

**Modernist Sensibilities in the Poetry
of Elizabeth Madox Roberts**

by

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MODERNIST SENSIBILITIES IN THE POETRY
OF ELIZABETH MADOX ROBERTS

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Table of Contents:

1. The Modernist “Spirit”	4
2. Poetry in Prose and <i>The Time of Man</i>	24
3. Modernist Sensibilities and <i>Jingling in the Wind</i>	43
4. Roberts in Colorado: Romantic Imitations, Modernist Intimations, and <i>In the Great Steep's Garden</i>	84
5. Roberts in Chicago: A Modernist Education— <i>Poetry</i> , The Poetry Club, Early Modernism, and <i>Under the Tree</i>	98
6. (New) Songs of Innocence and Experience, or Singing Beyond the Genius of <i>Under the Tree</i> : High Modernist “Wholeness” and Unity / Continuity in <i>Song in the Meadow</i>	156
Appendix	182
Works Cited	184

I. The Modernist “Spirit”

In an interview conducted by Rena Niles for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* (January 8th, 1939), Elizabeth Madox Roberts recalls an anecdote from her early childhood. In her *McGuffey's Reader*, a popular elementary school primer,

she read the following sentence: “Elizabeth Barrett Browning was a poet.” . . . She read it and read it again, and said to herself: “Elizabeth Barrett Browning was a poet—and that's what I am—a poet.” She was 8 years old. She did not use the future tense. She did not say “ I will be . . .” She said: “I am a poet.” (Niles 38)

In her forthcoming (the first *definitive*) biography of this largely underrepresented American (that is, *Kentuckian*) writer, *Something of Myself—Elizabeth Madox Roberts: A Life of Struggle for Female Identity in Twentieth-Century American Literature*, Jane Eblen Keller uncovers what was most likely the actual source engendering such an epiphany of brash-bright child resolve: from a series of readers composed by one James Baldwin, a *School Reading by Grades, Sixth and Seventh Year Combined*, published in 1897 (thus aging our “poet” to a ripe sixteen years of age), and noting that Elizabeth Barrett Browning, indeed, “was an English poet” (Keller 68).

Regardless of where Miss Roberts observed the declaration, and whether she was a child or a young adult, this origin story stands as a crucial component of the writer's mythos within the American literary consciousness. It is a myth that, although written, remains essentially tucked away in imaginary attics with many real documents in them: little magazines, newspaper clippings, and promotional pamphlets collected by some astute chronicler of a period within Anglo-American literature that has given rise to some of its most enduring works, especially those embodying one of the most iconic shifts in literary sensibility and accomplishment since the founding of the tradition.¹

¹ According to David Perkins, in *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode* (Vol. 1): “The transition from Romantic and Victorian to ‘modern’ modes of poetry is one of the fundamental shifts in the history of the art. If we look to English verse of the past for instances of comparable transition, only three suggest themselves: the emergence of the poetry of the Renaissance in the sixteenth century, of neoclassic verse

If, then, we are to identify and begrudgingly accept a myth that surrounds and encompasses the writer at the impasse of this present moment, it would hinge on the disheartening assumption of (and the romantic prospect of compensating for) an “*undue neglect*.” It is true that Roberts' name is not as well-known as many of her contemporaries, even within the Southern literary tradition, a tradition in which her work should be as well-acquainted to the discerning reader who places, say, the Nashville Fugitives and Southern Agrarians alongside William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe and Flannery O'Connor and acknowledges this party as dignitaries of a “Southern Renaissance.” During her lifetime, however, she was a popular success with both critics and the general reading public. *The Time of Man* (1926), was chosen for the Book-of-the-Month Club, while *The Great Meadow* (1930) and *A Buried Treasure* (1931) were honored as Literary Guild selections. Robert Penn Warren was a fervent admirer, claiming that “By 1930 ... it was impossible to discuss American fiction without reference to Elizabeth Madox Roberts” (20), as was Ford Madox Ford, citing her as one of “those chief ornaments of Southern writing” (*The March of Literature* 829), but more significantly as a figure who, even among a crowd of Modernist heavyweights, “stands almost supremely alone” (“Elizabeth Madox Roberts” 286). He proclaims that, between her first two novels, *The Time of Man* and *My Heart and My Flesh* (1927),

a whole quality had been added to literature itself – as if literature itself had a new purpose given to it, as if what literature could do had been extended in its scope, as if the number of emotions that literature could convey had been added to, and as if the permanent change that every book must work upon you had been given a new region in which to exercise itself. (Ibid. 285)

After pausing for a moment to process the caliber of the compliment, it becomes crucial to note that Ford's critical essay, in his approximations that situate Elizabeth Madox Roberts in the same

toward the end of the seventeenth century, and of Romantic poetry in the early years of the nineteenth century” (293).

conversation as James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway, give not only the reputation, but the very character of our understanding of the writer's body of work “a new region in which to exercise itself.”

To go about reconsidering Roberts as a writer participating within the Modernist tradition, that is, recasting the texture of her style and the character of her sensibility within a milieu attuned to some very different cultural idioms and reverberations than those of Southern, Agrarian, or Regional literatures (although certain concurrences are inevitable), is a task that demands a strong directorial vision and conviction. The “Introduction” to *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (1999) wastes no time in declaring the editors' position on the forever-contentious “-ism”: the first sentence, in full revisionist hyper-theorizing characteristic of “Modernist studies” in the decades following the preeminence of the New Criticism, asserts that “Modernism is not a movement” (xvii). In a similar vein, sociologist Daniel Bell, perhaps echoing W. B. Yeats' “The Second Coming,” can find in it “no center” (qtd. in Kavaloski 1). It is rational to concede with Peter Nicholls that what is sometimes constructed as “a sort of monolithic ideological formation” is more accurately “a highly complex set of cultural developments at the beginning of the twentieth century” (Nicholls vii). But to conceive of Modernism as “a term that masks conflict and upheaval and any number of contradictory positions” (Kolocotroni, Goldman & Taxidou xvii) while denying it any function as an idea of order seems to imply that it may only be considered a “movement” if it is entirely homogenous in action, thought, and presentation, or else it disregards the potentials of direct influence and traceable conversations that began accumulating with architectural design around 1890—and one need only begin parsing any thorough source-work (Michael H. Levenson's *A Genealogy of Modernism* is especially illuminating) to have their opinion on the latter fallacy swayed.

The poles erected over what is indeed, or allowed to be, denoted by the term

“Modernism,” as well as the full range of contention in between, stem, if not from any ignorance or stubbornness, from the incredible flexibility of the linguistic root. Matei Calinescu's *Five Faces of Modernity* (rev. 1987) opens with the simple claim (though incredibly *loaded*, as his scholarship proves) that, “During the last one hundred and fifty years or so, such terms as 'modern,' 'modernity,' and more recently 'modernism,' as well as a number of related notions, have been used in artistic or literary contexts to convey an increasingly sharp sense of historical relativism” (3), although “the idea of modernity was born during the Christian Middle Ages” (13). As early as the late fifth century, “*modernus*” found wide usage as a term both transcending and in opposition to “*antiquus*,” and its polemical divisiveness in arguments over the aesthetics of poetry extends at least as far back as 1170 (Calinescu 14-15). The history of the “modern” idea has been, and continues to be, perpetuated by an inherent antagonism, while its longstanding usage makes it a term as fluid as time itself—one that, for one drawing invisible distances rearward from a “contemporary” crux, sits as stable as shifting sands. (To put it simply: one man's modernity is another man's antiquity.)

To find some compromise within, or else forge a reconciliation towards a *distinct* literary conception of “modernism”—a majuscule “Modernism”—and use it as a lens through which to appraise the writings of Miss Roberts is not an altogether novel pursuit. The foundations laid out by, most durably and enduringly, H. R. Stoneback, Matthew Nickel, and Jane Keller,² have been a vital inspiration and necessary impetus for this current study. Furthermore, there exists a sound enough backing throughout the somewhat impoverished quantity of scholarship and criticism that lends itself fairly easily to the argument at hand. The “Modernist” appellation may be lost to

2 I am eternally grateful for Jane Keller and Matthew Nickel's generosity in sharing the typescripts of forthcoming publications with me. Between Keller's biography and Nickel's study on the Modernist dimensions of Roberts' work, not to mention H. R. Stoneback's countless essays (and inspirational force behind the essays of countless others), a new dimension has been added to Roberts studies, putting into check a great deal of misguided criticism and correcting a great deal of inaccurate scholarship from the previous era. This project indeed stands on the shoulders of giants, and is deeply indebted to their influence and encouragement.

the thought, or else the initiation determined to be lacking in exigence, but a supreme artistry is often illuminated that bears similar dialectical plumage and conducive critical underpinnings as one finds in discussions of those Modernist masters whose membership is infinitely insured—writers such as, in the Anglo-American tradition, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce.

The general character of Roberts studies, however, *has* been mostly a “novel” pursuit. The first published full-length study devoted solely to her work, composed by Harry Modean Campbell and Ruel E. Foster and published in 1956, bears the title *Elizabeth Madox Roberts: American Novelist*; the second, Earl H. Rovit's *Herald to Chaos* (1960), likewise primarily concerns “*The Novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts*”; while the third (and final to date), Frederick P. W. McDowell's *Elizabeth Madox Roberts* (1963), under the prospective guise of dispensing more equal attention in regards to the writer's other mediums, nevertheless devotes about as much space, energy, and conviction to discussion of the poetry as do the others in their studies with explicit intention to evaluate Miss Roberts' prose. Even among the recent efforts of the devotional wellspring waving the banner of a “Roberts Revival”—an enterprise that, since the founding of the Elizabeth Madox Roberts Society by H. R. Stoneback in 1999, and maintaining an annual conference as well as a steadily bulking output of scholarship,³ has undoubtedly changed the momentum, precision, and scope of Roberts studies—the disproportionate attention has more or less been sustained.

There is a correlation, however. Against the seven novels published in her lifetime, as well as two collections of short stories,⁴ Roberts boasts only two substantial volumes of poetry—

3 *Essays of Reassessment & Reclamation* (2008), *Essays of Discovery and Recovery* (2008), *Prospect & Retrospect* (2012), and *Keenly Aware of the Ceremonies of Place* (2017) are the first (and only) essay collections devoted entirely to Miss Roberts, and contain selections from both veterans of Roberts studies (H. R. Stoneback, William H. Slavick, Wade Hall, Ruel E. Foster, Woodridge Spears, and Robert Penn Warren) and outstanding examples from a new generation of enthusiastic scholars, as well as previously unpublished material from the Roberts archives.

4 These works include: *The Time of Man* (1926), *My Heart and My Flesh* (1927), *Jingling in the Wind* (1928), *The Great Meadow* (1930), *A Buried Treasure* (1931), *The Haunted Mirror* (stories; 1932), *He Sent Forth a Raven* (1935), *Black is My Truelove's Hair* (1938), and *Not By Strange Gods* (stories; 1941). In addition to these nine

Under the Tree (1922; revised & expanded in 1930) and *Song in the Meadow* (1940). *In the Great Steep's Garden*—seven brief poems, mostly about Rocky Mountain flowers, with accompanying photographs by Kenneth Hartley—was published (with a very modest print run) by Gowdy-Simmons of Colorado Springs, CO in 1915. As a poet among the newspapers, magazines and journals she had a consistent, though far from prodigious presence,⁵ and her verse has been collected in various anthologies, from those compiled for children to tomes cataloging “*Modern American Poetry*.” In the fall of 1981, a special issue of the *Kentucky Poetry Review* ran nearly forty previously unpublished poems, collected and edited by William H. Slavick under the editorially-appended title *I Touched White Clover*, as well as a series of comments “On Poetry” attributed to Miss Roberts.⁶

Although comprising only a fraction of her output as a writer, the poetry speaks volumes for her merit as an artist attuned to the attitudes, concerns, and reverberations emanating from the major works, both creative and critical, of the Modernist camp—enough so, I would argue, that on this verse alone we can consider her a major voice, if only a minor presence within the actual cultural dynamic and conversation of the early twentieth century. Just as Modernism is often

works, an unfinished manuscript of the novel *Flood*, edited by Vicki Barker, was published by the Elizabeth Madox Roberts Society as a part of the “Reading Roberts” series in 2012.

- 5 Miss Roberts' first published poem was “To My Country” in the *Springfield News-Leader* (8 May 1898); “Prophecies” in *The Idea* (4 Dec. 1913), was her first poem published outside of Springfield, KY; “My Love Came Home” in *Neale's Magazine* (June 1914) was her first national publication; other poems were published in *Sunset: The Pacific Monthly*, *Kentucky High School Quarterly*, various University of Chicago publications, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Child Life*, *Current Opinion*, *The Freeman*, *The Literary Digest*, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, *NEA Journal*, *American Federationist*, *The Nation*, *Wings*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Scholastic Magazine*, *Rotarian*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, *The Horn Book*, and, perhaps most significantly, Harriet Monroe's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. See Spears pp. x-xiv for a comprehensive list of Roberts' published works.
- 6 Keller notes: “The editor sometimes combined elements from various drafts to create what look like, but were not, finished poems. Some were mistranscribed and in a few cases misrepresent what EMR actually wrote. Several very nice bits of polished verse were not included” (N117n12). Regarding “On Poetry”: “...she called [it] her 'lecture,' or her 'doctrine,' or more jocularly her 'ravings.' She had been working on the formulation of a kind of Credo since her days in the Poetry Club, and in the summer of 1921 she finished it and set it out in a cleanly typed three-page text with a few hand written insertions . . . (Most unfortunately, the published versions are mistranscribed, scramble the inherent logic, and include extraneous matter)” (198); “The result is a confused and confusing rendition of what is actually (though no reader would realize it) a coherent expression of EMR's deeply felt and carefully constructed theory of her art” (N65n69)

characterized by its revolutionary tendencies, especially in formal and idiomatic concerns, so too is there a departure from a strict, tidy set of criteria that allows the discerning surveyor of literature to classify a writer or work as either partaking in or playing against the forces that dominate the cultural and artistic arena. “Modernism” as it pertains specifically to who is, or who is not, a “Modernist,” what is, or is not, a “Modernist” text, has denied a wholly salient shape. The critical contentions surrounding and confounding the designation, compounded even further by the very nature of the literatures on trial, have continually repelled into the misty future the dream of achieving some neat taxonomy, of finding some panacea to rectify the term's confused identity and ready it for the banal world of textbook pageantry. What remains steadfast, however, is that prevailing impulse to qualify the concept of “Modernism” as a reality, be it like God or like gravity, that establishes order among creative and critical expressions that would otherwise remain disconnected freckles in the sky, of no relation to each other other than proximity of provenance. Under these circumstances of a ritual insistence on legitimacy and the securing of ideologies in a cultural narrative, the pursuit may be said to deal in the province of myth.

