prologue is Luce's creation of the city of Mome, an imaginative world superimposed on the village of Anneville, which becomes an expansive symbol of life's possibilities and limitations as lyrically perceived by Miss Roberts through Luce. We have already observed in *The Time of Man* Ellen Chesser's deeplying dream of a vague idyllic security--a dream which functions to strengthen her spirit for the stresses of everyday life, even as it gives her a standard with which to meet and transform these stresses. Mome (perhaps a portmanteau combination of 'my home') is imaginatively projected out of the materials of Anneville. On its first level of creation, it is the naive wish fulfillment of a sensitive adolescent; it is everything that Anneville is not. It is large, modern, and romantically exciting....

However, toward the end of the Prologue, the imaginary city has become far more significant than a childish daydream. It has severed its ties to any real or simulated place, it has become pure symbol, an unfettered vision of order and value. 'Mome is disposed now, it is not a place now, is and actual substance as it was in the beginning, is becoming entirely what it always was. It has lost its delusion. No one ever called it now by a name.'

Dependent originally for its existence on the imagination of Luce, it becomes a direct expression of the frame of reality through which the novel will move. 'It is the four-arc'd clock of the seasons ticking its tick-tock around the year, and it is the mid-winter spring song of the joree bird, the Carolina wren, when he tee-teedle tee-teedles on a high bare bough on a bright morning in January, spring not being here, not being there, not being anywhere.' It partakes thus of the regular succession of the seasons, the continual flux of nature and the things which inhabit nature. In the swift poetic image of the Carolina wren, Miss Roberts implies both the beauty and the sadness of animate life within a limiting frame of forces....

And here the relationship of the living growing searching human being to the object of his search is vividly suggested--the need, something not of the will, but of the very nature of life itself, to discover the basic fact of life which lies secretive, but alluring like the Sirens of myth, at the very center of being. The passage is extremely elusive, but its general feeling is communicated, and the note of pain which pervades the entire novel is here explicitly sounded. 'It is the beauty of the thing itself welling up within itself continually in a constant rebirth, a resurrection. At any point it partakes of the whole nature of itself--like an onion.' This is certainly clear enough; the continual growth, the harmony, and the overriding beauty expressed in a union, which points to the main theme of the novel: death and rebirth.

'It is nobody's useless old cat, having been stoned three times to death and left by boys in a tin-can heap at the bottom of a gully in Dee Young's pasture, arising, one eye hanging by a thread, to cry 'meauw' of a woman's kitchen doorstep and to drink warm milk from a brown saucer.' And here, another swift concretizing image expresses the fierce basic urge of life to live, to keep its tenacious hold on whatever it is that separates life from death.

This entire section on Mome is written in a rich poetic prose which soars far above the realistic frame of the novel. The metaphorical reach of the images is justified by the sensitive preparation of Luce's perception in the earlier part of the Prologue, and Miss Roberts doubtless intended the creation of Mome as a kind of poetic statement of her ultimate concept of life which the Theodosia action of the book will strive to attain. I think, however, it fails for several reasons. First, the character of Luce, firmly established in the first pages of the novel, disappears out of the story. As we have seen, Miss Roberts hoped to merge Luce into Theodosia, keeping the two apart only so that Theodosia could be seen from without before the reader moves within her. However, Luce has so strongly gripped the reader's attention by the end of the Prologue, that Theodosia is much less interesting in comparison. And secondly, the rest of the novel is not organically attached to the Prologue (as is Proust's), so that this section gives the effect of being obtrusive and superfluous.

Miss Roberts could not have been insensitive to this structural discord, and it is possible that there are two explanations for her inclusion of the Prologue, other than the one already stated. First, she was at this time planning to incorporate *My Heart and My Flesh* into a linked-novel series to be called *The Books of Luce*, with this consideration in mind, the disproportionate prominence of Luce would not be a weakness. And, perhaps more importantly, the creation of the Mome symbol might have weighed more heavily on her evaluation of the total effect of the novel than the resulting defect in structural organization. It is true that the Prologue is too weakly related to the rest of the novel, but it is also true that the total meaning of the novel would be much less without it. If my reasoning is correct, it is an understandable enough fault, and one which she was never to repeat.

At any rate, the narrative effect of the Prologue is reasonably clear... Toward the end of the Prologue, Theodosia and Luce are supposed to merge into one consciousness, and the final section of the Prologue--the description of the Negroes laying water pipes through the village--is to set the scene at Anneville during Theodosia's childhood. Chapter One opens with a more objective narrative tone, showing Theodosia as a vaguely unattractive, spoiled child, already too well convinced of her own superiority. Thus, in the scene when she visits the Negro quarters on the Singleton estate: 'The little negroes would stare with strange dark faces... She knew the half-pleasant disgust felt for the young of another kind, a remote species. Their acts sent little stabs of joy over her, sickly stabs of pleasant contempt and pride!....

And in spite of her pleasant abundance of childhood opportunities, there is something lacking in her complete enjoyment of life.... This 'insufficiency of experience,' which will haunt her until the climactic episode of her self-realization, is the gnawing force which impels her to seek for her spirit. For although Theodosia has everything in the way of external securities, she lacks the one thing which Ellen Chesser possessed as her sole survival strength; this is, of course, an unbidden embracing sense of self. Without this, she is incapable of truly putting her universe in order; she can find no ease or beauty within herself. She rushes frantically from one thing to another--eager, dexterous and dissatisfied.

When her sister Annie dies, Theodosia hears the funeral hymn 'as a bright myth having some celestial, candle-lit meaning she could not understand.' The mysteries of death and life have no roots in Theodosia's experience. She is unattached to nature, knowing nothing of its cycle of deaths and regenerations. Lacking a solid core of self-identity, she is evidently unable to feel any real emotion. We are told starkly that her mother, Charlotte Bell, 'died one cold season when the town was numb and bewildered with the unaccustomed freezing.' There is no comment about Theodosia.

This lack of a self-centered ordering mechanism in Theodosia probably explains the rapid pace at which the first chapter moves. Its many external events are not realized in a central core, and therefore there is very little real accumulation of personality. This flurry of meaningless activity is mirrored in the swift ejaculative effect of the style... Missing here is the strongly participating vision with which the young Ellen Chesser characteristically views 'the noise outside.' Theodosia is a spectator, unable to measure 'the life that ran upon itself so eagerly' for what it actually is: 'a wind blowing in a mirror.' Accordingly we find no spontaneous realizations of identity--no 'here I am's'--in her running consciousness. She perches like a timid elegant bird on the uncommitted margins of life, willing to see her pretty image reflected in the admiration of others, but incapable of generating any inner loveliness of her own. Here, for example, is a description of Theodosia lying in bed in the early morning, snugly wrapped in her warm superficiality....

The accent of this passage is unmistakably passive rather than active. Theodosia is rendered in terms of 'relaxed languors,' 'floating,' 'drifting,' 'drowning' in 'light negligent laughter.' Comparing her with Ellen Chesser, we can readily see that in the inmost core of her being, Theodosia is dead, or at least unborn. Her life is realized in fragile evanescent meanings, comforted by a tenuous external security which the slightest gust of the weathers will rip aside. It is at this point that the 'process of subtraction' begins, stripping away one by one the false masks beneath which Theodosia conceals her lack of self.

