

Elizabeth Madox Roberts:

LIFE IS FROM WITHIN

By ROBERT PENN WARREN

"THE TIME OF MAN," the first novel by a spinster of forty-five, was published in 1926. It was received with almost universal acclaim. Edward Garnett, reviewing the English edition, flatly described the author as a genius. And such varied admirers as Joseph Wood Krutch, Ford Madox Ford, Robert Morss Lovett, T. S. Stribling, and Glenway Wescott were not much less guarded in their praise. Furthermore, the novel was a best-seller and an adoption of the Book-of-the-Month Club. The next year "My Heart and My Flesh" was, again, a success, book club and all. By 1930, with the appearance of "The Great Meadow," the fourth novel, it was impossible to discuss American fiction without reference to Elizabeth Madox Roberts.

By the time of her death in 1941 Elizabeth Madox Roberts had lived past her reputation and her popularity. Now she is remembered only by those who read her in their youth when she was new, and news. The youth of today do not even know her name.

Elizabeth Eleanor Madox Roberts was born on October 30, 1881, in the village of Perryville, Kentucky, where one of the crucial and most bloody battles of the Civil War had been fought and where her own father, a raw volunteer, age sixteen, had received his baptism of Federal fire. Both the father and mother were of old Kentucky families, now living, in the backwash of war, in what euphemistically would be called reduced circumstances. Both the father and mother had been teachers, and were lovers of books and carriers of legend; and the imagination of the daughter Elizabeth was nourished on the long sweep of time from which the individual rises for his moment of effort and testing.

But to the sense of time was added a sense of place. Ferryville, and the little town of Springfield, to which the family removed when Elizabeth was three, lie in a fertile, well-watered country on the edge of the rich Blue Grass. It was then a quiet farm country in sight of the Knobs, with the old



Elizabeth Madox Roberts—inner victories.

ways of action, thought, and speech to be found up any lane off the Louisville pike, and sometimes on the pike. In childhood, in young ladyhood, and later as a lonely teacher in back-country schools, Elizabeth Madox Roberts learned those old ways. She knew the poetry of this pastoral quietness, but she knew, too, the violence and suffering beneath the quietness. Her stories grew out of the life of the place, and are told in a language firmly rooted in that place.

Stories grow out of place and time, but they also grow, if they are any good, out of the inner struggle of the writer; as Elizabeth Madox Roberts puts it: "Life Is from Within." So we think of the girl growing up isolated by poverty, dreams, and persistent bad health, trying to find a way for herself, but gradually learning, in what travail of spirit we cannot know except by inference, that hers would not be the ordinary, full-blooded way of the world. And how often in the novels do we find some vital, strong person, usually a man, described as "rich with blood"—and how much ambivalence may we detect behind the phrase?

Over and over again, the heroine of a novel is a young woman who must

find a way. There is Ellen Chesser of "The Time of Man," who struggles in the dire poverty of the poor white, in ignorance, in rejection by the world and by her first lover, toward her spiritual fulfillment. There is Theodosia Bell of "My Heart and My Flesh," who suffers in the ruin of her genteel family, in the discovery of the father's licentiousness and of her mulatto sisters and brother, in rejection in love, in frustrated ambition as a musician in a physical and nervous collapse that draws her to the verge of suicide, but who finds a way back. There is Jocelle, of "He Sent Forth a Raven," who is trapped in a house of death (as Theodosia was trapped in the house of her aunt), is deprived of her lover, is shocked and fouled by a random rape, but who finds a way.

To return to the life of Elizabeth Madox Roberts, she was thirty-six years old when, after the apparently aimless years of schoolteaching in Springfield and the country around, she took the decisive step that put her on the way, and registered at the University of Chicago. Here, a freshman old enough to be the mother of her classmates, she moved into the literary life of the university, associating before long with such young writers of talent as Glenway Wescott, Yvor Winters, Janet Lewis, and Monroe Wheeler. She had escaped from Springfield. But she had brought Springfield with her. And after her graduation she went back to Springfield.