Frank Kermode defines the stability of “myth” against the flexibility of “fiction”:

We have to distinguish between myths and fictions. Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive. . . Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures. Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. Myths make sense in terms of a lost order of time, *illud tempus* as [Mircea] Eliade calls it; fictions, if successful, make sense of the here and now, *hoc tempus*. It may be that treating literary fictions as myths sounds good just now, but as Marianne Moore [in “Poetry”] so rightly said of poems, “these things are important not because a / high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are / useful.” (*The Sense of an Ending* 39)

Appropriating this paradigm to the question of the character and qualifications of “Modernism,” it seems crucial to maintain Kermode's cautious restraint from relegating literary fictions drawn

to the lamp-light of the Modernist movement to the rank of sacrosanct myth. However, the idea that there is indeed a “Modernism” to cling to, that has operative value in conversations about specific writers and their works, must remain in this province of myth; it must maintain the legitimacy of the absolute. To this end one would bring Hell and all its inhabitants upon himself were he to attempt quantitative measurements in the manner of a scientist nudging hypotheses methodically toward indisputable law. Rather, its verity—not what Modernism is, in essence, but rather that it does in fact exist and does in fact have some essence—is more aptly delegated to a qualitative field. The most appropriate cognate would be a felt faith in a power beyond the self and beyond total comprehension, a faith that has been strengthened and impassioned by an impression of the divine. There must be some sort of spirit or specter that is felt, and can comfortably and confidently be identified as a “Modernist” mode acknowledged by a wider population, in the presence of certain works even when that spirit cannot become complete and faithfully incarnate. With this understanding, Modernism can become, as Kermode's conception of myth dictates, a cultural artifact given meaning and value by a body of power imposing an interpretation upon it. Rather than a body of power propped by political privilege or an intellectual institution, though, the authority is derived from a community united by the faith that certain texts composed around the early- to mid-twentieth century were natural manifestations of the same general anxiety felt by artists at odds with the trajectory (perhaps “downward spiral” is more appropriate) of mass culture. A Modernist text, then, is defined not primarily by its superficial qualities, but rather those attitudes that governed its conception and, in any number of ways, may reveal themselves to and impress upon the reader. Just as the pious person's faith allows him or her to interpret certain mundane occurrences as expressions of divinity, so too does the disciple of Modernism maintain a certain heightened awareness of, and predilection toward, the artistic temperament out of which these texts were conceived.

Only in the movement retaining its status as myth are the texts that yearn towards inclusion—on their own merits, rather than the writer's insistence—able to exist as fictions. By claiming that Modernism does indeed exist because of a quintessential, pervasive quality in the literature, wrought like a dovetail from the cultural milieu of the contemporary decades in which the movement took shape as well as something ancient and enduring, and not simply because it is convenient for both casual and committed scholars to construct a new taxonomic order within a fine-tuned system, certain literary works are provided with a sort of mystic backdrop against which they may contrast or cohere while all the while maintaining the association and relationship with an impregnable spirit. In this paradigm, fictions—the Modernist text—exist as cultural tools and catalysts for change. They must remain confident in their ability to challenge the audience's expectations of what “Modernism” looks like, to destabilize their landing at conclusions, to perpetually blur the boundary between representation and reality. We must accept a myth of “Modernism” so that the literature we cast upon its stage and judge by its standards may retain its essential vital, dynamic quality—a spirit that zig-zags within and without impersonal convention to resist total comprehension, interpretation, definition—that can be distilled as part of the emotional core of any Modernist text. As easy as it is to identify this in the canonized keystone works of the movement (Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *Waste Land*, Pound's *Cantos*), we must continue to strive to identify and preserve this aspect in whichever other texts we are trying to bring into the company of those that dominate—such as the poetry of Miss Roberts.

This formal and idiomatic literary propensity for maintaining and perpetuating the cultural and intellectual unrest of the Modernist epoch, an unrest that is more so a historical observation than the diction of a certain connotation, is a crucial component in the articulation of that qualitative spirit. By displacing the mythic dimensions of Modernism from the

programmatic to the fundamental, by focusing on spirit rather than sense, the texts on trial are given a more direct and privileged treatment. Furthermore, the texts as they present themselves, as self-reflexive cultural paraphernalia, rather than the pedantic conditions they would otherwise cater to, are granted the power, not to reclassify the constitution or constituents of the Modernist program, but rather to allow a seemingly extraneous or contradictory quality the immunity of speaking on behalf of the work's merit as something distinctly "Modernist" without upsetting any stylistic benchmarks.

The dynamic or schismatic quality at the core of Modernism can be traced to what Levenson identifies as "the modernist urge towards dualistic opposition and radical polarities." He adumbrates: "The effect of such a dualism is to suggest a thorough historical discontinuity. Victorian poetry has been soft; modern poetry will be hard (Pound's terms). Humanist art has been vital; the coming geometric art will be inorganic (Hulme's terms). Romanticism was immature; the new classicism will be adult (Eliot's terms)" (Levenson ix). To begin with an acknowledgment of a "historical discontinuity," to plot the current moment against some historical precedent, becomes the first step in making sense of the overwhelming influx of worldly occurrences which seem to either have no justification and follow no rubric of logic, inducing absurd disbelief and metaphysical nausea; or otherwise, through the impersonal natures of science, industry, and materialism, obscure personal experience and jeopardize systems of values. Stephen Spender, in *The Struggle of the Modern* (1963), identifies this "discontinuity" as a divisive event, a complete break comparable to a "Second Fall of Man," which "seems to result from the introduction of scientific utilitarian values and modes of thinking into the world of personal choice between good and evil, with the result that values cease to be personal and become identified with the usefulness or destructiveness of social systems and material things"

(26). Ford Madox Ford,⁷ one of England's most competent cultural barometers at the turn of the twentieth century, saw this to some extent as well, recording frequent eschatologies from the front line. Uniformity and complexity stood as the most disconcerting symptoms of the age. He laments that, with the rise of mass culture, “we are standardizing ourselves and we are doing away with everything that is outstanding” (Hueffer, “Changes” 269), fostering a democracy of “amiable mediocrity” (Hueffer, “The Passing of the Great Figure” 129). With this, the rise of science makes questions that had once been negotiable “exceedingly complicated”: “any connected thought is almost an impossibility” (Hueffer, “Passing” 114, 123) “in an epoch that is “much more bewildered than it has ever been since the Dark Ages” (Hueffer, “On the Functions of the Arts in the Republic” 28). The state of affairs is thus distinguished by “its confusing currents, its incomprehensible riddles, its ever present but entirely invisible wire pulling, and its overwhelming babble” (Ford, *Henry James* 68); it is a “terrific, untidy, indifferent empirical age,” a “dance of midges” (Ford, “Letter to Lucy Masterman” 154; Hueffer, “Modern Poetry” 186).

We can begin to understand Modernism if we see it, at least partially, as an attempt to translate these anxieties into a coherent cognitive state and, from this stance and in this capacity, write accordingly—yet with each writer maintaining his or her own artistic integrity. Ford, for example, finds reconciliation in understanding the artistic temperament to be the only certain and legitimate source of value (“I have for facts a most profound contempt” [Hueffer, “Dedication” xv]). In this view he is in the company of Walter Pater, Joseph Conrad, and Henry James—those who, in Levenson's terms, recognize “the progressive centrality of self as a register of meanings ... and the dependence on consciousness as the repository of value” (23). This approach was not

7 The following parsing of Ford's writings is indebted to Levenson's *Genealogy of Modernism*, Chapter 4 (pp. 48-62).

ubiquitous, however. T. S. Eliot rejected these points, as did Irving Babbitt, an early (though not lasting) influence on Eliot. Babbitt claimed that “with the spread of impressionism literature has lost standards and discipline, and at the same time virility and seriousness; it has fallen into the hands of aesthetes and dilettantes, the last effete representatives of romanticism, who have proved utterly unequal to the task of maintaining its great traditions against the scientific positivists” (xiii-xiv).

Can such a contention (and this is just one of many) be sustained within the confines of “Modernism,” even while confidently maintaining a mythic fortification? Or are we dealing with a center that cannot hold, yielding (as Peter Nicholls would have it) aesthetically, intellectually, or sociopolitically diasporic “Modernisms”? It has become a critical commonplace over the past six decades or so to challenge the paradigm of “Modernism” over accusations of myriad manifestations of “elitism,” from the subjugation of “low” or popular culture by the “highbrow,” to the lack of diversity in the canon, to the prejudices supposedly upheld by both the writers of the Modernist camp and the critics who have sustained their reputations.⁸ Although these challenges are crucial in maintaining a healthy platform for debate, as well as sustaining a dynamic space to resist complete and final definition (an appropriately mimetic, if only coincidental, critical impulse), their momentum derives from a reactionary impetus against the formalist approach of the New Criticism. Joshua Kavaloski notes that “the New Critics are responsible for constructing, institutionalizing, and defending what was later labeled high modernism,” and just as they “legitimized modern literature of the early interwar years, this literature effectively reciprocated by providing legitimizing support for their formalist methodology” (40). Although “there is nothing about high-modernist texts that makes them the

⁸ For a thorough, recent survey and investigation of how “Modernist studies” have and continue to be “expanded,” see Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies” (*PMLA* 123.3, May 2008, 737-748).

restricted purview of a formalist approach,” the critical trend that revived the silenced concern of cultural context—relying on the “explicit sociopolitical” theories of Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, and cultural studies—saw it fit to likewise target those texts which “helped legitimize formalism” (Ibid. 41, 5). Despite the well intentions of what has endured as a revisionist progressivism, the pursuit has been, according to Stephen Ross, “largely defensive rather than critical” (12).

If so much really depends upon a representative “Modernism,” what is represented should be those qualities that transcend immediate traditions (Victorianism and Romanticism served as the perfect springboards), as well as an emphasis on the loosening of the poet's obligations to the total sum of past conventions in favor of the poem's most pressing needs (of which, of course, certain conventions will rightfully be upheld or adapted), and together amount to a “new” literature—or at least a “new” impulse, a revised set of responsibilities. (We might think of Gerard Manley Hopkins, prominent proto-Modernist, and the “freshness” of “God's Grandeur” that perpetually feeds his devout revelry.) Calinescu admits that “it is difficult to set even an approximate date” when “Modernism” became a “scholarly label” denoting a literary, and thus specialized, aesthetic mode (80-81). It is interesting to note that one of the earliest examples comes from John Crowe Ransom, father of the New Criticism, in a February 1924 (Vol. 3, No. 1) *Fugitive* piece on “The Future of Poetry”: “The arts generally have had to recognize Modernism—how should poetry escape? And yet what is Modernism? It is undefined” (qtd. in Calinescu 82). (What follows, as one would expect from someone responsible for laying the groundwork for the Modernist canon, is a keen and concise portrait of the burgeoning movement.)

By 1927, Laura Riding and Robert Graves had published their *Survey of Modernist Poetry*, and the titular term had undoubtedly acquired some capital as a distinct literary mode. Despite the idiosyncrasies of the survey, and keeping in mind the stance that it was “too early for

a more comprehensive critical synthesis or for a critical assessment of the concept of modernism” (Calinescu 85), what remains is as “complete” a conception of those innovative blooming artistic temperaments and aesthetic paradigms as any may find at the time of the movement's development.⁹ Riding and Graves begin by noting “the divorce of advanced contemporary poetry from the common-sense standards of ordinary intelligence” (9); that is, a divorce from the concept of the “modern” found in Louis Untermeyer's anthology of *Modern American Poetry* (1919), which they accuse of being “a modernism no longer modern, that of such dead movements as Georgianism and Imagism which were supposedly undertaken in the interests of the plain reader” (11-12). In their chapter on “Modernist Poetry and Civilization,” they distinguish a “vulgar meaning of modernism ... [which] is modern-ness, a keeping-up in poetry with the pace of civilization and intellectual history,” often “perverted” by an anti-traditional rage for novelty, “increasing contemporary mannerisms in poetry instead of freeing the poet of obligations to conform to any particular set of literary theories” (Ibid. 155-156). This mode can be further perverted by the view of the “middle population,” “the intelligent, plain-man point of view” that “is the prop and advocate of civilization”: “the idea of civilization as a steady human progress” that exalts “*historically*,” as opposed to aesthetically, “forward poetry” (Ibid. 157). The “real task,” Riding and Graves go on to say, is “not to explain modernism in poetry but to separate false modernism, or faith in history, from genuine modernism, or faith in the immediate, the *new* doings of poems (or poets or poetry) as not necessarily derived from history. Modernist poetry as such should mean no more than fresh poetry, more poetry, based on honest invention rather than on conscientious imitation of the time-spirit” (158). Ultimately, “Modernist” poetry is defined by the struggle “to free the *poem* of many of the traditional habits

9 An exception is the 1924 dissertation completed by Elias Thorleif Arnesen for the University of Washington on “Modernism and Literature,” although its unpublished status kept it some steps removed from the conversation surrounding the nature of the movement in question.

which prevented it from achieving its full significance” (Ibid. 156). If the attentive poet acts upon any compulsion to adapt a certain tradition or adhere to a certain doctrine, the pressure should come from the poem itself rather than the poet's conception of the poem within a literary tradition.