The first illusion to go is her treasured family respectability. She who had for so long assumed an automatic superiority in her family position discovers not only that she is poor, but also that she has two sisters and a brother in the long-loathed Negro community of Anneville. What had been an unquestioned source of identity--to be a Bell of Anneville--becomes a corrupt mocker. She turns toward Anthony Bell, her grandfather, searching him for some root meaning which will establish herself in relation to something absolute, dependable.... As she studies her grandfather, attempting to discover the secret strength that he owns--a strength which she now perceives to be nonexistent within her--she finds herself unconsciously becoming kind to him, gratuitously giving of herself to help him. The Theodosia who could not bear to have the slightest physical contact with anything foul or sick or alien comes to a point where she bathes the old man lovingly.... This tenderness is probably her first large step toward redemption; this is her first unselfish act which, paradoxically, becomes her first experience in the long chain of experiences necessary to her self-discovery.

Meanwhile, even as her search for self continues, the process of subtraction accelerates. Albert Stiles, who had promised to marry her whether she was willing or not, deserts her. And, more importantly, she learns that her hand is not broad enough to accomplish the fingering necessary to move into the outer reaches of musical experience, and her violin becomes an instrument of narcissistic self-pity instead of a way of self-discovery. She had been told that 'music must come out of the soul,' and she had been seized by a fervent passion for music: 'I want to play the fiddle to the end of the earth. I want to go to the end of music and look over the edge at what's on the other side.' Her physical limitations with the violin, however, are symbolic of the spiritual vacancy which marks her uncommittedness to life. Music can express, but it cannot create, the soul; Theodosia with her violin is in a twofold sense a dilettante, not an artist. That the music motif is significant in this novel can be seen in Miss Roberts' notation on Theodosia: 'Why did she not find the soul in music? (language of) approach but not soul itself.'

Conway Brooke, another tentative suitor, dies in the burning of his home, and this death gives Theodosia an opportunity to find a temporary security in a posthumous passion for his memory--a passion which cannot involve her in a real sharing relationship, because it occurred in another country, and besides, the wretch is dead.... In this assumed passion, her occupation becomes that of a shrine servitor; she had no friends; she has no love save that which she lives in the imagined past. She remains in her room, playing the violin, enjoying to the fullest that precious grief, about which Miss Roberts wrote: 'Man, poor creature, loves...his nice prides in little things.... Insofar as he knows only exquisite spiritual sorrows he has not yet begun to suffer and has not yet begun to live'.... The irony of this passage makes the pomposity of Theodosia's sentiments (because they are so unrelated to her life experience) unmistakable.

However, this self-indulgent role of Theodosia's is short-lived; rumor becomes bruited about that Minnie Harter, a young woman of the town, is bearing Conway's unborn child, and with this last illusion sheared away, Theodosia is forced once more to look truly within herself: 'A suspicion grew in the arising confusion of her thought that her own posthumous passion for Conway had been identified with her lost hope of the fiddle, with her tenderness and self-love that had been shielding her limitation from inner examination and despair.... The shock of the argument opened new vistas down into the dark of her inner thought.'

Chapter Four accelerates the pace of the descent into the tomb, and the tone of the prose moves up a pitch giving the effect of a steady, half-heard, unignorable shriek. Theodosia moves as in a dream, unable to find herself, but at the same time, protecting herself from the realization of reality. This is well delineated in a remarkable dream episode which occurs as Theodosia dozes in her vigil beside Anthony's bed. She dreams of the figure of a man, standing before a multitude of haggard women.... The dream symbolizes, at least as one of its meanings, Theodosia's coupling of the basic life urge, the sexual drive,

with something monstrously lewd--something to be hidden away from herself, lest she be soiled by the knowledge. This refusal to accept reality, or to look at it only in the hidden corners of her mind with prurient eyes, is unmistakable evidence of her closing herself off from the wellsprings of life.

We are thus not surprised that after Anthony's death and Horace's departure, leaving Theodosia alone in the great house piled up with debts, she moves to the very edges of insanity, seeking frantically to discover some external support on which she can lean her own emptiness. She goes to the Negro quarters, immersing herself in Americus and Stiggins' incestuous passion and Lethe's violent hatred. In the ugly violence of her sisters' and brother's lives, she finds something active which she can throw herself into, because she possesses nothing solid of her own....

For Theodosia, Lethe's unfaithful husband Ross is identified with Albert, whose body is 'rich with blood and bulk' like the lewd figure of her dream, and she sucks Lethe's anger into herself, goading Lethe to murder, loathing these filthy savage creatures as dark extensions of her own being: 'Theodosia felt her body slipping into the chair and leaning nearer. She wanted justice. She leaned close to Lethe's body, her hands on the edge of the table beside Lethe's hands. She was shut in a complete stillness and she was mingled with Lethe's anger and hate.' On the following morning, Ross is dead at Lethe's hands, and Theodosia, her borrowed energy entirely spent, lies numb with fever.

Chapter Five contains some of the most remarkable writing that I know of in contemporary literature. The time span is approximately eighteen months--eighteen months of a long gray convalescence, in which Theodosia moves to the very edge of suicide, halts, and begins her return to life. The setting and atmosphere are surrealistic; the house (the Singleton estate), the characters, Theodosia's state of mind, the wild dogs--all are blurred into indistinct but insistent shapes which howl at the fringes of the consciousness. The setting is thus a perfect allegorical projection of the hysteria which marks Theodosia's descent into the living veins of her soul. To show more clearly the profound derangement of Theodosia's inner being, as well as the arguments which lead her toward suicide, Miss Roberts employs a dialog which advances with surrealistic logic, alluding to the Bell family history, remembering fragments of disconnected poetry (Browning and Emerson), but more importantly, hammering at the unworthiness of Theodosia to live, if the universe is amoral one--charging her with murder, adultery, and dishonor of her parents. The arguments then shift their tack, holding the position that there is no meaning in life, that man is merely 'a nervous system'; that if goodness had any significance, her sister Annie would never have died....

To this, Theodosia can only counter with the climactic scream of the novel: 'Oh, God, I believe, and there's nothing to believe.' Finally, starved in both body and spirit to the last edge of endurance, Theodosia prepares herself for suicide in the frozen pond. And then her moment of revelation toward which the whole book has been building arrives: 'At once a vivid appearance entered her mind, so brilliant and powerful that her consciousness was abashed...' In this moment of self-recognition and assertion of the will to live the dissociated fragments of Theodosia's being are made whole and beautiful and electric with life.

As her new life begins, the pace of the novel slows to a more gentle, leisurely swing of cadences, approximating the pastoral regularity of the flow of the seasons. Theodosia merges into the life of the country, serving as teacher in a rural school. She learns to accept reality as a growing organism, unafraid now to accept any of its aspects. Thus, when she finds her blackboard covered with obscenities, she is not fearful of evaluating them in proportion to the whole pattern of life.... And when Caleb Burns offers her his love, she finds that her new life has grown over, has absorbed, has amalgamated the old life into itself, and she can go forth to her lover clean and whole....