She was forty years old. On the surface she had little enough to show for what Springfield must have regarded as her eccentric adventure, only a Phi Beta Kappa key and a handful of little poems; but in 1922, the year when the handful of poems was published as a volume called "Under the Tree," she began work on "The Time of Man." In it are the sweep of time, the depth and richness of place, and the echo of her own struggle to find a way. These things were the gifts her experience had given.

As she put it in her journal, Elizabeth Madox Roberts had originally thought of "the wandering tenant farmer of our region as offering a symbol for an

Odyssey [sic] of man as a wanderer, buffeted about by the fates and weathers." But by the time she began to write, the main character was Ellen Chesser, the daughter of such a man, and we see her, in the opening sentence of the novel, age fourteen, sitting in the broken-down wagon of their wanderings, writing her name in the empty air with her finger. This "Odyssey" is, essentially, a spiritual journey, the journey of the self toward the deep awareness of identity, which means peace. As for the stages of the journey, again we may turn to the journal:

- I. A Genesis. She comes into the land. But the land rejects her. She remembers Eden (Tessie).
- II. She grows into the land, takes soil or root. Life tries her, lapses into loveliness—in the not-lover Trent.
- III. Expands with all the land.
- IV. The first blooming.
- V. Withdrawal—and sinking back into the earth.
- VI. Flowering out of stone.*

The numbering here does not refer to chapters, but to the basic movements of the story, which the author took to be, to adapt the phrasing of one of the reviewers, an emblem of the common lot, a symbol of the time of man.

The abstract pattern given in the journal is, in the novel itself, fleshed out in the story of Ellen Chesser. In this life of shiftless wandering she yearns for a red wagon that won't break down. Later, as she passes by the solid farmhouses set amid maples and sees the farmers on sleek horses or encounters their wives with suspicion in their glance, and learns that she is outcast and alienated, she yearns for things by which to identify herself. "If I only had things to put in drawers and drawers to put things in," she says, remembering herself begging old clothes at the door of a rich house. And later still, when she has found her man, she dreams of "Good land lying out smooth, a little clump of woodland, just enough to shade the cows at noon, a house fixed, the roof mended, a porch to sit on when the labor was done"—all this a dream never to come quite true.

What does come true in the end—after the betrayal by her first love, after the struggle against the impulse to violence and suicide, after love and childbearing, after unremitting work and the sight of reward tantalizingly just out of reach, after betrayal by the husband and reconciliation over the body of a dead child, after the whipping of her husband, by night riders, as a

suspected barnburner—is the discovery of the strength to deal with life. "I'll go somewhere far out of hearken of this place," her husband says, nursing his stripes. "I've done little that's amiss here, but still I'd have to go." And she says: "I'd go where you go and live where you live, all my enduren life." So they take to the road again: "They went a long way while the moon was still high above the trees, stopping only at some creek to water the beasts."

Thus the abstract pattern is fleshed out with the story of Ellen, but the story itself is fleshed out by her consciousness. What lies at the center of the consciousness is a sense of wonder. It is, in the beginning, the wonder of youth and unlettered ignorance, simple wonder at the objects of the world, at the strange thing to be seen at the next turn of the road or over the next hill, at the wideness of the world, sometimes an "awe of all places," and a "fear of trees and stones," sometimes a wonder at the secret processes of the world, as when her father tells her that rocks "grow," that some have "shells printed on the side and some have little snails worked on their edges," and that once he "found a spider with a dragon beast in a picture on its back." But all the wonder at the wideness and age and ways of the world passes over into wonder at the fact of self set in the midst of the world, as when in a lonely field Ellen cries out against the wind, "I'm Ellen Chesser! I'm here!"

BEYOND naïve wonder and the deeper wonder at the growth of selfhood, there is a sense of life as ritual even in the common duties, as an enactment that numenously embodies the relation of the self to its setting in nature, in the human community, and in time. Take, for example, the scene where Ellen is engaged in the daily task of feeding the flock of turkeys—turkeys, by the way, not her own:

She would take the turkey bread in her hand and go, bonnetless, up the gentle hill across the pasture in the light of sundown, calling the hens as she went. She was keenly aware of the ceremony and aware of her figure rising out of the fluttering birds, of all moving together about her. She would hear the mules crunching their fodder as she went past the first barn, and she would hear the swish of the falling hay, the thud of a mule hoof on a board, a man's voice ordering or whistling a tune. . . . She would crumble down the bread for each brood near its coop and she would make the count and see to the drinking pans. Then she would go back through the gate, only a wire fence dividing her from the milking group,

and walk down the pasture in the dusk. That was all; the office would be done.