“Modernism” has seen its fair share of “definitions” since Riding and Graves initiated the critical debate (still inconclusive and perpetually contested nearly a century later), whether concise and encyclopedic for the neophyte (often at the expense of vagueness or ambiguity) or developed into an extensive critical study (characteristically complex, often convoluted).¹⁰ This present study, however, is not trying to reinvent or revise a definition of Modernism to account for Roberts; nor is it willing to commit to any single one heretofore coalesced (Note: “dynamics”). Rather, I aim to discuss her poetry on the grounds of its artistic merit within its appropriate artistic context. If the evolution of “Modernist studies” suggests anything with such a striking immediacy as its rage for inclusion, it is a critical mutation of Eliot's “dissociation of sensibility.” The unbridled animal is a rage for politics. Whether these politics fixate on the identities of neglected authors, their peripheral perspectives, the content of their narratives, or, perhaps the greatest offense, the resolute commitment to elucidating or expanding a completely autonomous “theory” of “Modernism,” there is a divorce from the textual reality, the formal composition that the New Critics appraised with the glimmer of gospel—not for their own political gains, but for the sake of the new literature.

10 Of the former, take, for example, the following (quoted in part) from *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*: “Modernist art is, in most critical usage, reckoned to be the art of what Harold Rosenberg calls ‘the tradition of the new.’ It is experimental, formally complex, elliptical, contains elements of decreation as well as creation, and tends to associate notions of the artist's freedom from realism, materialism, traditional genre and form ... there are several modernisms: an intensifying sequence ... often radically at odds, and sharp differences of cultural interpretation coming from writers apparently stylistically analogous ... We can dispute about when it starts ... and when it ends ... We can regard it as a timebound concept ... or a timeless one ... The best focus remains a body of major writers ... whose works are aesthetically radical, contain striking technical innovation, emphasize spatial or ‘fugal’ as opposed to chronological form, tend towards ironic modes, and involve a certain ‘dehumanization of art’ (Ortega y Gasset)” (Bradbury 145). Of the latter, refer to a fair portion of the works cited in this study.

Despite means that may achieve some rich delta justification by the time they drain out to pasture, the desire here to solidify the reputation of Miss Roberts as a significant participant in the Modernist mode will not hinge on an iconoclasm that seeks to remedy any disparities involving an “elite” intellectual class or the obvious disparity between canonized men and women writers. Rather than trying to dismantle, displace, or disperse the status of Eliot or Pound, they will preside as crucial references on behalf of the quality of the verse in question. Such political approaches remain interesting, though, because they occasionally, whether intentionally or not, operate under the presupposition that Modernism does indeed have some center, a spirit that reveals itself in multiform ways, that cannot be denied or suppressed by the technical constraints and academic nomenclatures of the preexisting canon. The difference lies in the fact that political motivations tend to promote a text's reputation (usually as a bridge to the author) by calibrating Modernism as a privileged cultural currency, rather than evaluate Modernism as an artistic nexus in which the constitution of the texts themselves are given priority.

Politically-motivated reassessments that profiteer under the banner of inclusion are often prone to *hamartia* and may even neglect to deepen or enrich one's holistic understanding of Modernism; crucial thrusts of the argument often mimic, out of heated desperation, the methods used by those responsible for making the canon a bastion in the first place. Rather than sufficiently reframing the context or conditions, political advocates may champion texts using the same rubric that upholds the status of the works and names obstructing the plaintiff's egalitarian vision—all the while consistently denouncing the system. To avoid any accidental hypocrisies and ensure none of the following readings take root in the divorced critical imagination, claims of influence will be contextualized within the artistic milieu and aesthetic trends that dominated the years Miss Roberts was honing her skills as a writer and connoisseur of literary taste.

Like the struggle for the poem to find its genuine incarnation envisaged by Riding and Graves, making any ground in enriching the reputation of Roberts' poetry is a constant struggle to free it from the “traditional” readings which have “prevented it from achieving its full significance.” Although *Song in the Meadow* contains a series of poems that appear strikingly similar in content, form, and psychology as its two-decade precursor *Under the Tree*, I would argue that during the span of years in which the latter volume was being conceived, composed, and compiled there was a significant shift in the sensibility of the artist and the subsequent poetic mode. The nature of this shift can be elucidated under the conditions of understanding Modernism as consisting of three distinct “phases” in which we find Miss Roberts participating in a translation of influence with a parallel trajectory.¹¹ (The timelines, however, do not perfectly coincide. Roberts, like Faulkner, was mostly a homebody, keeping her distanced from the literary London and Parisian scenes, divorced from any direct participation in their activities, and always a little late to the party.)

We may conceive of Early Modernism (1890-1920) as a cultural shift, its onset “a Promethean act that shook modern society free from the accretion of norms, customs, and rules that had amassed over the past century” (Kavaloski 200). (The Victorians and Romantics had been too forgiving of sentimentality, morality, rhetoric, overindulgence, and the perpetuation of formal conventions in their writing.) Artists and movements were often politically and socially engaged; certain schools seemed more like campaigns in their devotion to the manifesto, and the increasing popularity of the little magazine provided a new platform for expounding theories and engaging in debate. The schools that reached preeminence during this phase and are most pertinent to this study are Impressionism, Symbolism, Imagism, and Vorticism.

¹¹ My understanding of this critical practice is indebted to Kavaloski's *High Modernism*—see “Appendix: The Early, High, and Late Phases of Modernism” (199-210)

David Perkins, in *A History of Modern Poetry* (1976), sees “the high Modernist mode” as “dominat[ing]” Anglo-American poetry for approximately thirty years, from the early 1920s to the 1950s (449), while Kavaloski limits the reign to a decade, eclipsed by a final decade of “Late Modernism” in which there was a “noticeable retreat from the formalism and aestheticism that are often associated with high modernism” (207). In both configurations, though, the 1920s stand as “the historical apogee of the modernist period,” its “central and highbrow phase” (Kavaloski 203). Kavaloski accepts Perkins' paradigm in which this “mode” is more accurately defined as a “synthesis” of the diverse poetic idioms from the previous three decades, which provided a rich, dense repository of aesthetic models (Kavaloski 203; Perkins 449-450). Rather than using these resources as a foundation for continued political engagement, though, there was a “general tendency during [the 1920s] to ennoble the aesthetic domain and discount any social or didactic role of art,” to privilege “the depiction of consciousness, the experimentation with form [as well as structure and narrative], and thematization of time” over sociopolitical concerns (Kavaloski 15, 204).¹² Other distinguishing features include the “appropriation of recent psychological and anthropological developments [that open] poetry to the unconscious mind, the world of dreams, myths, and archetypes” (Kavaloski 203), as well as the influence of “techniques developed in other arts, such as the leitmotiv in music and the collage in painting” (Perkins 450).

Although Riding and Graves make some crucial distinctions in their formulation of a “genuine modernism,” their understanding lacks the nuance to account for any distinct phases in the movement. We can cut them some slack, though; they composed their survey while their subject of study was still in its formative years. They lacked the knowledge of what this literary trend would evolve (or devolve) into, being too caught up in the middle of it all to have any

¹² Kavaloski does not entirely subscribe to this view, though. He rather concludes that “high-modernists texts seek efficaciousness in the world through the very form of literature,” “ruptur[ing] the system of conventional referentiality comprised of the social codes and symbolic order of the early twentieth century” (204).

sense of how to sequester the major voices and consider them with autonomy, just as they lacked the knowledge that their “modern”-laden diction would endure and become the standardized nomenclature for this epoch in literary time. Perhaps, with nearly a century of hindsight, they would clarify their distinctions with a diction less rife with connotation.

Regardless of their intentions, though, Riding and Graves still conceived of a “faith in history” at odds with a “faith in the immediate.” By their standards, it seems, a poem sacrifices its integrity whenever the poet becomes conscious of culture as bound by historical time, whether past or present, and adapts certain techniques or attitudes to ease the poem into its conception. The goal, then, must be to write from the eternal present of the poem unraveling into a language that manifests in a natural, and not consciously imitative or adaptive formality. This may not amount to a full break with tradition, suggesting rather that the poet's responsibility is to the immediate needs of the poem before any adherence to literary conventions, but the opposition still stands. Whereas this attitude seemed viable and was readily adopted during the early phase of Modernism, it seemed to lose its grip on the artistic temperament as much of what was considered the “civilized” world descended into debauchery and botched its integrity with the Great War. Contemporaneity began losing its capital as an attraction and repository of faith, while history was being reconsidered as something much more present in the present than it had lately been conceived. It was along this bridge between history and the immediate, or perhaps in the building of the bridge itself, that faith could be rekindled, for out of the recognition of certain parallels and trajectories, perhaps a solution to the issues of moral and cultural degradation could be synthesized. The present was understood as a function of the past, and a new poetic idiom soon formed in this image.

If we look at the poetic career of Miss Roberts in relation to the above schematic of Modernism, it becomes evident that her own early phase (*In the Great Steep's Garden, Under the*

Tree) coincides significantly with the programs and values of the Early Modernist phase, while her later work (*Song in the Meadow*) culminates in an advanced artistic endeavor characteristic of the High Modernist mode. This investigation does not seek to bestow any such epithets as “the Pound of the Pigeon River country”; nor does it intend to argue that “Conversations beside a Stream” from *Song in the Meadow* is an aesthetic or artistic achievement comparable to *The Waste Land* (as a younger, critically naive, and more pigheaded version of myself once contended). Rather, what follows will be a sustained investigation into Miss Roberts' poetic oeuvre, on its own merits and by the poet's own standards, recalling the principles, programs, or visions of the Modernist tradition, when appropriate, as an affirmation of influence, a means of illumination, or a model by which to measure formal achievement.

II. Poetry in Prose and *The Time of Man*

Before diving into the poetry, however, one feels contextually obligated to make a few observations and offer a few comments regarding Miss Roberts's prose. As Alexander M. Buchan notes, “For praise and for blame alike, the style of Elizabeth Madox Roberts is mentioned as often as her novels are. It has been praised, mainly in general terms, as being 'poetic,' 'rhythmic,' 'shimmering,' 'evocative,' and so forth, and has been condemned, with the same vagueness, for being 'unreal' and 'artificial’” (464). One of the earliest critical essays on Miss Roberts, printed in the September 1932 issue of the *English Journal*, chooses “Her Mind and Style” as its focus. (Buchan's essay is very clearly indebted to this earlier piece, although he refuses to give any explicit credit. Perhaps it was too “vague” to warrant any expression of gratitude.) Mark Van Doren justifies his topic with the assertion that “her style [is] most clearly the expression of a mind which is interesting in its own right.” Furthermore, it is “in itself ...a sort of substance”: “It is more than a way of saying things; it is something said, something which would not otherwise have been said at all, something, we suspect, which could not be said unless it were said in this way” (522).¹³ Rovit remains adamant about the critic's obligation “to integrate their analysis with the functional intention of this style,” for they often “forget that 'style' is not an isolated segment of a piece of writing, but that it pervades the entire shape of the writing, integral to that shape at all points”—an especially significant detail for a writer “who is so persistent in her avowal of aesthetic organicism” (129-130).¹⁴

13 Both Buchan and Van Doren refer exclusively to her prose in their discussions of style. Van Doren alludes briefly to *Under the Tree* (*Song in the Meadow* was years away from publication), and his attitude towards Miss Roberts' poetic career reflects his own shortcomings as a critic more so than his subject's shortcomings as a poet: “Her first volume ... was a collection of poems for children. They remain poems for children; they have nothing in them, except for the piece called 'In the Night,' that bears an important relation to the surely more considerable work she has done in prose. I should not be surprised if she became a considerable poet. But it is not necessary that she should, since her novels contain so much that we are accustomed to getting from poetry in this age” (529).

14 Although this idea that a work of art can only be measured by and appreciated in its organic totality can be traced

Although Roberts' early career shares a certain amount of affinities with the motivations and methods of the early Modernist phase, she was never one to make any *public* declarations regarding the responsibilities of the artist, the function of art, or the style and substance of her own work. We are without any list of “Don'ts” circulated in a literary publication,¹⁵ without manifestos, without any forays into literary criticism. Nearly everything the critic now has at his disposal is either a breach of Miss Roberts' *private* world, whether from her personal notes¹⁶ or epistolary correspondence, or the precarious (though often persuasive) translation of her creative writings into a critical stance. It is in the spirit of the latter that Buchan derives a list of stylistic effects characteristic to Miss Roberts' prose (I have provided the passages from which he pulls his key terms to give the total effect):

- 1) an agreeable “monotony”;

“The low monotony of the words trailed across the music and spread it widely at the end, and pleasure gathered in her body and in her mind”
(*The Time of Man* 185)

- 2) a “fluid speech,” which ... is “half-rhymed experience”;

“The speech was their own ... Here among the rolling hills it rolled lightly, spoken from relaxed throats, and there was always time for each slow vowel, for each sung diphthong ... Into this fluid speech would come forceful words, strong old utterance that leaped out of the yielding medium.” (*He Sent Forth a Raven* 72-73)

- 3) a break in this fluid speech, brought about by a “few hard, tender sayings”;

“...she tended the housekeeping or wrote fragments of herself onto

back to the ancient Greeks, it was continually adapted throughout “modern” times. One might compare how this position evinces itself in Roberts' poetry and fiction with the aesthetic philosophies of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

15 Here I refer to both Ezra Pound's “A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste” from the March 1913 issue of *Poetry* and Robert Penn Warren's “Some Don'ts For Literary Regionalists” in the December 1936 issue of the *American Review*. Miss Roberts, without a doubt, both read and was highly influenced by the former; it is perhaps nothing more than wishful thinking to say the same for the latter, the fact of her even reading it lacking evidence, but Warren's comments on Regionalism in the age of Modernism are undoubtedly relevant to any study on Roberts.