This remarkable book is extremely difficult to evaluate. Its relative lack of popularity is probably adequately explained by the 'unpleasantness' of its subject matter, as Professor Wagenknecht has pointed out. Glenway Wescott lists it as his favorite of all Miss Roberts' novels, and J. Donald Adams writes: 'It is a novel which has at times an almost terrifying power; dealing with a somewhat Faulknerian theme, it reduces Faulkner to melodramatic claptrap.' Kenneth Burke, on the other hand, writes: 'In *My Heart and My Flesh*, we remain unmoved by the heroine's aberrations, which are conveyed less by psychological disclosure than by tricks of presentation.' It is difficult to imagine how else a novelist can disclose character except by tricks of presentation, but I suppose Burke is referring to the 'Voices' in Chapter Five. Janney's

criticism of the novel strikes me as more fruitful; he recognizes the power of the theme, but finds Theodosia too 'thin' a character to sustain the weight of meaning which the novel lays on her. Miss Roberts herself seems to have been comparably dissatisfied with the character of Theodosia....

Whether of not Miss Roberts' lack of sympathy for Theodosia is the cause, I think it is true that the characterization exerts less of a grip on the reader's empathies than it might conceivably have done. A comparison with one of the great archetypal resurrection figures in literature, King Lear, will make manifest the difference. Lear, going through the same kind of subtraction process to find himself, to incorporate himself into the common membership of mankind, never loses his firm grasp on the reader's affections. Theodosia, on the other hand, stands apart from the reader too long; and, therefore, her torturous trials affect him more as a case history than as a moving literary experience. But granting the slight discord of structural form, allowing for the argument that Theodosia's character tends to alienate the reader, granting even that the subordinate characters (with the possible exception of Anthony Bell) are incompletely realized--still the novel records an achievement which is rare in contemporary American literature. It probes with an awesome honesty into the darkest areas of the human soul, the area where morality and order have their genesis. And without sentimentality it enfleshes the psalmist's cry: 'My heart and my flesh cried out for the living God'; and it answers this cry.

My Heart and My Flesh is a novel that Miss Roberts probably was forced to write after writing *The Time of Man*. As we have noted, *The Time of Man* suggested questions which could not be answered within its symbolic plan; *My Heart and My Flesh* answers these questions. What about the twentieth-century man not on the primitive subsistence level? What about the human being with the advantages of education and culture? Where will he find his morality, his order, his significance in life? These questions we asked, and *My Heart and My Flesh* pointed for answer to the same place. 'Life is from within.' The 'living God' is within; seek there and ye shall find."

Earl H. Rovit
Herald to Chaos: The Novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts
(U Kentucky 1960) 26-47

"The first symptoms of the attenuation of power which Emily Bronte escaped are observable in her very next book, *My Heart and My Flesh* (1927), which introduced the theme that she was to work over and over in the next years: the baffled, humiliated, at times actually violated heroine, after a volume of sleepwalking and groping, punctuated with nightmares, finds a spiritual rebirth in the arms of a strong man who has remained close enough to the soil to be uncorrupted. It is the ancient legend of death, burial, and rebirth, but that is no excuse for solemnity that is always verging on the tedious.

Theodosia Bell, the heroine of *My Heart and My Flesh*, suffers two shocks amounting to traumatic experiences: she is brutally deserted by her lover who, overnight, and without even a decent shadow of subterfuge, turns his ardor to another girl, and she discovers that her dissolute father is also the parent of three Negroes, two girls by one woman and a half-witted boy by a second. In an effort to discover her own identity, which has become confused in her mind as a result of these new relationships, she befriends the Negro girls. When the older one murders her lover and the younger sleeps with the idiot brother, Theodosia becomes unbalanced and goes off to live in the country with a crazy aunt who half-starves her. Rescued by the local doctor, she recovers and regains her mental and physical health in a simple rustic atmosphere and with the admiration of a fundamental man. In Caleb Burns, the farmer, 'there was a sense of the whole country, of the rolling farms as owned up and down the watercourses and farther, including the town, Anneville and beyond, other towns, Lester, Quincy, all the reach of the entire region.'

Miss Roberts' solution of a reconciliation with natural things is expressed in the final paragraph, where Caleb wanders about the farm at night: "The leaves of the poplar tree lifted and turned, swayed outward and all quivered together, holding the night coolness. The steps returned to the pasture, going unevenly and stopping, going again, restless. They went across the hollow place and came back again toward the rise where the cows lay. They walked among the sleeping cows, but these did not stir for it was a tread they knew."

Louis Auchincloss
Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists

"It is the story of a woman who went to hell and returned to walk among you.' So Miss Roberts described *My Heart and My Flesh*, a book that, like *The Time of Man*, explores the individual's relations to his family, to his society, to the earth which surrounds him, to the religion of tradition, and to his inmost self. The problems are similar but the approach to them is different in *My Heart and My Flesh*. In the later book Miss Roberts scrutinized the capacity of Theodosia Bell, a sensitive woman of some intellectual pretensions, to withstand affliction. Unlike Ellen Chesser, Theodosia is, for most of her history, at several removes from the earth and the realities to be found in unsophisticated rural life. The book is the converse of *The Time of Man* because, as Miss Roberts said, the method used for artistic creation was that of subtraction rather than addition. To Ellen all things are slowly but steadily given, but from Theodosia all things are taken away....

The book has a Job-like theme: what are the limits of affliction that a human being, unassisted, can bear? In her papers Miss Roberts indicated that, in this novel, her purpose had been 'to isolate a human spirit, to separate it from circumstances, to find it beyond the influence of fortune, to part and lay back and away everything that can be set aside, life remaining.' In her youth and maturity Theodosia, accordingly, undergoes great suffering. As she tries to dispel her agony, she is to be identified with the spiritually undefeated psalmist whose heart and flesh 'crieth out for the living God.' Her journey from happiness to despair to regeneration, from spiritual confidence to spiritual humiliation to spiritual reconciliation, and from a relative superficiality to unwonted suffering to a poised serenity, prescribes the arc and structural line of this searching novel. In the first four chapters Theodosia's deprivation, bereavements, and disillusionments gather with cumulative weight as she gradually descends into the Hell of apathy and disbelief in Chapter V.

In Chapter I Theodosia flourishes on the praise of her family and friends. Light is more direct and the sounds are more clear than elsewhere in the novel. At the Singleton farm, the brilliant light from off the walnut tree and the pleasant, firm voices of her relatives 'proclaiming themselves now in their real and permanent, unillusory aspect, in their true cause and relation' betoken inner illumination and outward stability. Her values will never again be so clear, and life will never be so full of ceremony and comfort for her. Thereafter, torment and frustration afflict Theodosia and her affluence diminishes.

At this time musical ability sets her apart, though Anthony Bell, her grandfather, overestimates her talent. Such evasion of the truth is constitutional with Anthony Bell and his aristocratic caste. When Theodosia discovers the unsavory truth about her father and his mulatto progeny, Anthony is horrified more by Theodosia's knowledge of the scandal than he had been by the scandal itself. Anthony Bell, with his noble instincts and sentiments and his inability to flourish in a ruthless environment, is symbolical of his magnanimous but ineffectual class. His son Horace perceives in his father those fine qualities which he himself has not inherited: 'Faithful to his ideal, honest with all men, proud, gentle, as tender as a woman.' Anthony's suffering from palsy and his decline to senility are in counterpoint to Theodosia's mounting life, which reaches its height in Chapter II when her grandfather first becomes helpless.