This sense of ritual, here explicit for the only time but suffusing the book, is related to the notion of "telling." Ritual makes for the understanding of experience in relation to the community of the living and the dead; so does "telling." Ellen, when the family first drops aside from the life of the road, yearns to see her friend Tessie, one of the wanderers, for in "telling" Tessie of the new life she would truly grasp it. Or the father sits by the fire and tells his life: "That's the story of my life, and you wanted to know it." Or Jonas, the lover who is later to jilt Ellen, makes his courtship by a "telling" of his sin. And later on, Jasper "would come that night and tell her the story of his life and then, if she was of a mind to have him, they would get married."

The novel is not Ellen's own "telling," but it is a shadow of her telling. The language, that is, is an index of her consciousness, and as such is the primary exposition of her character and sensibility. But it is also the language of her people, of her place and class, with all the weight of history and experience in it. We can isolate turns and phrases that belong to this world: ". . . if he comes again and takes off the property he'll maybe have trouble and a lavish of it too." Or: "I got no call to be a-carryen water for big healthy trollops. Have you had bad luck with your sweethearten?" But it is not the color of the isolated turn that counts most. It is, rather, the rhythm and tone of the whole; and not merely in dialogue, but in the subtle way the language of the outer world is absorbed into the shadowy paraphrase of Ellen's awareness, and discreetly informs the general style. For instance, as she sits late by the fire with her first love, Jonas, with her father snoring away in the bed across the room:

The mouse came back and ate crumbs near the chairs. Ellen's eyes fell on the little oblong gray ball as it rolled nearer and nearer. Jonas was sitting with her, tarrying. It was a token. She looked at his hand where it lay over her hand in her lap, the same gaze holding the quiet of the mouse and the quiet of his hand that moved, when it stirred, with the sudden soft motions of the little beast. The roosters crowed from farm to farm in token of midnight and Henry turned in his sleep once again.

It is, all in all, a dangerous game to play. In a hundred novels for a hundred years we have seen it go sour, either by condescension or by the strain to
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*The references are drawn from "Herald to Chaos," by Earl H. Rovit.

Love's Savor Lost

By GRANVILLE HICKS

LAST year Leslie Fiedler, a beligerently controversial literary critic, published a collection of short stories, "Pull Down Vanity" (SR, May 5, 1962), which I felt to be only partly successful but interesting in spite of weak spots. I have the same feeling about his first novel, "The Second Stone" (Stein & Day, \$5.95). If it seems as disorderly as a three-ring circus, it does hold the attention.

The novel is laid in Rome in the Fifties. Clem Stone, a writer, mostly unpublished, who has been living in the city for several years while working on a novel about his war experiences, encounters his boyhood friend, Mark Stone. He also encounters Mark's wife, Hilda, with whom he instantly falls in love. The development of the triangular situation through a brief but intense period is the principal theme of the book.

Mark and Clem were radicals together, first Stalinists and then Trotskyites, in high school and college, but they have gone different ways. Mark, who has become "the spokesman for a return to religion without a commitment to God," is head of a new Reformed Seminary and something of a public figure. He is in Rome for the First International Conference on Love, which he has organized and at which sociologists, psychologists, theologians, writers, and all sorts of other authorities from many countries are assembled.

Clem, on the other hand, has courted failure as avidly as Mark has courted success. His wife having understandably left him, he lives in poverty and squalor, not even working on his book. He has preserved his integrity at all costs, including the sacrifice of cleanliness and politeness. When she first meets him, Hilda refers to him as "a nasty child." Later she calls him "the loveliest lunatic of all," but on the same occasion a British philosopher, female, describes him as "this aging teddy boy." He can be perceptive, and he can be pigheaded; he can be amusing, and he can be tiresome.