16 She had pasted the following warning on one of her notebooks: “My Relation to my Notebook is that of a Guinea-hen to her nest. If you put your Hand into the Guinea-hen's nest, She will never return to it. Eggs must be taken, if at all, with a long-handled Spoon. . .” (qtd. in Keller 302).

fragmentary sheets of paper, rhythmic lines and half-rhymed experience, drawn down into a few hard, tender sayings.” (*HSFAR* 107)

4) the use of words to “heighten reality,” and to dig down to the “roots of human life.” (Buchan 465)

“All around was the speech of the country, and this again added continually to the heightened reality as it called their attention and awakened their admiration, even affection, for what lay about.” (*HSFAR* 72)

“He had a tender sense of language as being some essence from the roots of human life.” (*HSFAR* 76)

Each of these effects, he asserts, may produce a “poetic” impression upon the reader, although it is the characteristic “fluency that brings her prose very close to poetry” (Buchan 468). Unless she is deliberately striving for another effect, “her writing has always a 'dying fall,' a rise in emphasis and meaning, and a falling away from the peak”; that is, a rhythmic “crescendo-diminuendo” that recalls and resonates within the expectations of traditional verse (*Ibid.* 469). He even supports this assertion, as does Rovit, by translating prose passages into verse, concluding that the lines “come as close to the *modern* use of conventional verse-forms as a great deal that is published as poetry” (emphasis mine; Buchan 469-470).

There is no need to dig any deeper and recapitulate any more of Buchan's (or Van Doren's, or Campbell and Foster's, or Rovit's) argument, to relay references to passages illustrating the “poetic” quality in Miss Roberts' syntax, her dialogue, her metaphors, her imagery, or to beat the proverbial dead horse with fresh examples. Rather, let us fetch our “long-handled spoon.” To have a reader find a particular prose passage, or even a cumulative style “poetic,” and to have the writer's own insights into the nature of their work (the writer in question boasting competency in both prose *and* poetry) replete with motivations and intentions, their very articulated conception of who they are as an artist and the implications of their art—these are two eggs that may hatch two very different birds.

By the summer of 1921, engaged in some last minute tinkering with the poems of *Under the Tree* before the manuscript was sent off to various publishing houses, Roberts was anxious to work on new projects. She had “frequent impulses toward my prose work” (Letter to Glenway Wescott, 15 Aug. 1921; qtd. in Keller 188) but was questioning if the form thus enacted was a suitable vessel for her vision. By May of the following year, she began working on a “story,” her earliest attempt at fiction, that had long been “floating over” her, “sensed as a nebulous rhythm” (Letter to Janet Lewis, 15 Jan. 1922; qtd. in Keller 210) and finding provenance in a “line, a pattern . . . which is the way my poems start, a felt—pattern” (Letter to Janet Lewis, 22 July 1922; qtd. in Keller 211). The energy and inspiration that went into “Sallie May” (as it was tentatively titled) was rescinded before the project was complete¹⁷ and redirected into what eventually became *The Time of Man*.¹⁸ In her arduous revising, she had worked out all of her stylistic kinks. She figured her method as “symbolism working through poetic realism” (“The Time of Man, Argument. . . 1923”; qtd. in Keller 189) and in this considered herself a “pioneer” (Letter to Janet Lewis, 14 Oct. 1922; qtd. in Keller 189). Writing to Harriet Monroe upon the novel's completion, she noted “It is, perhaps, as much within the province of poetry as it is within that of the novel. . . . I poured into it the notes which might otherwise have gone into the making of many bits of verse, and in the structure of the entire work I tried to achieve a form in which the uses of poetry and prose are identical” (qtd. in Slavick 756-757).¹⁹

17 According to Keller, Miss Roberts knew she needed a new protagonist for her story once she “sat beside a girl in a faded blue striped dress” with “a dollar bill crumpled in her brown, sweaty hand” at a county fair (Letter to Janet Lewis, 12 Aug. 1922)—“brown because of the sun and the weather, sweaty because the tide of life ran high in her flesh, secretion and flush, ebb and flow of blood” (typed note, LOC 9.4). The project had already seen major revisions, but was “not yet hard enough” (Letter to Janet Lewis, 22 March 1923). By December, she had abandoned Sallie May Best to begin working on Ellen Chesser, a girl more like the one in the blue dress (Keller 212-213).

18 Excerpts from the *Sallie May* manuscripts can be found in *Essays of Discovery and Recovery* (7-10) with an insightful introduction by Stoneback (3-6).

19 Although Slavick's report is full of valuable material, both Stoneback and Keller have noted that the quotations are often incomplete, not always transcribed accurately, and sometimes taken out of context. I have tried to use this material sparingly, although some of it is simply too good pass up; in these instances I am praying that the highest degree of accuracy has been maintained, or at least there is nothing egregiously misleading. Even more

It was not only Miss Roberts' conception of the *mode* she was working in that relied on the flexibility of prose to accommodate that which was traditionally designated to the province of poetry; her very conception of the *work itself* seems to partake in this characteristically Modernist challenge. The earliest realization of the project follows a “clod woman,” a scrap of “animated soil,” who would “emerge a little, become for a brief moment an essence and a vapor that is aware. Then the moment is done and she goes back to the soil again, and she does not remember what it was that happened. But she faintly knows that something happened. That is all there will be to my novel” (Letter to Glenway Wescott, 13 June 1922; qtd. in Keller 210-211). This flicker of flame with a dying fall, although merely the germ of a story, suggests very modest novelistic ambitions. It seemed a far cry from an attempt at something epic in stature, lacking any motivations fueled by “the fundamental passions, or instincts, Homeric themes of blood and waste and death. . . . Of life” that she later admitted to being “the only subjects worthy of permanent consideration” (Notes, dated 1924, on Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*; qtd. in Keller 279).

However, with an expanded “narrative” laid out and articulated with a roused fervor, the ambition begins to bloom and our interests begin to pique:

The story runs like this: A level of clods and dusts of the ground, and in this the people, caught in an unyielding mesh, a mesh of clods and dusts and furrows. Then a mind plays. Comes a flash of mind, and under the influence one of the clods becomes aware of itself and the world around and the mesh and the bounty and wonder of the sky. But the play of the mind comes to an end through a sort of disaster, a trifling disaster, scarcely noticed in the physical action and the emerged clod goes back, and the traces of the flame that leaped once are effaced by time and forgetting, a very little time, only she who had the experience dimly remembers that there was something, once, now gone, but what was it? and nothing answers anything. (Letter to Monroe Wheeler, 29 July 1922; qtd. in Keller 211)

questionable are Campbell & Foster's quotations (hence this demotion to footnote), but the following is relevant (if accurate) to Miss Roberts' meditations on, and play with, form: “I am still a musician, deeply within, along with what ever else I am. *The Time of Man* is a symphony brought into words, for I believe that it is, whatever its failings, complete in itself. At its roots, its inception, it might have taken musical form” (qtd. in Campbell & Foster 58).

She follows with an assertion that “I have attempted something which Henry James might have done, but with what a different medium!” (Ibid.; qtd. in Keller 211) Matthew Nickel notes how her description of “mind” and “flash” resonates with what Jonathan Levin identifies in James as his characters' “endless unfolding of perception” (“EMR: Modernist” 117).²⁰ Although used to different ends, Levin's “poetics of transition” recall the process by which texts outside of the established canon disrupt the moderated cohesion of the Modernist idea before potentially being integrated into its system of conventions: “Transition is a figure for the process whereby the familiar is relentlessly exposed to the unfamiliar, incorporating an undefined, undefinable excess into a previously articulated system. Once that excess is incorporated, however, the system is modified—the unfamiliar familiarized, the dynamic stabilized—and so the transition itself is rendered illegible” (Levin xiii). In the work of James, this paradigm accounts for his characters as well as the narrative voice, which “do not simply develop or evolve through the course of a novel; rather, the process of development utterly overtakes the narrating and the narrated selves” (Ibid. 118). Thus, he is “frequently drawn to scenes which exceed either a character's or even the narrator's understanding of events, staging the literal disruption of surface that marks any transition” (Ibid. 118). Given her translation of the novel's central drama into the nexus of the core constituents of “flash,” “mind,” and “disaster,” Nickel argues that this Jamesian tendency is likewise enacted in Roberts, who “transforms James' poetics of transition through her integration of perception and place ... in the way landscape defines, forms, influences, and comes alive in character” (Nickel, “EMR: Modernist” 16).

20 Nickel's forthcoming essay, “Elizabeth Madox Roberts: American Modernist” (to be published in the *Mississippi Quarterly*), which he was gracious enough to share with me for the sake of this project, continues the investigation into Miss Roberts' Modernist education via Ezra Pound that Stoneback laid out in his landmark essay “In a Station of the Modern ('Ah, how I Love Pound!'): Roberts and Pound—Post-Symbolism, Imagism, Melopoeia, Phanopoeia, Logopoeia, and Mo(o)re.” The essay's major contribution, however, lies in connecting Miss Roberts to Henry James—as a subject of study filtered through Pound (we know she read, took extensive notes, and even transcribed passages from Pound's August 1918 *Little Review* essay), as a model of “prosaic complexity,” and as an influence on such essential literary novelistic components as form and characterization.

This distillation of novelistic plot into an emotional core that hinges on “flash,” “mind,” and “disaster” also reflects, fairly significantly, the mind of a *poet* more than the mind of a novelist. Roberts' time spent at the University of Chicago (January 1917 through June 1921) as an active member of their Poetry Club was arguably her most prolific in regards to her deliberation of poetic intent; to transition into a different mode and compose with the awareness of different conventions and constraints would obviously require some refocusing. This early conception of what would eventually become *The Time of Man*, especially when compared with later schematics,²¹ does little to indicate what the final product will be. There are only weak indications of narrative, and none whatsoever of specific content. It reads more like a phenomenological or *aesthetic* theory in the elevated poetic language of metaphor. Consider William Blake (in whom Roberts likely found a body of work on which to model her own poetry) on his *Vision of the Last Judgment*, and let us replace his subject with Miss Roberts' title: *The Time of Man* “is not Fable or Allegory, but Vision. Fable or Allegory are a totally distinct & inferior kind of Poetry. Vision or Imagination is a Representation of what Eternally Exists, Really & Unchangeably. Fable or Allegory is Form'd by the daughters of Memory” (Blake, “Last Judgment” 604). Fable and allegory are not only prone to moralizing, which our poet consistently repudiated, but are relegated to inferiority because of their inherent relativism.

Roberts considered morality to be “a matter of fashion,” as “the good of one age or race may be

21 While formulating her first prose work, Miss Roberts had also thought of “the wandering tenant farmer of our region as offering a symbol for an Odyssey [*sic*] of a man as a wanderer, buffeted about by the fates and weathers” (qtd. in Warren 20-21). In the final product we have the daughter of such a figure on, according to Robert Penn Warren, “a spiritual journey, the journey of the self toward the deep awareness of identity, which means peace” (21). In her journal, Miss Roberts outlines the stages of the journey, with the numbering referring to the basic movements of the story rather than the chapters (qtd. in Warren 21, below):

- 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 bad of another” (qtd. in Keller 355-356). What she sought to understand in her private life and make incarnate in her writing was that degree of truth uninhibited by contingency, or that which has always been and always will be absolute and inviolable.

In the finished novel we have the following passages that wed Ellen Chesser's “flash of mind,” her sense of self coming into conviction, with Blake's allusion to the immutable:

... in her dreams in the night she often arose to a great quiet beauty. There a deep sense of eternal and changeless well-being suffused the dark, a great quiet structure reported of itself, and sometimes out of this wide edifice, harmonious and many-winged, floating back into blessed vapors, released from all need or obligation to visible form, a sweet quiet voice would arise, leisured and backward-floating, saying with all finality, “Here I am.” (*TTOM* 232)

The mountains grew more definite as she looked back to them, their shapes coming upon her mind as shapes dimly remembered and recognized, as contours burnt forever or carved forever into memory, into all memory. With the first recognition of their fixity came a faint recognition of those structures which seemed everlasting and undiminished within herself, recurring memories, feelings, responses, wonder, worship, all gathered into one final inner motion which might have been called spirit. (*TTOM* 237)

Roberts is clear to differentiate between that which is fixed in “all memory” and that which “*seemed* everlasting and undiminished within *herself*.” This conflict resides within the very heart of the Modernist mode, and the pursuit of ascertaining the knowledge of the former distinction might very well be the primary objective for the movement's definitive phase, for with this knowledge comes the program by which man may hope to reorient himself amid the chaos and confusion of the “modern” world. It is through this channel that the past is able to make itself relevant in the present, bridging the banks that Riding and Graves so confidently and contrarily delineated in their *Survey*—just as it is in the character of the invigorating stimulus that questions the sense of Modernism against the backdrop of its inalienable spirit.

The passages quoted above, and especially the second, mark a crucial development in Ellen's sense of self. We may compare the latter to an earlier scene in the novel, designating

another formative stage in selfhood, in which Ellen is working in the fields with her father:

“No plow iron ever cut this-here hill afore, not in the whole time of man,” Henry said.

“The time of man,” as a saying, fell over and over in Ellen's mind The strange men that lived here before our men, a strange race doing things in strange ways, and other men before them, and before again. Strange feet walking on a hillside for some purpose she could never think. Wondering and wondering she laid stones on her altar.

“Pappy, where do rocks come from?”

“Why, don't you know? Rocks grow.”

“I never seen any grow. I never see one a-growen.”

“I never see one a-growen neither, but they grow all the same. You pick up all the rocks offen this-here hill and in a year there's as many out again. I lay there'll be a stack to pick up right here again next year.”

“I can't seem to think it! Rocks a-growen now! They don't seem alive. They seem dead-like. Maybe they've got another kind of way to be alive.”

“Maybe they have. All I know is they grow.”

[...]

“Maybe they take soil, like everything else, but it's a strange wonder nohow [...].”

[...] She was leaning over the clods to gather a stone, her shadow making an arched shape on the ground. All at once she lifted her body and flung up her head to the great sky that reached over the hills and shouted:

“Here I am!”