More than most novelists, Miss Roberts in this book, as in her others, suggested through image and metaphor what she was unwilling to express by direct statement. Accordingly, she used vivid olfactory images to mirror the decay of Theodosia's class. As Theodosia searches in the attic papers, she is overcome by 'the stale odors of decaying paper and dust,' and her own past now seems 'a moldy smell on rotting paper, a faint stench and a choking dust.' The gradually dying Anthony Bell gives off 'a moldy smell of age putrefaction,' 'some flower in his decay.' In Chapter V the unkempt Singleton farmhouse provides oblique commentary upon aristocratic decline. The once noble dwelling has a leaking, sagging roof and dark, moldy, airless rooms; and overpowering 'thick vapors and gasses' emanate from the stinking dogs running wild inside.

Theodosia is, for a time, the victim of the forces which have submerged her family, but in the end she rises victorious over them. Miss Roberts' design for the novel converged upon Theodosia's partial defeat as preliminary to her rebirth, if we may judge from her letter to Mr. Huebsch, August 19, 1927. Commenting upon his proposed title for the novel 'Full Circle,' Miss Roberts emphasized how closely Theodosia's

cyclical progress was involved with the fortunes of her family: 'As I see Theodosia, her life is something of an epitome of the history of the Bells. That line has its youth and rise and decay, and then, in the person of the girl, finds new birth in union with the simple and uncomplicated earth. The girl's life and spirit describe the same arc.

Theodosia endures some decisive misfortunes in Chapters I and II. Her happy, ordered existence is, however, less displaced by them than it should be. Her sister, her mother, and her uncle Tom Singleton (her direct link with the earth) all die, her pride in family passes as a result of her research in the attic papers, her grandfather castigates her for her disclosures to him of what she had found in these documents, and her father's incestuous advances discompose her. Her superficial security is first pierced by the sight in Chapter II of her grandfather's wasted body which initially inspires revulsion in her, then tenderness when she brings herself to care for him. 'She had grown in the interval' from her first shudder at touching him.

In Chapters III and IV Theodosia's losses accelerate, but she is not yet prepared to adapt herself to altered circumstances. She loses her most importunate suitor, Albert Stiles, to a newcomer in Anneville; and his more genteel and sympathetic rival, Conway Brooke, dies in a fire. Here as elsewhere in the novel, her inner life is mounted against the outer and inner reality of music, and becomes more concentrated as a result of such stimulus. She confides each of her experiences of love and loss to the violin; and the quality of her playing, at any given moment, reflects her exaltation, her agitation, or her disillusionment. Albert's words of love are, accordingly, translate to a 'trill' that contains their essence, and Theodosia is triumphant: 'Her mind was suffused with half-knowing, drunk with sense, but her fingers knew their cleverness and the trill lived on while she floated in the reality of consenting fiber and essence.' After his death Conway lingers on in her mind to be with her as she plays her violin, 'and she had a pensive happiness in the running, singing parts she played, or she supplied a second-fiddle part in her thought, her ear leaning inwardly to listen.' Music provides a means for her not only to aspire and search her spirit, but to know more closely the sordid aspects of the Bell inheritance when, for example, she teaches her mulatto half-sister Americy to play the guitar and plays her fiddle at Americy's home.

After Conway Brooke's death Theodosia loses him a second time when the town accuses him of being the lame Minnie Harter's lover and the father of her stillborn child. Theodosia denies these rumors, but seems to accept their truth later when her half-sister Lethe accuses her of being unable to hold a man. The sequences in which she loses her lovers are each followed by visits to her mulatto half-sisters Americy and Lethe: '...Lethe. River of forgetfulness. Her name shall be Lethe, saying, I forgot myself...Americy. A whole continent to name an incontinent hour.' Chapters III and IV thus alternate scenes of forfeiture with visits to her previously unknown and unacknowledged relatives. They are all lost souls together. Theodosia's motives in seeking out her 'family' comprise curiosity, retreat from unbearable pain at home caused by Anthony's death and Horace's callousness, a masochistic desire to expiate her own suffering by acknowledging a degrading reality, and an intuition that resolute honesty at this point can alone cleanse a tarnished family name and rip aside the pretenses which have prevented the Bells for so long from leading a genuine life. As Miss Roberts says in her notes, these experiences are for Theodosia 'not altogether disaster, but a richness of living.'

There is as yet little spontaneous charity in Theodosia's responses, especially in those prompted by her mulatto relatives. As to Americy, Theodosia's mind 'reverted to its loathing and gloated on its disgust'; toward Lethe, she experiences the same disdain and attraction she might feel for a wild animal. Her half-brother Stiggins, a stable hand whose mother had been the half-demented Dolly Brown, 'spread onto her mind once as a flat unrecognized affront,' and she complacently regards the gulf between herself and the boy. At the same time he offers the greatest challenge to the idea of God's providence. Stiggins is the lowest in the human scale, 'a link between what men keep and what they throw away.' Miss Roberts intended Theodosia at this point to voice an anguished perplexity at Stiggins' very existence.... Theodosia perceives with shock and envy that Stig has 'the fiddle hand,' whereas her own physical endowment is unequal to her musical knowledge and ambitions. Others like Albert, Frank, and Lethe also own the strong large hands which a perverse Fate has denied her. Even her grief for the dead Conway Brooke is self-centered and not charitable, as she comes to realize. She has kept alive her emotions for him because of her need to be compensated for 'her lost hope of the fiddle,' and she becomes aware of the 'tenderness and self-love that had been shielding her limitations from inner examination and despair.'

The early part of Chapter IV charts Theodosia's reactions to her second loss of Conway as a result of the town rumors. At such a time of stress Theodosia again seeks her half-sisters. This opening scene is more sinister than her encounters with them in Chapter III because she now introduces Stiggins to the family circle. In frenetic counterpoint, the idiot boy descants on a struggling rat shut in a water tank, Americy plays her guitar and prays to God, Lethe taunts Theodosia with losing her lovers, and Theodosia inflames Lethe with jealousy and searches for evidences of soul in Americy and Stiggins.

With the ensuing death of her grandfather, Theodosia's hold on reality weakens further; with her father's renewed advances, the securities she had once known completely crumble. At this point she dreams of Bacchanalian women who surround a towering male figure in a lewd pose. This figure has on its body protuberances evidently meant to be phallic emblems pointed at the women. Rovit interprets this dream as a sign of Theodosia's retreat from sexual reality, but the proximity of the dream to Horace Bell's furtive approaches to her suggests, I am sure, that it applies to Horace rather than to Theodosia. In a letter dated July 22, 1927, to Mr. Huebsch, Miss Roberts was alarmed at the suggestion that this particular passage might be offensive to the censors and offered to alter it. Whether she toned down the passage we do not know, but she went on to say, 'This man, Horace, has been my concern for the past week, and the dream was my standby for getting him focused as he appeared to his daughter.' The dream makes Horace the monster that his lascivious overtones to his gently bred daughter have shown him as being in intention.