Between them stands Hilda. It is no accident that Fiedler has given her the name of Hawthorne's heroine in "The Marble Faun," a character that Fiedler discusses at length in "Love and Death in the American Novel."

(There are other echoes of "The Marble Faun," particularly in the use of Roman scenes.) One of Hawthorne's characters says of his Hilda, "Her womanhood is of the ethereal type, and incompatible with any shadow of darkness or evil." Fiedler's Hilda is not exactly ethereal, and her behavior would scandalize Hawthorne and his generation; but there is, we are told, something virginal about her, and much is made of her cleanliness and delicacy. Clem says, with his usual vehemence, "I thought you were a *femme fatale* disguised as a snowmaiden. You're only a snowmaiden disguised as a *femme fatale* disguised as a snowmaiden." ("Snowmaiden," incidentally, is Fiedler's word for the other Hilda.)

Fiedler subtitles the book "A Love Story," and it is at any rate a novel about love in many aspects. Clem loves Hilda, but at the same time he is drawn back to his wife. Hilda loves Clem, but she also, in some ways, loves Mark. Between Clem and Mark, for all their differences, remain strong ties of affection and need. Clem's affair with Hilda is not the simple, straightforward, passionate, carnal affair he professes to want. And in the background are the speakers at the conference, theorizing endlessly about love.

THE descriptions of the conference come close to burlesque. Its "angel," a rich manufacturer of contraceptives, is given to malapropisms. ("What is the customary politesse for the unmentionable?" "Technology and love are learning to be sybaritic.") Two novelists from the United States, a self-conscious, self-righteous highbrow and a professional Negro, are frank caricatures. An Italian writer, an unabashed opportunist, cuts a ridiculous figure. Mark, who is absurd enough himself, presides at the end over a kind of Last Supper, at which there are five Judases. A wise old man from Japan expresses his wisdom in scatological terms. Fiedler makes the usual disclaimer, and I don't care whether some

of the characters can be identified or not, but there is bound to be speculation.

This is not only a book about love—it is also a book about Americans in Europe, a theme that, as Fiedler knows very well, has a long history. The gulf between Americans and Europeans, he seems to be saying, is as great now as it was more than a hundred years ago when Hawthorne wrote "The Marble Faun." Now, moreover, the attitude of Europeans towards Americans is marked not only by condescension but also by acute hostility. Clem, who has himself rejected America, who has felt at one with the Romans, is stripped of his identity when he is made the object of this anti-American bitterness: "At the will of a guitarist, a clown, he could be reduced to a political symbol, the almost-cipher of his Americanism." Later he takes part in a May Day riot against the American Embassy, carried back, first, to the demonstrations of his Communist days and then to the mindless violence of any mob.

The title illustrates Fiedler's complex ingenuity. It is, to begin with, a pun on the name the two men share: one or the other, depending on which way you look at it, is the second Stone. Then in the mob scene Clem finds a stone thrust into his hand, drops it, finds himself holding a second stone, and hurls it "toward Mark, toward the American Embassy, toward his boyhood, toward home." He is not, I suppose, sufficiently "without sin," sufficiently single-minded, to throw the first stone, but he does throw the second. The act is ambivalent: "'Americans go home!' he roared for the last time, and he knew that he at least would, would go home."

The weaknesses of the novel have already been suggested. Not only do the satirical passages come close to a too easy kind of burlesque; there is a great variation of tone in the more serious portions of the novel, from the poetic and would-be poetic to the grossly realistic. The book is constantly threatening to fly apart, and now and then it does. Furthermore, Fiedler is so unrestrainedly analytical in his treatment of his characters that sometimes they simply dissolve. Yet the novel has an interest that does not derive merely from the author's ideas. As I said when I reviewed the short stories, Fiedler has a gift for fiction, though his grip on his craft is uncertain. Some of his comic scenes are really funny, and some of the dramatic episodes—for instance, the May Day riot—are compelling. A good many of the characters never come to life, but the book itself is alive.