She waited listening.

“I'm Ellen Chesser! I'm here!” (*TTOM* 87-89)

Here, the “growen” rocks, as the subject of a discussion tinged with a subtle and wry folk humor, provide an ironic contrast to the certainty of Ellen's demonstrative declaration of immanence. But more significantly they prefigure, with a more refined ironic timbre, “the mountains [growing] more definite” as Ellen, now wiser to the “strange ways” of man, perceives them. The fundamental fact acknowledged on the virgin hill coalesces into the primeval sublimity of the latter backdrop. Her imagination subsumes the landscape and assimilates its structures, becoming “a Representation of what Eternally Exists.” It is precisely what Robert Penn Warren would identify as “a fusion of the inner and the outer” and the fundamental precept of Roberts' “poetic realism”: “Somewhere there is a connection between the world of the mind and the outer order—it is the secret of the contact that we are after, the point, the moment of union. We faintly sense

the one and we know as faintly the other, but there is a point where they come together, and we can never know the whole of reality until we have these two completely” (qtd. in Warren 38).

Fast-forward from Blake to the cusp of Modernism, where Walter Pater, in his experimental novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), renovates Blake's “Vision”: the artist is defined by “the desirableness of refining all the instruments of inward and outward intuition, of developing all their capacities, of testing and exercising one's self in them, till one's whole nature became one complex medium of reception, towards the vision—the 'beatific vision,' if we really cared to make it such—of our actual experience in the world” (143). Then consider W. B. Yeats (in his 1897 essay “William Blake and his Illustrations to *The Divine Comedy*”) on Blake's paradigm, in which “allegory” is again relegated to inferiority and “Vision” is simply another name for “the symbolic imagination”: “A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame; while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or familiar principle, and belongs to fancy and not to imagination: the one is a revelation, the other an amusement” (176).

We know that Roberts read Yeats. We know that she attended the banquet held in his honor, sponsored by *Poetry*, in March 1920. We can also infer that she thought highly of him, or at least his ideas regarding the state and substance of literature. She even appropriated some of his language in her Poetry Club “lecture,” an uncharacteristic invitation into the private workings of her mind, and the most complete and explicit theory of art we have from her. In “The Thinking of the Body,” Yeats acknowledges a symptomatic “thought ... rush[ing] out to the edges of ... flesh” in the presence of “all good art” (107). Roberts expresses her ambition to “bring the physical world before the mind with a greater closeness—richer immediacy—than before, so that the mind rushes out to the very edges of sense,” before it “turns about and sees

itself mirrored within itself” (qtd. in Keller 202).²² The ideal in each situation is contingent upon the capacity for the acute reception of an intense external presence (the vital essence of a work of art; the *genius loci*), and both play out in sensational psychosomatics; yet Roberts seeks to cause, and Yeats seeks the effect. We likewise hear an echo of the Celtic sage in her declaration that “It is not the function of poetry to exhort or to utter moral precepts” (qtd. in Keller 202)—she had underlined the following in her April 1914 issue of *Poetry*: “It is not the business of a poet to instruct his age. He should be too humble to instruct his age.” (qtd. in Keller 199) Suffusing one’s poetry with a moral dimension does not just render it largely illegitimate due to cultural, temporal, or even personal differences; it likewise signals the poet’s vanity while consequently calling his intentions and integrity into question.

Though it would be an overestimation to claim Roberts’ “lecture” is somehow derivative of Yeats, the presence of Pound in this “doctrine” cannot be overemphasized. One of the most obvious sources (because at times just short, or even guilty of plagiarism) is an essay concerning “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” by Ernest Fenollosa, (lightly) edited and annotated by Pound and included as Part IX in his *Instigations* (1920). For now I will simply lay the respective resonances beside each other, for the sake of reference and to emphasize the extent of Roberts’ “borrowing”; I will return later to this “lecture” to illustrate how its theories and concerns are indoctrinated in the poems of *Under the Tree*.

Here is Fenollosa:

Poetry differs from prose in the concrete colors of its diction. It is not enough for it to furnish a meaning to philosophers. It must appeal to emotions with the charm of direct impression, flashing through regions where the intellect can only grope. Poetry must render what is said, not what is merely meant. Abstract meaning gives little vividness, and fullness of imagination gives all. (375-376)

And Roberts:

²² See also “Appendix” for the lecture in full.

Now poetry differs from prose in more than mere metaphor, though this is a concrete difference, the difference which is most often stated because it is most obvious—the visible difference of color and diction.

Poetry must appeal to the emotions each time it appears with the freshness and the vigor and the charm of a clear first impression. It flashes into media where the intellect goes crawling and groping. (qtd. in Keller 201)

Fenollosa:

The best poetry deals not only with natural images but with lofty thoughts, spiritual suggestions and obscure relations. The greater part of natural truth is hidden in processes too minute for vision and in harmonies too large, in vibrations, cohesions and in affinities. (376)

And Roberts:

Poetry is forever trying to make clear obscure relations in the worlds and systems of things and ideas.

It is not enough that Poetry states accurately physical facts, and not enough that it expresses the high thoughts of men, their ideals and hopes for the future of the universe. It searches further than this in searching out obscure relations. (qtd. in Keller 201)

Fenollosa:

Yet the Chinese language with its peculiar materials has passed over from the seen to the unseen by ... [the process of] metaphor, the use of material images to suggest immaterial relations ... [a] bridge whereby to cross from the minor truth of the seen to the major truth of the unseen. (376-377)

And Roberts:

We go into the unseen by way of the visible, into the unknown by way of the known, into Nous by way of the flesh and the dust. (qtd. in Keller 201)

Fenollosa:

The more concretely and vividly we express the interactions of things the better the poetry. (382-383)

And Roberts:

I have striven for a concrete and immediate rendering of life. (qtd. in Keller 202)

(These are just the most obvious examples—parallels in diction and syntax.)

Fenollosa's essay also seems to have been the source for Roberts' conception of “flash” and “mind” (or at least the inspiration behind the words' usage); she had written her letter to Monroe Wheeler containing the “story” behind the first novel around the same time she had drafted and delivered her “lecture.” The passage of note reads: “The very soil of Chinese life seems entangled in the roots of its speech. The manifold illustrations which crowd its annals of personal experience, the lines of tendency which converge upon a tragic climax, moral character as the very core of the principle—all these are flashed at once on the mind as reinforcing values with an accumulation of meaning ...” (Fenollosa 380). In a letter to Janet Lewis (c. March 1922), Roberts specified that all of her work concerns “myself against the background of this land” (qtd. in Keller 187), and Keller is wise to note that “the word *against* carries the sense of opposition as well as cohesion” (187). *The Time of Man* may be best understood as a complex network of cycles in perpetual gyration. Whatever kinks or jams arise in the machinery do not cause any lasting disruptions, and are eventually subsumed by the steady drive of the cycles, as Levin's “poetics of transition” assume, leaving only a faint memory of that initial disruption. A steady heartbeat, the pattern of breathing—these are synthesized by the motions of man as dictated by the motion of the sun across and beneath the sky. Daily labors are defined by the stages of planting and harvesting, which in turn are dictated by the succession of seasons. This becomes a pattern of life, churning steadily onward from infancy through old age and into death, with variation but always driven by the same unyielding and unforgiving insistence of nature. Thus we have a scene like the following, of Ellen working in the fields, in which the rhetorical and rhythmical devices employed intensify this natural fact:

She ceased to think of any day before this day or of any task before this. Each plant freed of weeds was something liberated, but another stood trammelled, the same endlessly snared, the same, until she tramped a treadmill and her thought was clodded with earth ... As she plied the hoe a quick image of a year, a season, from planting to cutting and stripping, stood forth as if it were in the soil, a design,

all finished and set apart. The design of the grass roots matted with the soil lay under her eyes, complete forever, varying in every detail but forever the same. The hoe came down over and over, no two blows exactly alike but no varying in the form. The year stood plainly designed, one with the grass and the dust, a certain year, formed with beginning and end, planting and cutting ... All now lay in the form of the year ... The year began to turn, a form moving lightly upon itself, but she minded nothing of the year, for her body had changed, and the hoe and the soil now cut each other sharply, visible and near ... She went endlessly down the row, plant after plant, the same, no thought of how long she would endure or of the end. Her body and mind were of the earth, clodded with the clods; the strength of her arms and her back and her thighs arose out of the soil, the clods turned upon themselves to work back into their own substance endlessly. (*TTOM* 259-263)

With such sustained attention given to Ellen's conception of herself in relation to the land, it is easy to see how we may consider *The Time of Man* to be, in part, the “annals of personal experience,” a novel of sensibility in which most sentiment is stripped and a hard realism of landscape and labor is substituted—a work that Pound would perhaps characterize as “austere, direct, free from emotional slither” (“A Retrospect” 108). However, the wider the focus, the more complex the schematic becomes: the law of conservation of mass may maintain a cosmic balance, but the life of each individual adheres to its own schedule, and the world boasts a near-infinite diversity of stages always somewhere *in media res*. Were the novel nothing more than the “annals of personal experience” recorded in such a fashion, we could be left with a protagonist who could just as well be anyone else, an anonymous soldier of the soil lost in the wash of the rain. Likewise, if we derive the story's sole value from its plot, especially as a narrative considered in the terms of Freytag's dramatic structure, we not only find a tragic climax in Jasper being accused of barn-burning, forcing the family into exile, but an entirely “tragic work,” as Glenway Wescott saw it, with a pervasive “troubling sense of reality” and “on every page a most desperate and unforgiving cry” (“Miss Roberts' First Novel” 73). Even Miss Roberts' own notes emphasize Ellen fading out back into the elements at the end of the novel, “represented in the voices of her children” (qtd. in Nickel, “EMR: Modernist” 20). Perhaps she even maintained

Yeats' assertion through the course of her writing, which she copied (although slightly mistranscribed) from his piece in the August 1921 issue of *The Dial*, that “We begin to live when we conceive [orig. “*have conceived*”] life as tragedy” (qtd. in Keller 376, N116-117n7; orig. Yeats, “Four Years” 193).

But more significant is the portion of the paragraph preceding this sentence that she likewise copied, adding her own gloss: “At twenty our intellects contain all the truths we shall ever find, but as yet we do not know truths that belong to us from opinions, caught up in casual irritation or momentary fantasy. As life goes on we discover that certain thoughts sustain us in defeat [Roberts: “*are constant, recurrent?*”] or give us victory, whether over ourselves or others, and it is these thoughts, tested by passion, that we call convictions” (qtd. in Keller N117n7; orig. Yeats “Four Years” 192-193). We may recall that the final “stage” provided by Miss Roberts' schematic of the novel is a “Flowering out of stone” (qtd. in Warren 21). In the perpetual encroachment of tragedy and attempted effacement of identity, Ellen is able to maintain the conviction of individual selfhood, and with it, a sense of agency in asserting herself against the currents of eroding time. She can remember “with a sudden flash of bright, pictured light a hill grave ... where she had sung of life with a great shout” (*TTOM* 364). The “lines of tendency” may “converge upon a tragic climax,” but Ellen may resist the fate of succumbing to a life defined by its tragedies. Like Fenollosa's Chinese characters, Ellen's “etymology is constantly visible”: “It retains the creative impulse and process, visible and at work ... Thus a word”—or our “[emblem] of the common lot” (104), as F. W. Knickerbocker characterizes Ellen—“instead of growing gradually poorer and poorer ... becomes richer and still more rich from age to age, almost consciously luminous” (Fenollosa 379-380). Miss Chesser's recurrent vindication of agency, her conjuring of former epiphanies in present reaffirmations, “reinforc[es] values with an accumulation of meaning” (Ibid. 380), allowing for the imposition of natural rhythms to be

transformed into, or claimed as, personal rituals—for a complex system of cycles to be rendered concentric, with herself at, or *as*, the center.

The “play” and “flash of mind”—*not* the “disaster” that brings this “play” to an end, “effaced by time and forgetting” (Letter to Monroe Wheeler, 29 July 1922; qtd. in Keller 211)—is the heart of *The Time of Man*. In a December 1927 letter to Louise McElroy concerning *My Heart and My Flesh*, Miss Roberts provides the key by which we may decode not only her first two novels, but the vast majority of her work: “Looking inward upon the human mind we see a world without end, receding down long vistas to a universe as vast as that of the firmament outside and comparable to it. All that we know outside is known only because of the power inside, the capacity to recognize, founded on the vast identity of the inner with that without” (qtd. in Keller 263). It is with this knowledge that Nickel is able to justify Ellen's “Flowering out of stone” even against what Stoneback identifies (here in the context of Hemingway) as “the haunting paradigm of place and placelessness,” “the unique pattern amid Modernist novels, particularly those subsumed under the epic device utilized by Joyce and Pound” (Nickel “EMR: Modernist” 18), of “freedom and motion ... deracination and the lost authentic place, of the constant quest for and pilgrimage to the hoped-for numinous place ... always in the optative mood ... [and] frequently conducted in the shadow of a Poussinesque landscape, under the rubric: 'Et in Arcadia Ego'” (Stoneback, “Freedom and Motion” 216).²³

Although we may find certain moments recalling the overly sentimental lightness of “local color” throughout Roberts' writing of her native Kentucky, they are, more often than not, both deliberate and integral within a greater design of a conscious, sustained tension; what may be a fixture in the narrative is bound to be destabilized by the rolling, sweeping thunder of irony.