Theodosia's alienation and disillusion are now so radical that she seeks for the second time in Chapter IV her outcast relatives. The scene reaches a climax of horror as the slobbering half-wit Stig lies in the drunken embrace of his half-sister Americy; the scene thus parallels the incestuous nightmare with Horace that Theodosia has just lived through. Theodosia now stands over Lethe to merge herself with her half-sister's hatred of Lou, who is Lethe's rival for Ross's love. Theodosia wants to keep Lethe's passion at red heat; her unacknowledged motive is to incite Lethe to murder in the hope that such external violence will allay the violence in her own soul. Thus Ross or Lou, either one, may become a substitute victim to avenge Theodosia upon Albert Stiles or his new sweetheart. Infected by her father's touch, Theodosia becomes an agent of evil who is indirectly responsible for the incest of Stiggins and Americy and for Lethe's murder of Ross. Lethe's sudden embrace of Theodosia before she leaves on her mission of vengeance establishes Theodosia's complicity in Lethe's crime--in evil and original sin. This is the only time Lethe overcomes her repugnance to Theodosia; and Lethe gains new strength from this personal contact, as energy drains from Theodosia.

In spite of the severe illness and 'the heart of this remote Death' which descend on her after the events of this night, Theodosia feels life come back--not because she wills it but because its force is too strong to be deflected. The land as a presence stirs in her mind, especially the memory of her animating visits to the Singleton farm when she was a girl. The prospect of another stay at this farm now promises relief to Theodosia's tortured spirit: 'As if bandage had been removed from a recent hurt or fracture, the confines of the town taken away, she spread painfully out through the hills and fields, through the ways to go.'

Theodosia's hopes are ironically at variance with the actuality. Instead of finding relief from pain, she is yet to be tried in body and soul almost beyond endurance. Thematically and structurally, the pattern of the book depends upon this contrast between Theodosia's aspirations and the actualities she encounters. Before going to her aunt's, she has been chastened by life to the point of seeing that regeneration will lie through contact with the earth. She is not yet capable, however, of self-effacing, sustaining, serious love.

Fruitful contact with the land, which might have led quickly to spiritual self-possession, is denied her until she has weathered eighteen more months of suffering. The farm with its poorly tended acres contrasts with the verdant fields which she had known there as a girl and which she had expected to find again. Her aunt is as mean-souled as her husband Tom had been open-natured. Where the springs of healing nature should flow, bleak winter weather freezes into immobility all currents of energy. In the preceding chapter the harrowing death of Anthony Bell, the scarifying sequences with the mulattoes, the climactic murder of Ross by Lethe, Theodosia's sickness of body and mind, and her unnerving dreams all lead into 'the nether hell' of Aunt Doe's farmhouse in Chapter V, where aging but untrained and untamed dogs are the tutelary demons and where all warmth and comfort have departed. Theodosia's complete degradation occurs when

her Anneville admirer, the young lawyer Frank Riley, pursues her when she is too cold and weak from hunger to resist him.

When her aunt begrudges her the food to sustain life, Theodosia's spirit weakens, and she is unable to hold in equilibrium the conflicting forces of her being. She is nearly crazed when hallucinatory Voices accuse her of crime and treachery. Overcome by despair, she plans to drown herself in the icy pool a short distance from the house. Inexplicably, life rises in her to dispel the bleakness and aridity of her soul, and she now knows that she must break away from her spiritual prison. In Chapter VI Theodosia's resurrection occurs, amid the vernal abundance of Spring Run Valley. Returned to her are all things that she had lost and more, with her stabilizing and deeply felt love for Caleb Burns.

Theodosia always had within her being a sense of God's abundance; she now, more completely than before, embodies 'the gift of God' (the meaning of her name) in the throbbings of life which surge through her. Theodosia's authentic vitality both mystifies and entrances Caleb Burns: 'Whenever I touch you...I have to take a deeper breath to accommodate the new life that's grown in me.' Theodosia becomes indeed the center now of all vital life, and the birds sing joyously 'as if it were to celebrate the coming of Aphrodite among the herds.' Only in Chapter VI does Theodosia encounter a reality that surpasses expectation, in life on the land and in love of Caleb Burns. Again, of course, the pattern is like that in the book of *Job*, when after unexpected and unexplained suffering, Job receives rewards to compensate for previous tribulation.

Theodosia's Despair

In her downward journey to hopelessness, Theodosia searches, with increasing agony and pessimism, into the nature of reality. She is, as Miss Roberts said in her notes, 'man looking only upon the wonders of his inner part, pushing his gaze deeper and deeper as the matter there parts and yields to his look. Theodosia is one with suffering flesh, raw nerve and aching cerebration.' Theodosia's quest has violent aspects in that her values must be reordered radically and her earlier existence shattered.

To convey Theodosia's dislocation, Miss Roberts had recourse throughout the novel to images of fracture, splitting, and violent motion. These images predominate in Chapters II, III, IV, and V but are in abeyance during the tranquil concluding chapter. After her father tries to embrace her, Theodosia feels her soul taking form from this rude encounter: 'She had identified it [her soul] with a swift moment of concentrated loathing, cut it free with hate.' When her teacher tells her that she does not have a good fiddle hand, Theodosia experiences 'a sensation as of a keen blade cutting a cold path down her back near her spine.' To accompany the frenzied reunion at Americy's, Theodosia plays 'soft demonic music, ill-flavored, crooked, sinister. She brought her playing to crashing discords, softly played, a disturbance working upward through half-tones.'

Theodosia then imagines the contact of Lethe's knife with living flesh: 'Her hand would feel the dull resistance of human bone and it would rain up and down, stabbing deeper with each blow, letting out the blood, tearing through flesh until her hate had eased itself.' Home after her night with her half-sisters and brother, Theodosia is distraught: 'Her body was shaking in curious rhythms that built upward toward a climax and subsided only to arise again, a compound rhythm of quivering flesh.' At her aunt's farm, violence in external nature suggests the extremity of her suffering: 'a wind...would tear life out of the trees.... The cold cut her garments apart and entered her flesh, past her chilled blood.' At the depths of despair, she imagines her approach to suicide in terms of decisive motion: 'the picture of her going, a felt picture, spread downward through her limbs that lay relaxed now, ready for the sudden spasm of movement.'

Theodosia's quest for reality leads her deep into the psyche before she can grasp truth entire. What Rovit has said in this connection is surely the book's greatest distinction: 'It probes with an awesome honesty into the darkest areas of the human soul, the area where morality and order have their genesis.' Before Theodosia can know--or recover for herself--the restorative powers of earth and see herself as a vessel of life, she must know a complete desolation. Her earliest quest, genuine and tormenting as it is, is too self-conscious: 'remembering that the music must come out of the spirit, the soul, she would search inwardly for

some token or glimpse of this shadowy substance, this delicate eidolon. The question arose again and again. The Soul, where and what was it?'