²³ See also Erwin Panofsky, “*Et in Arcadia Ego*: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition” in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955; 295-320)

Perceived as a total impression of place, what we become privy to is *not* a utopian pastoral. It mediates faithfully between a “hard” and “soft” regionalism, neither the “almost subhuman existence full of terrible hardships and devoid of all comforts” (“civilized life stripped of its virtues”) or “a golden age of plenty, innocence and happiness” (“civilized life purged of its vices”) (Panofsky 297).²⁴ From the age of the pioneers in *The Great Meadow* through the encroachment of modernity in *He Sent Forth a Raven*, the romantic mistranslation of “I, too, have been in Arcadia” (whether the “I” is understood to be Poussin's shepherds, Diony Hall, Jocelle Drake, whoever) continually yields to the actual signification: “Even in Arcadia, there am I”—“I,” of course, being “Death” (Stoneback, “Freedom and Motion” 216).²⁵ The epiphany, which pervades Roberts' work, is not that Death was able to infiltrate antiquity's Arcadia (just as Lucifer infiltrated Eden to instigate the Fall of Man and inaugurate the program of Original Sin), but rather that the rural life, despite the respite it offers from the industrialized urban machine, is not without its own hardships. While her characters learn this indisputable truth through even the most mundane of their toiling, Miss Roberts consistently secures her protest against the condescending stereotypes of “local color” pastoralism perpetuated by publications that tailored to the vague fancies of a cosmopolitan target market.

Although the land continually denies the prospects of Arcadia—a subsuming prosperity and peace, a yield to end all harvests—it would seem that Miss Roberts has complete faith in the inner sensibility to transform these external circumstances into a complete and indisputable sense of selfhood. To call the cows home, I might add that it is this very approach to writing that most convincingly extends the borders of Miss Roberts' prose into the province of poetry, more so than any amalgamation of stylistic, rhetorical, and rhythmical devices (although employing them

24 Adapted from the definitions of “hard” and “soft” primitivism in Arthur O. Lovejoy & George Boas' *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (1935).

25 The historical and critical reception of the Latin phrase is the crux of Panofsky's chapter.

effectively, without the transparent tackiness of ornament, requires a skilled artistry, and may be equally convincing to many). Stephen Spender, who began his own career as a poet in the 1930s and may be considered among the “Late Modernists,” identifies the “modern” prose method as “an imagistic poetic one” (his miniscule rendering accounts for a general tendency within a broader historical context rather than a specific movement, but at the heart of it we will still find Imagism—Pound's Imagism), with its contrast being realism (117). Although we know Roberts' intentions for *The Time of Man* were to bring these two methods together into harmony (and most critics would agree that she succeeded), I hope the above discussion proves that the original conception of the novel, and more significantly its emotional and thematic structure, is more indicative of a “poetic” method, despite the degree of realism its narrative conditions depend on. Spender's detailing of this method resonates with nearly everything quoted thus far from Roberts' notes and letters regarding her artistry, and I think he would allow her name to stand alongside Henry James, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf:

The imagistic poetic method derives from the action of the external world upon inner sensibility. Individual consciousness is the centre which is acted upon by the environment. Contemporary economic conditions, politics, etc., affect it as discords in music, screaming colours, distorted form or lack of form. These conditions, that affect sensibility, form a 'climate' or 'atmosphere'—moral, intellectual or aesthetic—which is the complex result of material and social circumstances, seen by the mind's eye, just as the physical eye sees the colours of the sunset which result from the precipitation of dust in the air ... In the ideally perceptive inner sensibility there is contained the image of the whole condition of the world ... This attitude to writing, whether prose or verse, fiction or poetry, is essentially poetic, because it apprehends the real by way of feeling, intuition. The writer has faith in the potentiality of the most individual or subjective experiences and feelings, to be, if they are truthfully realized, representative of the state of existence. (Spender 117)

Were I investigating “Poetic Sensibilities in the Fiction of Elizabeth Madox Roberts,” the evidence presented above should lay a fairly substantial claim upon the writer's impulse toward poetry, her poetic sensibility as something of an osmotic membrane through which ideas pass,

even though their final incarnations may bear the distinctions of prose. From here it would only be necessary to prove that she maintained this attitude throughout the course of her fiction—a claim that the remaining six novels and two volumes of short stories could easily validate. My subject, however, is Roberts' poetry. Why, then, the lengthy coverage of *The Time of Man*, and the strong insistence on its consideration as participating within the poetic tradition?

III. Modernist Sensibilities and *Jingling in the Wind*

It would be a cruel joke to insist that the aim here is to prove that it's *all* poetry, that the prose is only considered as such because of the wizardry of formatting. To even attempt to do so would shine much more light on the critic's cheap-trick “revisionist” sensibility than anything in Miss Roberts' writing. Before I supply an answer, though, it would perhaps be useful to clarify what is intended by “sensibility.” It may suffice to settle with a dictionary definition: “The quality of being readily and strongly affected by emotional or artistic influences and experiences; emotional awareness; susceptibility or sensitivity *to*, keen awareness *of*” (“sensibility, *n.* [def. 4a]”). To glean and appreciate the nuances of this condition in a more intimate context, though, we may yet again invoke that master to many of the canon-catered Modernists: Henry James.

In “The Art of Fiction” (1884; rpt. 1888), James finds it “equally excellent and inconclusive to say that one must write from experience” (388); the claim only assumes validity when “experience” is qualified. For him, this quality is partially defined in its resistance to being *quantified* (not unlike the necessary “mythic” component to our conception of Modernism): “Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense *sensibility*, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind” (388; emphasis mine). When the imaginative faculties of the mind begin to shimmer with life—that is (to borrow from Fitzgerald), when the mind ignites in that “transitory enchanted moment” in which it stands “face to face . . . with something commensurate to [its] capacity for wonder” (182) (Roberts would call it “flash”) and sustains it to allow for “play” (that attempt to bring the freshness of impression into a state of perpetual renewal)—then “it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations” (James, “Art of Fiction” 388).

This imaginative impulse, tempered by discretion (James identifies this elsewhere as “taste,” or the poet's “active sense of life: in accordance with which truth to keep one's hand on it is to hold the silver clue to the whole labyrinth of his consciousness” [“Preface to 'The Golden Bowl’” 340]),²⁶ guided by the voices of a living tradition of culture, and translated into the language and syntax of a personal historical record, constitutes a primary faculty of the artist:

The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implications of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it—this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience ... If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions *are* experience, just as (have we not seen it?) they are the very air we breathe. (James, “Art of Fiction” 389)²⁷

It is not simply the elevated language that differentiates this from the dictionary definition of “sensibility,” but the sublimation of its truth to a new domain (one we might label “neuromystical”). The stakes have been raised, and the drama consequently intensifies. The artist's “sensibility” is responsible for managing the relations between the self *and* external reality (whether the process is one of import or export), while dictating the natures of the self *in* external reality and external reality *in* the self. The extent to which sensual experience invigorates the imagination (and even shapes identity), then, becomes a testament to one's emotional capacity. The “immense sensibility” that James recognizes is rendered only as manageable as the artist's vision and role are intensely realized and passionately felt.

If an artist's sensibility is defined by an inherent quality rather than in measurable quantities, it would naturally follow that an investigation by this avenue into the dominion of Miss Roberts' artistic character and merit would provide a means of considering her work as

26 If Roberts did not read *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* in its entirety, she at least read Richard P. Blackmur's introduction, from which she copied out the following: “Once the situations are rightly found—the story 'assumes the authenticity of concrete existence,’” to which she added “My own—felt or musical form” (LOC 8.3; qtd. in Keller 376; orig. Blackmur, “Introduction” xxxiv).

27 Note also the use of “the unseen” and “the seen”—cf. Fenollosa's “The Chinese Written Character” & Roberts' poetry “Lecture.”

emblematic of the Modernist mode without perpetuating any academic impositions onto the nature of the movement and without serving any political ends. Her distinctly “Modernist sensibility” can be diagnosed from two interrelated symptoms of her artistic temperament. The first is her “keen awareness *of*” the work being done by those at the cultural (and later canonized) nucleus of what has come to bear the title of “Modernism”—from the predominating intellectual and aesthetic doctrines to their incarnations in creative work. Maintaining awareness does not always, but in this case *does*, I believe, generate a certain degree of influence that can be detected, and in Roberts' formal artistry we find traces of Ford, Joyce, T. E. Hulme, and especially Eliot and Pound. Furthermore, her body of work contains verse that signals and gives new life to the distinctive essences of both the Early and the High Modernist phases.

The second “symptom,” the more foundational of the two, is her “susceptibility or sensitivity *to*” the “modern” predicament, with the nature, or at least the extent, of its effects on her general conception of the world and man's (the artist's) place within it, which likewise recalls those same writers who have secured their place in the canon. When Virginia Woolf, in a May 1924 address at Cambridge University, famously asserted that “in or about December, 1910, human character changed” (320), she is not, as Spender notes, “recording the kind of changes which take place in manners, behaviour and ideas within the unchanging constant which is human nature” (xiii).²⁸ Rather, she is “seeking to turn her fiction into an instrument which records changed human nature: a shift not just in the taste that sensibility reveals, but in the quality of sensibility itself” (Ibid. xiii). Spender thus characterizes the “moderns” as:

...those who start off by thinking that human nature has changed: or if not human nature, then the relationship of the individual to the environment, forever being metamorphosized by science, which has altered so completely that there is an

28 Spender is referring to E. M. Forster in his Introductory Lecture to *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), in which his long view of culture allows him to draw such “crude” (his word) conclusions as: “All through history writers while writing have felt more or less the same. They have entered a common state which it is convenient to call inspiration, and having regard to that state, we may say that History develops, Art stands still” (38-39).

effective illusion of change which in fact causes human beings to behave as though they were different. This change, recorded by the seismographic senses of the artist, has also to change all the relations within arrangements of words or marks on canvas which make a poem or novel, or a painting. (xiii)

Although, by his classifications, “modern art” neither fully contains nor is fully contained by what is “grouped approximately” under the heading of Modernism, it is nevertheless “that in which the artist reflects awareness of an unprecedented modern situation in its form and idiom. The quality which is called modern shows in the realized sensibility of style and form more than in the subject matter” (Ibid. 71). That is, a work need not explicitly conduct itself within the writhing, impersonal mass of shadows that fuel the modern industrial complex, nor within the secular economy of “progress,” nor along the disassembly line of the Great War, nor any such scene reflecting the malevolent carnival of “modernity.”

In “Narcissus as Narcissus” (1938), Allen Tate's explication of his own “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” he claims that the poem reflects “the modern squirrel cage of our sensibility, the extreme introspection of our time” (596). Whether this is diagnosed as “solipsism” or “Narcissism,” the symptoms compile in severity and synergy to eventually flat-line as the “failure of the human personality to function objectively in society,” a “remarkable self-consciousness” that prevents separate tendencies of the individual man from being integrated into a holistic idea of culture and conception of selfhood—a “unity of being” (Ibid. 595-596). This failure is fairly unanimously attributed to the mammonic “Age of Progress,” and as materials became mass produced, new machines labored without the aches of men, time became obsessively measured by the clinking of coins, distances shriveled in the growing networks boasting new modes of transportation—all of this energy offered as though a sacrifice to the capitalist dynamo, the urban colossus—so too did infinitesimally specific degrees of specialization shatter the “big picture,” especially when dependent on new machines, populating

urban landscapes with cyborgs as plentiful as pastoral centaurs. The industrial mode, its mechanized “form,” labors as meticulously as logic, only no premise has any vision of the conclusive whole other than that abstract ideal of “Progress.”

This is surely and admittedly a dramatization, but although “The age demanded an image / Of its accelerated grimace, / Something for the modern stage” (Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* 188), what it actually and desperately needed was a vital and dynamic sense of classic drama to rejuvenate the individual consciousness—parts in motion and finding relation. Tate asserts that “serious poetry deals with the fundamental conflicts that cannot be logically resolved”; they must be integrated within a certain modal realm of “experience,” which in itself “means conflict . . . and conflict means drama” (“Narcissus as Narcissus” 597). A poem achieves “form” when “what was previously a merely felt quality of life has been raised to the level of experience—it has become specific, local, dramatic, 'formal'—that is to say, *in-formed*” (Ibid. 598). (The process recalls Levin's “poetics of transition,” but where conflict would be subsumed it is instead solidified and secured within the form the individual poem dictates. Levin's paradigm resolves in a system that achieves homeostasis despite the disruption; Tate's proposition resolves in the suspension of the conflict rendered to its own articulated system.) The “modern predicament” as it materializes in literature, in simplest terms, is one in which this “Assumption” (as Christians know it) is stunted, redirected, or downright denied.

In the wake of what should be a natural translation, that elevation of impression to experience that James situates at the heart of the artistic sensibility, there lies a jumbled heap of anxieties and unconsummated semiotics that will not cohere. Nature as an organic network, as a spiritual ecosystem, has been jolted and disoriented by the dissonant rhythms and atonal melodies of human toiling. There is indeed a “machine in the garden,” as Leo Marx observed, but one must not forget it is continually made and operated by man. Furthermore, one must not

forget that this pernicious “machine” does not always announce its entrance with the flamboyant symbolism of a steamboat churning and chugging through the quaint Mississippi or a steam engine screaming over the stillness of a wooded Walden. The very process by which patterns of natural relation were being realized through sustained meditation on the interpenetration of various timeworn cycles became prone to disruption, and the impulse began being diverted into artificial and streamlined processes that connected man to an abstract idea of nature rather than the actual nature that surrounded them. According to Spender, since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, “poets have felt threatened by a change in consciousness from an organic and concrete to scientific and abstract thinking,” which “has cut them off from a past when [they] were intimately and, as it were, immediately in touch with the sacramental, the personal, and the natural forces that were once the ritual of living” (37). As a result, the very primacy of the human imagination as elevated by the Romantics was called into question.