Many of Theodosia's endowments and qualities, even then, do indicate a measure of perception and depth of response: her energy, the flowing currents of life in her, her ethereal and expectant nature ('her rounded breasts...up-tilted...as if they would offer drink to some spirit of the air'); her sense of music as 'an interpretation of life...of mind, mood, thought, by way of sound...sound brought to high refinements, nuances, exquisite variations to make a speech for the spirit of man'; her ambition to 'look over the edge of the last precipice of music...and say "God"'; her endeavor to find in her grandfather 'some last sign of an inevitable substance or kind, perpetually existent, unchanged, beyond delusion'; and her sense of enrichment from contact with her friends. She must, however, lie down 'in the heart of evil' before she can transcend her spiritual weaknesses and the impersonal powers which assail her.

At first, Theodosia finds some evidence of the reality which she is seeking in the personalities of her friends and lovers and in her music. I would not assume, as does Rovit, that Miss Roberts is only satirizing Theodosia's attempts to reach reality because they are then incomplete or misguided. He asserts that her thoughts, as she plays the violin after Conway's death, are pompous and depicted alone with irony.... There is, granted, an overemphasis in the passage which Miss Roberts meant for satire directed at Theodosia. But there is also, I believe, a more subtle irony than the one Rovit brings out. The sentiments in the passage, in fact, comprise much of the central substance of the book: man is born to sorrow, man is a limited being and the thrall of time, man is an aching sensibility, man is part of some larger Entity, man is serene--if sad--only as he works on the land. The ideas are, ironically, more genuine than Theodosia can recognize them as being; she has at this point too little experience to know the validity of her partial perceptions.

In Chapter V, what does Theodosia find when she is visited with greatest adversity and when, concurrently, she reaches most deeply after the truth, prompted by the Voices, which, like the Eumenides, never let their victim rest? The psychic death which enfolds her after Lethe's murder of Ross continues but for intermittent spells of bright and calm. Her existence at the Singleton farm is a nightmare. All vestiges of warmth disappear in the second winter except for ineffectual fires which only make the cold more intense. Like the 'Nether Hell' of Dante, her present surroundings afflict her with cold instead of heat, 'the sour odor of cold cleaving the air, rising from the window ledges and gathering at last to the bed...all night the air would grow more and more dense with cold.' On the point of starvation because of her aunt's miserliness, she is reduced to robbing the dogs of their beslobbered corn pones.

As early as Chapter II, Miss Roberts had accentuated Theodosia's self-centered existence, her increasing withdrawal and isolation, and her intensely subjective search into the roots of her being by use of sound images which betoken, in part, a bustling life led outside of Theodosia in which she has only a modest share. Even at the end of Chapter II, when she experiences the greatest degree of spiritual self-possession, she hears 'remote sounds of retreating steps, coming steps, voices that cried out in low commands or questions, but they said nothing for her beyond the abundant drama of their passing.' In Chapter V, the spectral quality of Aunt Doe's house is intensified by the noises inside and outside: the scuffing and yelping of the dogs, the quick shouts of the liniment man, the muffled motions of Aunt Doe herself, them mournful sound of nocturnal creatures ('a vast throbbing sea of sound beating continually and arising in shrill waves, the crickets, the frogs, the toads, the treetoads, the katydids'), and the even more desolate sounds of winter ('the whining of the wind in the chimney and the crack of the dry burning logs was a clicking of summer insects shut into winter, imprisoned in frost').

Sound is at its most oppressive in the Voices which torture Theodosia's mind, as they engage in dialogue with her. These Voices are insistent rather than loud in contrast to the clamorous noises in Chapters III and IV. These latter begin with the clangor of the fire alarm bell that interrupts Theodosia's dream the night of Conway's death, continue through the horn blares that accompany the vision of the giant man in the lewd pose, and reach their insane climax in Lethe's cries for vengeance and in Stiggins' laugh as he caresses Americy.

The Voices repel Theodosia, yet hypnotically transfix her. They insist that man is alone in the sidereal universe and that he is only 'a nervous system' and 'ten-thousand-footed octopus, a...ten-thousand-footed

serpent, every foot a feeler out to feel something...a maw in the middle of it.' After this ten-thousand-footed serpent breaks ten thousand possible commandments--one for each nerve end--it reaches satiety: 'The whole thing draws itself inside its own maw, lies down to sleep in its snake nest, replete, when it has enough.' Another Voice sums up Theodosia's present situation: 'The foul breath of an old fox-killing bitch on a hot pone and a clock strikes. That's what time it is. There is nothing comparable to it on any other planet. Nothing like it.' Under such attack as this, Theodosia feels the root fibers of her being shrivel, and in anguish she cries out, 'Oh, God, I believe, and there's nothing to believe.'

Miss Roberts intensified in many ways the horror of Theodosia's predicament. In addition to images associated with coldness and with turbulence and quietude, Miss Roberts used animal imagery to suggest that man reverts to the savage when realms of the spirit are altogether lost. The Voices describe man as the 'octopus' with ten thousand 'feelers' while the quarrelsome dogs run loose in Aunt Doe's house. The Voices are also obsessed with butchering a hog. This act runs parallel in Theodosia's mind to Lethe's murder of Ross (both acts represent studied but bloody violence), and it paradoxically yields human nourishment--warm blood and succulent flesh that would succor the starving Theodosia. Snatches from Browning's 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin' recur in this scene; in his litanies the Pied Piper offers to free the country of those creatures that do harm: 'The mole, the toad, the newt, the viper.' In Theodosia's dreams wildness and barbarity now occur. In her principal dream she merges with the hound Congo who tears the flesh and entrails of a fox--'her [Theodosia's] teeth in his flesh.' The animal-like quality of her present existence, the evil of her passion which had incited Lethe to kill Ross, her gradual loss of control over herself, her mounting hysteria, and the actual physical act of tearing living flesh (see Lethe's stabbing of Ross and the sticking of the hog)--all are suggested by this dream.

Theodosia's hyperaesthesia intensifies through Chapters III and IV and reaches a climax in Chapter V. She lives often at the utmost edge of her sensibility, at the highest pitch of nervous intensity, 'parting thought and thought, parting its semi-dark which lies between sleeping and waking.' She might have asked, as Miss Roberts herself did in her journal, 'Why are we lumps of raw nerve, quivering mass of quick pain?' Theodosia's conjuring of allegorical presences and her belief in them as real betokens a mind increasingly disordered. In defending Conway's memory, she defies Song to prevent her from achieving her musical ambition; in Lethe's presence Hate becomes a 'hungry god, ravenous, beside an altar waiting for food'; and the Voices which harass her have an all too vibrant reality. At the time that the Voices first speak to her, she has lost normal health and responsiveness: 'She would lie in an apathy, scarcely breathing, divided in mind, uncoordinated by hunger and unintegrated by pain.'

As pressures on Theodosia mount, impressions of sense become increasingly deformed. At the time of Conway's death, for example, the fire alarm which she hears in sleep flattens out to an ill-defined shape on the ceiling of her room as she awakens. When she arrives at her aunt's, the way the bed leaps at her when she comes into her room, recedes when she focuses on it, and again assumes 'unapprehended proportions' when she withdraws her attention from it foreshadows her increasing derangement. Thereafter, she experiences night noises as a 'great swinging water,' in visual as well as in auditory terms. As she begins to suffer acutely from cold, hunger, and desolation, she hears the cry of a woodpecker outside, which to her jangled senses 'lay along the ceiling and was interlaced with the faded rose and pearl of the vignettes there.' After one of her hallucinations Theodosia looks from the window and sees crows whose movements seem divorced from their bodies, and these are then assimilated to the senses of sound and sight: 'the movements of the birds and the birds being two separate things, unrelated. When the birds were gone the movement remained, sobbing against the wall of light.' Somewhat later, she starts from a reverie, 'the act a sudden cry to the departing light.' Once again, a tangible act is rendered not through kinesthetic but through visual and auditory images.

Theodosia's 'Abundance as a Sensitive Body and Mind'

In her bleakest moments, however, there are forces acting to save Theodosia. When the Voices insist upon man's insignificance, Theodosia protests that a human being can realize the pain and aimlessness of life and still say, 'God, God.' She is pleased to find, as evidence of pattern and order in a chaotic universe, a sparrow's nest lined with her own hair; and if her violin music now seems 'spectral' and void of passion, she can experience, after the hallucination just mentioned, a melody which 'lived as a fragile pattern creeping from key to key, spontaneously erecting itself out of some inward repository of dancing, sinking and rising.'

Even at the moment when she has decided upon suicide, she regards her fiddle as 'identical with some abstract goodness that would never be stated.' Though Theodosia's cry of disbelief is climactic, it is immediately preceded by an equally emphatic assertion, 'You couldn't blaspheme the human mind, you couldn't ever.' In Theodosia's inner drama, the negative forces momentarily triumph; they all but have their way with her before positive energies assert themselves.

Over her numbed psyche the sense of abundant earth soon presides. She had been close to earth as a child; she had, in fact, been born at Linden Hill before her grandfather had had to sell the family estate. At the town house in Anneville she had dug in the soil as a child and had still felt near to the spirit of earth. The house is thus entwined with her memories of beneficent nature, as are her memories of the Singleton farm: 'I perceive the earth, myself imbedded into it, attached to it at all points...sinking at each moment into it.'

The cord to earth, once established, can scarcely be severed. It is no accident, then, that Theodosia's nearly extinct life force revives and that she regains, after harrowing experience, the peace she had known in an earlier state of innocence. The serene accord with earth returns to Theodosia; this fact illustrates the cyclic aspect of natural phenomena. A pattern such as this of loss and gain is reinforced by many images of motion, flow, and rhythmic movement in the novel. Fatality may be for the moment decisive, but the very flux of life is bound to lessen its eventual impact; and what was once known with joy we may perhaps recover. Even at a time of only partial understanding, Theodosia perceives the unstable, ever-changing aspects of human existence as adumbrating some deeper, less transitory reality: '...the song of the mockingbird became the atmosphere one breathed, a touched substance, giving life to the breath of man, set about the earth to flow with the winds. The tall swaying grass with its sunlight was the people of the earth, the reason for the continuance of the world.'

In contrast to the winter days of despair before Theodosia had left her aunt, the novel serenely ends on a warm summer night as Theodosia falls off to sleep on an open porch. Miss Roberts' modulation in Chapter VI of two consistently used strands of imagery diffuses still more this atmosphere of tranquility. Distant sounds are no longer a symptom of Theodosia's alienation but a sign of her identification with the human community. Voices at night now become 'the refrains from some flowing song into which she had gone and in which she lived,' the cries of nocturnal creatures now 'set stars of sound into the mellow black,' the far-off song of Caleb Burns at oat harvest thrills her with its energy, and the echoing steps heard at night from among the cattle reassure her instead of oppressing her.

Tones of twilight and dusk or the darkness of peaceful night suffuse these last pages, tones at variance with the incandescence which had emanated from whatever had once enlisted her aspirations--for instance, her music, her teacher, or the presence of Conway Brooke. The nocturnal serenity of these last pages also contrasts with the gloom dominating the sequences with Stiggins, Americy, and Lethe and the hopeless life she had led with her aunt. The tranquil twilight close of the novel, in which Theodosia achieves self-possession, also differs from those sections of the novel in which fitfully receding light recorded Theodosia's own uncertainties.

Thus the wavering sunset light in the sky upon her return from her first visit to her sisters indicated her unsettled nature at the time and her ambiguous attitude toward her newly acknowledged relatives. For much of the novel, she is in the state of 'confused dark' which governs her feelings toward Conway or in the state of 'enveloping confusion and distrust without and within' which marks her emotion toward her dying grandfather. At Spring Run Valley she no longer plays the violin so much or so lovingly to help her probe her inmost being. She plays it spontaneously now, as an expression of her inner harmony rather than as an accompaniment to her restless searchings of spirit.

Miss Roberts' subtle, artful use of imagery embracing the contrasts between light and dark, between sound and silence, enabled her to realize her intention for this last chapter.... All the energies of primeval earth are summed up in Caleb Burns, Theodosia's lover at the end of the novel. He is a shaper of nature's resources, building new forms such as superior Shorthorn cows from out of her vast array of materials, 'man borrowing and shaping a little the power under the earth.' As an embodiment of natural forces, he is the repository of ancient wisdom, a rustic oracle. Such men as he are the best the soil produces, men whose

conscious knowledge is less weighty than their instinctive elan, men whose 'learnings were ceremonials far apart from their richer flow of living.' In his instinctive wisdom, Caleb sees the vastness of nature, how man extends back into time and forward into ages yet unborn. He celebrates a golden age, existing once in the past, a garden of Eden, but he also keenly looks 'forward to a city, a place, streets of gold, jasper walls.'

Some of nature's manifestations, however, are more violent than reassuring. In a pastoral setting cruelty is a necessary part of life. Thus 'The Good Shepherd' in Spring Run Valley who loves his sheep eventually leads them to the vehicles which take them to the slaughter. Even the fine Shorthorns Caleb will eventually kill for food for himself and others: 'he would, with his men to help, stab the young beast at the throat and hang it to bleed, one of his men catching the blood in a bucket, a bucket of blood running out of a young beef, warm stuff, sickening to the smell, stuff that nice people fear.' Thus all is not idyllic at Spring Run Valley. The stench of the slaughterhouse fills the countryside, and the heads and feet of the butchered animals are gnawed clean by the dogs that fight all night when an animal has been newly killed. The nocturnal snarling of the dogs is, in essence, a ritualistic preliminary to the nourishing feasts that will follow the next day for the country folk.

All such contradictions Miss Roberts gathered up into the symbol of Mome, described at some length in the prologue to the novel. The city of Mome, in its physical appearance in the imagination of Luce (Luce is the 'point-of-view' character in the Prologue, who does not figure elsewhere but whose mind focuses independently upon many of the characters and relationships in the novel), is composed of brilliantly lit sections contrasted with dark alleyways. Mome is a symbol, first, of all realizable or still unrealizable glamor, 'where marble causeways ran up to marble stairs and tall white walls gave out onto high balconies, cool and fresh in a sweet wind, the people eager and exact and clear, intent with being.'