Although it feels natural to append the epithet of “Modernist” to Eliot or Pound, the tendency of Roberts studies has proven that the Adamic impulse is most often distracted by the fact of her Southern situation, both biographic and artistic. Thus, we are at best presented with a (majuscule) “Regionalist,”²⁹ or, more specifically, a Southern “Agrarian.” Roberts admired the conservative and traditionalist principles set forth in the agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), but the spirit of her two early volumes of poetry and four novels already published by the

29 Regionalism also (most commonly) maintains a pejorative sense. Earl H. Rovit, in *Herald to Chaos*, identifies the issue—the “danger”—as “the fallacy of the repeated judgment,” in which “a superior achievement [goes] unnoticed . . . some unique quality is obscured by an arbitrary grouping with inferior works which share superficial resemblances” (149). Roberts' work was not impervious to this critical error. As Rovit notes: “with its heavy connotative carryover from 'provincial' and 'local-color,' it registers an unmistakable literary judgment of 'mediocrity' without clearly establishing the criteria for that judgment . . . the literary employment of the term purports to describe writers or writings inextricably associated with a particular geographic region—so closely associated indeed, that the literary work is somewhat overshadowed by the peculiarities of the region it chronicles” (Ibid. 150). He concludes that the term can only be useful when using a definition like Allen Tate's—“the immediate, organic sense of life in which a fine artist works” (“Regionalism and Sectionalism” 158)—as “every writer—and especially one who works within the mode of realism—must use local materials as the working ingredients of his art” (Rovit 151).

time the “Twelve Southerners” took the platform proves her politics and ethics were not indebted to them—just as it proves that their concerns were not simply the result of academic alchemy conducted in a windowless Vanderbilt laboratory. What is especially useful in the case of Miss Roberts as Modernist, though, is the rhetorical polarization of their platform: it is, very explicitly and distinctly, “Agrarian *versus* Industrial” (“Twelve Southerners,” “Introduction” xix).

One of the greatest offenses of the American industrial ideal, “devoted to the applied sciences and to practical production,” is its “[assumption] that labor is an evil, that only the end of labor or the material product is good” (“Twelve Southerners,” “Introduction” xxii). The very premises on which the industrial complex is built scoff at the agrarian conviction that “the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations” when “pursued with intelligence and leisure” (Ibid. xxix) It does little less than trivialize the ideal from which a massive (and integral) population may derive a sense of individuation or utility, and resolves any gesture intimating a shared interest in the vocation with a redacted hand and an elitist scoff. The very dynamic of man in relation to nature that agrarianism upholds is perverted by the urbanization of natural spaces and the commodification of its resources. Urban-minded man succumbs to the “illusion of having power over nature, and lose[s] the sense of nature as something mysterious and contingent”—both religion (“our submission to the general intention of a nature that is fairly inscrutable”) and the arts suffer under the “general decay of sensibility” that rides always at the heel of industrialism (Ibid. xxiv-xxv). The inevitable “sequel,” as Lyle H. Lanier notes in his contribution, is “personal isolation, and a fractionation of life functions into an ever-expanding and differentiating system of formalized institutions” (148).

Isolation, or the more severe condition of alienation, has gained critical renown as a watermark on the Modern imagination, and it is often the catalyst spurring the Modernist impulse towards constructing literatures which, phoenix-like, transform a bed of ashes into nests

wrought from the tenets of invented, reconstructed, or mosaic value systems. The industrial work ethic began losing its foothold in ideas of personal improvement as the idea itself became confused. Inhuman forces, ever expanding and escalating, overtook distinct social atmospheres dictated by moral and ethical codes established to preserve traditions (both local and national), maintain varying degrees of political integrity, and both reflect and serve the most immediate needs of the community. Firmly established social systems of customs, values, and mores that once indicated complex development, cultural refinement, and general order became less apparent. The entrenched circumstances integral to the popular novel of manners—we may think of anything from Jane Austen's or Edith Wharton's domestic preoccupations to something of a wider scope, such as those works in which James (by way of Balzac) explicates his “international theme”—against which characters are defined by the degree to which they measure up to the social standard or cultural ideal it begets, began to crumble. (If Yeats did not say it best, he was at least the most explicit: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / [. . .] The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity” [“The Second Coming” 215].) The staunch convention of Victorian morality in Anglo-American literature in general became less a mode of realism and more an indication of denial, ignorance, or oblivion. In the wake of morality stood the impersonal industrial and economic machine; where values once cohered (albeit not always in favor of the general population), fragmentation set in.

This fragmentation of values bred social isolation, and this in turn engendered the convictions of the deracinated artist. Thus we have Hemingway—the self-diagnosed “chickenshit dis-placed person” (Letter “To William Faulkner, 23 July 1947” 624), the American expatriate who saw some promise of community and artistic cohesion in 1920s Paris—with his invented system of values, always seeking experiences that validate that system. Or else this isolation may

give us a kind of “Miniver Cheevy,” that sad satirical portrait from the pen of Edwin Arlington Robinson, but very real in what George Santayana classified (and dismissed) in 1911 as “the Genteel Tradition.” We may think of the “Harvard poets”—William Vaughn Moody and Trumbull Stickney, for example, as well as, ironically, Santayana—with their zeal for “culture” and their vague idealism. In them we find the privileged avoidance of the “modern” predicament and the clinging to Platonic ideals. Shallow sensibilities prefabricated from the cloth of cultural seniority either took pride in their symptomatic deracination or else didn't care, and it is from this *long* view and allegiance to the abstract that they reconstruct a system of values. However, as Perkins notes, this tendency need only be framed in another vocabulary to become “one of the great, valued roads always open to the human spirit” (103). Santayana defends this mode in the “Preface” to his *Poems* (1922): “If their prosody is worn and traditional, like a liturgy, it is because they represent the initiation of a mind into a world older and larger than itself; not the chance experiences of a stray individual, but his submission to what is not his chance experience; to the truth of nature and the moral heritage of mankind” (ix). Between these two tendencies we find the likes of Eliot and Pound, who construct a sort of mosaic value system out of the “Great Tradition” of literature and the blending of Western and Eastern cultures, each with their own distinct philosophies and religions. Allusive rather than abstract, this approach relies on forcing disconnected scenes and sensibilities into contact with each other. In this new context, the interplay creates a sort of cultural cocktail tailored to the contemporary palette and the symptoms of the “modern” predicament.

Miss Roberts and her fellow Southern American “Regionalists,” however, do not fit neatly into any of these paradigms. They sensed the threat and felt the pangs of alienation as a community, as a single Southern body. Their traditional value system could not so easily become fragmented; because of its direct opposition to industrialism and materialism, it would need to be

wholly subsumed if it were to be compromised at all. The true “Regionalist” writer—and I find it hard to disagree with the fairly unanimous critical gesture that Miss Roberts bears this epithet, and remains thoroughly Regionalist even when we are considering her within the Modernist tradition—cannot suffer this defeat, though, for in his or her direct connection to the land and the traditions which maintain the sanctification of the relationship is interwoven the very spirit of the writing itself. It is with this awareness that Allen Tate defines Regionalism (we may drop the quotation marks as we assume a working definition to carry through the argument) as “only the immediate, organic sense of life in which a fine artist works” (“Regionalism and Sectionalism” 158).

Tate was quick to compose a sort of addendum following his contribution to *I'll Take My Stand*, in which he differentiates between this conception of Regionalism and “sectionalism.” The latter is “by necessity a doctrine, philosophical at its rare best, [and] at its worst boastful propaganda . . . a kind of politics, a set of social values,” always “aggressive and abstract” (Tate, “Regionalism and Sectionalism” 158). In literature “it falsifies the creative impulse with the motives of social action, with motives that are vaguely political” (Ibid. 160). Regionalism is not inviolable, though; it is prone to the “provincial vice” of “antiquarianism” (Ibid. 158). This “self-conscious regionalism,” in which the writer “get[s] out the documents, living and dead, animate and inanimate, and give[s] them expression,” “is nearly always stillborn, for it is documentary, and the author may be deceiving himself in believing that the material has some vital *rapport* with his own moral temper” (Ibid. 159). That is, it “destroys tradition with its perpetual discovery of it; makes it clumsy and sterile” (Ibid. 159).

In Tate's conception, Regionalism nears its apotheosis in working from a genuine tradition that is instilled in the writer's sensibility. After the dust kicked up during the Early Modernist phase by the reactionary prioritizing of aesthetics had begun to settle, writers began

the more radical task of attempting to derive both content and *form itself* from an intimate knowledge of the literary tradition (including those reactionary movements that came immediately prior) and the compulsion to create something *new*, because *whole*, out of precisely articulated fragments (devices, modes, conventions, tropes, allusions, *et cetera*) from the past. This is most apparent in the High Modernist “holy trinity”: Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and Pound's *Cantos* (which, coincidentally, perform quite convincingly in the roles of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

Tate's definition of “tradition” as a working concept within the prospects of sound Regionalism is the tradition that Eliot and Pound felt as though they had been cut off from, and once this relation was lost it could not be recovered. He claims that,

a genuine tradition must on the whole be unconsciously operative: in literature it is the writer's decorum in the widest sense, a powerful instinct of selection and arrangement; it is those ways of feeling, those convictions of propriety, those ways of speaking, of which the writer himself is hardly aware, and from which he cannot escape. More generally tradition is the knowledge of life that we have not had to learn for ourselves, but have absorbed out of the life around us. Its chief value, in literature as in living, is its economy; it releases the individual from the necessity to learn from the ground up all the mechanics of living, all the hard, trivial fundamentals; it gives us fixed procedures that we can rely on in the larger pursuit of the good life. (Tate, “Regionalism and Sectionalism” 159)

Tate's understanding of “tradition” is derived from his Southern identity, and the Southern literary legacy has always been an explicit function of place. Much of its literature concerns the lives of its denizens, and one of the primary objectives of its serious writers has consistently been the dismantling of stereotypes with substantiating dramatic emblems of the distinct and rich cultures that make up the expansive region. If cosmopolitan nature aims to be present and participate within a global network, then it is the general nature of the rural to keep to itself, creating a private, self-contained, sovereign, and staunchly local society. Without the constraints that contain this world unto itself, tradition becomes something that needs to be consciously

upheld or else it becomes murky and convoluted, or even wholly inaccessible. With the constraints maintained, every aspect of a given culture becomes neatly self-reflexive and synecdochic. It is under these conditions that Tate can comfortably and confidently situate the “mechanics of living” as “fixed procedures” that shape a literary work without any sustained translation work by the writer.

Regarding these “unconsciously operative” aspects of the writing process, Tate's definition of “tradition” provides an implicit motivation for the necessary discretion alluded to by James in his conception of “sensitivity.” It also somewhat recalls the second degree of “sensitivity” that Roberts maintains as a writer participating within the Modernist mode, although the condition that Tate defines is more generally a neutral frame of reference; the operations of a mind keenly aware of the “modern” predicament are not only more consciously maintained, but are motivated into action by an anxiety of exigence. What Tate defines is something that can be written simultaneously with human drama or the environment that it is staged in without affecting the natural timbre of emotion or landscape, and if it were ever to become something ornamental deliberately imposed or an undertone deliberately set it would become susceptible to falling into political collusion. It is, Tate continues, “to approach the chosen subject matter with an instinct for its meaning, rather than with an abstract theory about it or with an air of contriving for oneself all the properties of the scene”; that is, it is something *felt* (“Regionalism and Sectionalism” 159). The “tradition” that characterizes the High Modernist mode is far from being an “abstract theory,” but its utility definitely hinges on *thought*. Although the circumstances and capacity for sustained feeling have been disrupted, and although the demarcations of inviolable traditions have been blurred, the writer with an intensity of vision may still be able to sense his subject matter's propensity for figuring into and perpetuating a literary heritage like a medium in a banquet hall of ghosts. Then instinct must yield to ingenuity;

whatever was apprehended by feeling soon demands thought as a means of discovering or creating order—of securing utility, relation, structure, and implication.

Tate sees his traditionalist in opposition to the “provincial writer,” the “regional[ist] without civilization” (“The New Provincialism” 542). What he bills as “The New Provincialism” (1945) is essentially the state in which the “modern” predicament is “resolved” by acquiescing—by *not* finding a resolution and by accepting this situation as the new norm. It is thus “that state of mind in which regional men lose their origins in the past and its continuity into the present, and begin every day as if there had been no yesterday” (Ibid. 542). For being so passive, it nevertheless amounts to a radical denial of the self in relation to history and sense of place. The provincial view in Southern writing naturally degrades into the politics of sectionalism, which are entirely ignorant: “The South, backward and illiberal, and controlled by white men who cherish a unique moral perversity, does not offer in itself a worthy subject to the novelist or the poet; it follows that the only acceptable literature that the South can produce must be a literature of social agitation, through which the need of reform may be publicized” (Ibid. 543). This limits the Southern writer in two ways: that he first “must ignore the historical background of his subject,” and that “he must judge the subject strictly in terms of the material welfare of his characters and of the 'injustice' which keeps them from getting enough of it” (Ibid. 543-544). Writing under these limitations creates literatures that surrender to the inhuman, inhumane, and impersonal exaggerations of industrialism; man becomes uprooted from his native soil and is conceived of as a commodity.

In each of these schematics, Tate praises Miss Roberts as the uncorrupted ideal. He acknowledges her as the *only* Southern novelist of her period who “ignored” the provincial attitude towards Southern writing while staying “continuously popular” (Tate, “The New Provincialism” 543). She is likewise “*the* American writer of distinction who is both regional

and traditional”; that is, she writes “with so little self-consciousness that [she] can see the past and the present as one, and can grasp the surrounding life, with its implications in the past, as a whole” (Tate, “Regionalism and Sectionalism” 159; emphasis mine). She maintains an intense and sustained awareness of the complexity of each moment, knowing that every aspect of her present reality has been dictated by the past and will, however slightly, shape the future.

Regardless of Miss Roberts' religious temperament, her register of values enmeshes her in the design of the “classical-Christian world ... which held that honor, truth, imagination, human dignity, and limited acquisitiveness, could alone justify a social order ... and could do much to redeem an order dilapidated and corrupt ... if a few people passionately hold these beliefs” (Tate “The New Provincialism” 545). In maintaining such a close connection with the land of her region, she accepts and extends the tradition that shaped it. Her artistic temperament and the lives of her characters are rooted in the realm of experience, and it is only through a continuation of this lived experience that any scandal of suffering can achieve redemption naturally. In this we find a stark contrast to the provincial world of the logical (the political, the dogmatic) present, “which sees in material welfare and legal justice the whole solution to the human problem” (Ibid. 545). We might consider it comparable to the form a poem or piece of prose may take when it is blind to fate and numb to necessity, coming together by processes parallel to the intellectualized composition of the benchmark High Modernists, who strive for total conception and whose critical attitudes radiate from the very consciousness maintained in their work, but void of artistic sensitivity and without the sense of urgency that is the natural consequence of being preoccupied with the wax and wane of morality through time.