If Mome is a symbol of all that is ineffable, a symbol of aspiration and inward seeking ('the reach toward the last word), it is also a symbol of the tawdry: 'nobody's useless old cat, having been stoned three times to death and left by boys in a tin-can heap at the bottom of a gully in Dee Young's pasture, arising, one eye hanging by a thread, to cry 'meauw' on a woman's kitchen doorstep and to drink warm milk from a brown saucer.' Mome includes also the cruelty to be found in the natural world ('the wide-opened jaw of a hound blowing hot breath on a little field beast') and Caleb Burns slaughtering the young calf for food. Mome is at once 'the new food and the new hunger'; it combines the disturbing facts which exist and the possibility of constant rebirth and resurrection, 'the beauty of the thing itself welling up within.' As the 'four arc'd clock of the seasons,' Mome gathers all weathers and times into itself and, by implication, all contrarities. Thus Mome is the living thread of the nerves 'knotted into a net and contrived to catch and to hold pleasure and pain, chiefly to hold pain.'

Rovit views the Prologue to *My Heart and My Flesh* as a structural blemish, largely because of its loose connections with the rest of the novel. We can also view the prologue more favorably as containing in the thoughts of the detached observer, Luce, the essence of the book and as throwing an oblique light upon it. These opening pages should be read as prologue and epilogue, much as the prologue or first section of a Faulkner novel should be reread in light of the work as a whole. The prologue of *My Heart and My Flesh*, I think, defines in clearest perspective some of the book's ramifications of meaning.

Miss Roberts foreshadowed in this Prologue many of the situations and relationships presented in the fully-fleshed novel. Luce sees Theodosia as a little girl leading the dance line in the Sunday School exercise, 'spread[ing] a trail of herself' in her pride. Thus Theodosia is at the height of fortune before the novel proper begins; thereafter the process of subtraction starts. Luce sees darkness come over Charlotte Bell's face when Charlotte thinks she is not observed. Luce then dismembers Charlotte in a fantasy of violence as though Charlotte were a slaughtered animal ('she emptied the heart out of it and flung out the entrails, for she had seen men butcher a hog.') In spite of her minute search Luce finds nothing although, as soon as Charlotte is reassembled, the presence of something valuable within speciously asserts itself. Charlotte's inner vacancy has its counterpart in Theodosia's relative shallowness of soul at the beginning; Luce's penetration of Charlotte suggests Theodosia's endeavors to pierce through their bodies to the souls of those whom she knows. Luce's disordered fantasy, of course, foreshadows Theodosia's vision of horror in Chapter V of the novel. Luce's dismembering of Charlotte also is related to Theodosia's later obsession with the slaughtering of animals.

The discussion of original sin by the local minister, whose evangelical fervor creates a similar fervor among the self-righteous in his community--'the fearful definition which was heavy with meaningless wordings'--has more than superficial relevance to the evils of miscegenatory passion, irresponsible behavior, and deadened feeling seen throughout the novel. Miss Roberts also emphasized the lack of charity in those who smugly instruct their children that they too can sin and offend God. The description of Eve by the Sunday School teacher as 'a terrible instigator of Want-of-conformity-to' applies directly to characters like Horace Bell, Doe Singleton, and Lethe, who know of no moral law to observe. On the other hand, most of the other women in the novel, including Charlotte Bell and the young Theodosia, and Anthony Bell conform too readily to prescriptive standards.

The effectiveness and the worth of the novel depend finally upon the success of the character of Theodosia. Rovit interprets her more negatively than the evidence warrants, I think. He asserts that the 'mysteries of death and life' are not meaningful to her: 'Lacking a solid core of self-identity, she is evidently unable to feel any real emotion.' This may describe in part the early Theodosia but even then she can feel more deeply than Rovit indicates. The point of the novel, I think, is that Theodosia does not use to the full the qualities which she abundantly possesses even at the start. Her charm and freshness, felt from the first, are always genuine and insistent; if she is misguided, she appeals to our sympathies. Part of Miss Roberts' achievement is her moving presentation of a woman whose immaturity never makes us impatient, since suggestions of the inner richness that will surely prevail, once circumstances develop her character, are always present. If others have the soul she lacks (though few of those do who surround her), she feels disabled by its absence, and is oppressed by the 'beauty, yearning [which] surround a great nothing' in the core of her being. Her pride and foibles are 'gentle conceits' rather than radical vices.

As a woman who has to learn to use her abundant resources of spirit, Theodosia is persuasively presented. Miss Roberts, moreover, thought of her heroine as having just such inexhaustible inner wealth: 'My ideal title would center to the woman and her abundance as a sensitive body and mind...' The novel may not reach quite the dimensions which Miss Roberts had hoped for it. But if it does not do so, it is less through failure with Theodosia than with the residue of the novel. Milieu and subordinate characters are credible; though they are presented solely through Theodosia's mind, the people who surround her are firmer than many critics have granted. It is not the reality of setting and character which is in question so much as the relevance of these elements in the novel to Theodosia's intensive development.

Miss Roberts did not conceive subsidiary characters and setting with quite the same force as she did Theodosia. Except for the Singleton farm, there is nothing extraordinary in the novel's decor. Nor are the other figures in the novel altogether strong enough to serve as effective foils to Theodosia. The novel accordingly lacks the scope which its theme demanded, as well as some of those resonances of meaning which we might expect from an artist as subtle as Miss Roberts. As a saga of aristocratic decline *My Heart and My Flesh* attains neither the grandeur nor the solidity of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* But with these qualifications put aside, we can regard Miss Roberts' virtually unknown novel as one of the most powerful in recent Southern fiction."

Frederick P. W. McDowell
Elizabeth Madox Roberts
(Twayne 1963) 107-27

"The marks of Roberts's prose style and this 'striving backward' toward dignity and peace are on all the fiction that followed. *The Time of Man* had come out of the 'little country' surrounding Springfield. *My Heart and My Flesh* (1927) came out of the artist's struggle to find herself. She began it in 1923, the year of her sojourn to Stockbridge. Theodosia Bell's dark and even more lonely journey is from aristocratic innocence and a disturbing emptiness through a series of deprivations into the nightmare fears of her unconscious, to near death at Aunt Doe's, and then to rebirth. The account of her travail prompts comparisons of this novel with Faulkner and Dostoevsky, and Winters's claim that, like Melville, she 'possibly comes closer to involving the whole consciousness than does the more perfect...Henry James.' The series of unworthy suitors, her father's incestuous interest, and her mulatto siblings' sexuality and violence support Simpson's reading of Theodosia's artistic handicap as emblematic of the 'deformation of Theodosia's consciousness by the crude sexuality of the demythologized historical society in which she strives for her identify as an artist.

Roberts wrote of Theodosia's 'rebirth in union with the simple and uncomplicated earth.' Theodosia desperately wants the fullness of life, and the book teems with life until she reaches the nadir of her fortunes. But it falters in realizing her transformation: contemplating suicide, she reaches for a word to which she can hold--'tomorrow' is a substitute for it. Then she recognized 'pride in life and joy'--Simpson calls it an orgasmic spiritual ecstasy--and the next thing we know her fear is gone and she is an Aphrodite fertility goddess figure capable of love and of union with Caleb, nature, and the community."

William H. Slavick
"Elizabeth Madox Roberts"
eds. Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bain
Fifty Southern Writers after 1900
(Greenwood 1987) 415-16

Michael Hollister (2021)