If the “modern” world is defined by its fragmentation—of values, of memory, of community, of the intellect, of sensibility—and a consequential alienation, then the primary Modernist impulse is one towards recognition and reintegration. The “modern” imagination is

one which struggles to render the rhetorical, moral, didactic and symbolic situations inscribed within mundane routines (for the severity of discipline demanded by ritual has been undermined) and the formal parameters of any conscious literary work. Throughout the various movements and guises of Modernism, we find faith in, sanctification of, and yearning towards a condition of “wholeness.” For example: in Impressionism we find the urge to *present*; in Imagism the urge to *create*; in the High Modernist mode the urge to *reclaim*; and in Regionalism the urge to *maintain* something “whole.” It is in this light that Donald Davidson, in *The Attack on Leviathan* (1938), asserts that the genuine Regionalism as outlined by Tate promises to provide “a locus, physical and spiritual, in which association might replace disassociation, and thus furnish within the regional tradition the cultural assumptions often lacking in modern art” (86).

And it is with this awareness that Roberts exercises the faculties of her sensibility. Her third novel, 1928's *Jingling in the Wind*, neither bore the distinct Regionalist mark so palpable throughout the rest of her oeuvre nor fared very well with the critics.³⁰ The *Time* magazine review, bearing the epithet of “Travesty,” considered the work to be “utterly meaningless potpourri of pleasant enough bits of satire, glimpses of nature, [and] young men in love” (47). Rovit claims it is only successful “as a pastiche, parts of which are wonderful in themselves, and parts of which are interesting in the light they shed on Miss Roberts' other work,” rather than “a unified metaphorical statement of experience” (90). He sees her “adopt[ing] the form of the picaresque novel” for the “structural framework,” only to “[suffuse] this traditional pattern with a combination of farce, fantasy, and poetry, leaving the reader with a concoction that should be drunk swiftly with one's eyes shut” (Ibid. 90). Although *Jingling in the Wind* remains about as stylistically faithful to *The Time of Man* as 1960s West Coast “cosmic Americana” does to rural

30 Much of what follows regarding *Jingling in the Wind* has been adapted from my paper presented at the 88th Annual SAMLA Conference (4-6 Nov. 2016 in Jacksonville, FL); the conference theme was “Utopia/Dystopia: Whose Paradise is it?”

American folk-song, and although we often feel as though we are more likely in Oz or Wonderland than Kentucky (beneath the many layers of folkloric and mythic lyricism, of poetry that ranges from proverbial to Poundian, of allusion, of parody, of satire; along what Allan Nevins ultimately characterizes as “a mockery that shifts and changes in color and form from page to page, usually defying analysis” [294]), the novel contains what is perhaps Miss Roberts' most explicit (albeit allegorical) rendering of the contrast between the “new provincial” mind tackling the “modern” predicament and the Regionalist mind suffused with a Modernist sensibility.

Some context is necessary: Jeremy is a rain-maker, by profession and partly in passion. That is, he is a scientist in charge of regulating the rain in rural Jason County. His friend Josephus stops by one day and tells stories of his time spent in the capital, insisting Jeremy pays a visit. He acquiesces after hearing that the city will be hosting a rain-maker's convention. There is an ulterior motivation, though. He hopes to encounter Tulip McAfee, a love interest from his friend's stories who becomes, by nature of the enigmatic charms Josephus bestows upon her, an object of love-longing for Jeremy. On the way to the metropolis, the motor-bus he is riding breaks down. To pass the time until the vehicle is fixed, the passengers tell stories that, intentionally or not, illuminate a range of vices, follies, and failures of the modern man. A woman appears out of a cloud of dust, chased by wild horses. The men rescue her, and Jeremy realizes it is Tulip McAfee. While sharing her own story, Jeremy finds that she has become jaded and calloused, but hope shows a shoot of green: she is a rain-maker as well. The motor-bus finally makes it to the city. Tulip apparently runs off with a Mr. Breed, one of the passengers. Jeremy attends the convention, where he learns there is to be “a great rain fair, a rain carnival, to illustrate the virtues of the craft” (*Jingling in the Wind* 181). The carnival will open with “a great rain display, a model rain, predicted, arranged, conducted ... [and] controlled” by “the best

practitioner of the science” (Ibid. 185). Jeremy, to his partial dismay, is elected, and he discovers that Tulip is responsible. His performance (which is more so a battle with a cloud) is a success, and he is coerced into leading a celebratory parade. Managing to slip away, he finds himself in a nearby park where he meets a symbolic spider, simultaneously spinning and narrating a web. He takes the spider's advice on how to summon and court Tulip. It is a success: following a series of performed rituals of romance (I do not mean a euphemism for sex), the two agree to abandon their scientific profession, marry (out of what we are to believe is “true love”), and start a family. The narrative ends in song.

Roberts believed she had invented yet another new form with *Jingling in the Wind*: “prose in appearance and tradition but actually poetry” (Letter to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant), a “phantasy” (Letter to George Oppenheimer, 25 May 1928) or “musical comedy” (Letter to B. W. Huebsch, 29 April 1928) rather than a novel (all qtd. in Keller 269). She had the full support of Maurice Lesemann, who thought it about “time people find out that you are not always the sober poet of *The Time of Man* or the somber poet of *My Heart and My Flesh*” (qtd. in Keller 269). This time around, she assumed, among other guises, a social role, balancing the sardonic and the severe: the role of the satirist. One of her target subjects was the American attitude toward poets. When a poet laureate is wanted for the great rain fair, the committee discovers that “emigration has been complete” (*JITW* 183), that there are no poets left in America. They have all taken the way of the expatriate, lured by prizes and travel scholarships to practice their craft “beyond the sea,” “braving the terrors of the deep and the rigors of life in an unknown land [where] they may worship after the dictates of their consciences,” where their artistic pursuit is valued and valuable (Ibid. 183). Finally, the last living American poet is “discovered in a small town far in the South,” “masquerading” under “some more genteel calling” (Ibid. 184). Upon contemplating the opportunity, he is so overcome with disbelief and joy that he suffers a nervous breakdown,

replete with “complete amnesia” and the loss of “all his rules for quantities, which he had massed in his years of research and experiment,” and must be “tenderly nursed back to health by psychiatry” (Ibid. 184-185). The episode is both a diatribe against American preoccupations and an expression of mourning over the pervasive fragmentation of American values and cultural decay. If this public satire is any indication of private frustrations, we may have some insight into Miss Roberts' nearly two-decade hiatus from publishing another full volume of poetry to follow *Under the Tree* (these two lonely volumes bookend the complete body of her published prose, save the stories compiled in *Not By Strange Gods*). To whatever extent we consider *Jingling in the Wind* comic, it is crucial to acknowledge its dimensions as tragedy; it is just as much a pastoral elegy (for the shepherd, for the agrarian, for those with moral conviction, for the poet, for the literati) as it is a “phantasy.”

Of all Roberts' work, this complex experiment in fiction most vehemently peddles the agrarian stance that the rural is morally superior to the urban. The novel opens with a sylvan scene drenched in fertile rain, blessed by Saint Francis, and singing its gratitude:

The rain increased in a crescendo and made a more continuous patter-dripping that arose high in the scale with the increase of speed. Underneath the steady clatter of the drops on the leaves and the grass there was a faint humming that was perpetual in tone, as if the machinery of the instrument were heard through the music ...

The leaves held out their forms to the coming wet, all still now as a used prayer ... It was early morning.

A caterpillar crawled up a raspberry spray and found a dry spot under three touching leaves. It was ... eager to live, impertinent, on a raspberry stem. It wanted life. Life was for it. (*JITW* 1)

Even when Jeremy enters, clunking along in his boots and disturbing “the stillness of the rain,” he becomes part of the symphony, “a swaying movement of tone mingled with ... a great throb or beat that was a regular and blithe drup-tap widely muted,” rather than a racket disrupting it (Ibid. 2).

By the time he makes it to the rain-makers' convention, it becomes clear that the

metropolis bears the burden of a moral inferiority. This is where Roberts' satire is most indulgent and transparent. It is not a mere quirk that, for example, constellations are used to broadcast advertisements (“VIRGO: For poise and maiden beauty. Shamrock!”) or promote entertainment (“URSA MAJOR: See Zelda. The Great Dancer. World Premiere!”) or circulate Puritanical propaganda (“CANCER: Hear Ahab Crouch! Beware Sodom!”) (*JITW* 75). There is undoubtedly some play within the conventions of “utopian” and “dystopian” literatures, but the place portrait of the city recalls a destination out of Homer's *Odyssey* or Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* more so than Huxley's *Brave New World*. Even through the pervasive indulgence in imaginative exaggeration, the work as a whole maintains enough of a sense of fantastical play, self-awareness, and adherence to the skeletal conventions of the comedy and picaresque novel to resist becoming predominantly an allegory of hyperbolic politics. We would likewise deceive ourselves were we to insist on any real-world model for Roberts' fantastic city with a comparable degree of influence and texture as, say, Joyce's Dublin. The satirized city, as well as the idyllic country, may be the most immediate physical realms, but, quite uncharacteristically of Roberts, they do not serve as the medium in which identity is subjected to trial or from which it is ultimately derived. They are, however, suggestive. We may say they function as *topos*, which, translated literally from the Greek, means “place.” In the context of classical rhetoric, though, the term takes on additional meaning, suggesting a general topic, concept, or convention. Essentially, these functional landscapes exist as ideas of place more so than places themselves.

Throughout *Jingling in the Wind*, the only concrete adoptions of meaning for the characters occur in parallel, alternate spaces—that is, through allusion. The moral dimensions of place and character are both evaluated and ultimately determined by the laws of foreign lands. With more than a subtle nudge of irony, the allusive heart of the metropolis lies in a haunted wood. In search of Tulip, Jeremy goes to Mr. Breed, who is staying in a suite at the Capitoline,

the city's most luxurious hotel. While talking with Breed, the “whisper parts” of Jeremy's mind begin asking him: “Does he remember Spisserholt, the wood were Faust . . . ? Spisserholt?” (*JITW* 199). The voice hissing insists on the word over and over again. A cat, “pepper-and-salt” like his owner's suit, sits at Mr. Breed's feet and echoes Jeremy's conscience with a final hissing iteration. According to German folk tradition, Spisser Holt (“Spisser's Wood” in English) is the site where Doctor Faustus sells his soul to the devil in exchange for all the knowledge of the world and the freedom to indulge in all of its pleasures.³¹ The word becomes an incantation; its dozen utterances over the course of a few pages summons the shadows of the wood and suspends the scene in its folklore. It is more than simply an allusion, however. Here is Roberts employing what T. S. Eliot christened the “mythical method” in his November 1923 review of Joyce's *Ulysses*, the method of “manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” (“*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth” 177). The Faust legend, along with Christopher Marlowe's adaptation, and especially Goethe's, may be seen as “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (*Ibid.* 177).—that which is dramatized throughout *Jingling in the Wind*. It is easy to accept Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as providing the novel its structure (even without the nudge from the title), but if we are to divine a sense of its *substance* it seems necessary to consider the haunting presence of Goethe's *Faust*.

Consider this clever contraption, what appears to be mere coincidence assuming critical significance as Miss Roberts flashes her High Modernist plumage: While Jeremy is sitting with Mr. Breed, he struggles to restrain himself from showing any sign of desperation, of having any emotional outbursts; when he fumbles, the question falls “as an unwilling toad from his mouth”

31 See *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Dr. John Faustus*, translated & edited by P. R. Gent (1592); collected in William J. Thoms' *Early English Prose Romances* (pp. 151-300; “Spisser Holt” p. 168)

(*JITW* 198). Despite the persistence of his hiss-whispering mind, he keeps “Spisserholt” locked behind his teeth. The scene remains calm; his one slip-up remains an ignored “green figure on the carpet” (Ibid. 199). The cat, sitting at Mr. Breed's “pearl-clad” ankle, is promptly removed from the room after its outburst, and the hissing subsides (Ibid. 201). Although the means are subtle, this seems to be yet another nod to Henry James: “Vereker's secret, my dear man—the general intention of his books: the string the pearls were strung on, the buried treasure, the figure in the carpet” (“The Figure in the Carpet” 63).³² Here, rooted deep in the dark dirt of Spisser Holt, is the apparent key to understanding *Jingling in the Wind*, and perhaps even Roberts' entire artistic vision. She secures the novel in the longstanding tradition of tales of temptation, this crux of Christianity persisting tight in the chest of the Western world extending its implications to the borderlands of the “modern” predicament.

Despite the “diabolical” air about him, Mr. Breed seems much too civil to be Mephistopheles, and is definitely far too innocuous, far too impotent in villainy to be the Devil himself. We may see him instead as a man of a Faustian temperament, sullied by enough hubris and avarice to weigh out the wager on the capitalist's scale, to consider the offer as an opportunity to fill out his ledger. (At one point, a frustrated Jeremy imagines him having already taken the Faustian Fall, Breed's “right hand invisibly clutching the right hand of Mephistopheles himself” [*JITW* 225].) He is the “modern” man, whose susceptibility to temptation has escalated in correlation with his rage for “productivity.” Perhaps once an honest and modest specimen of agrarianism, he may maintain some airs (as he does with farmer John Bolingbroke), but his roots have rotted. His former community has become a commodity; what once served as an end in and of itself has become a path to profit. While Tulip serves as the rain-carnival's “directress of events,” “creatress of powers,” and “the brain at the top of the machine,” the operation's success

32 This image cluster likewise figures significantly in Roberts' fifth novel, *A Buried Treasure*.

becomes implicitly and entirely dependent upon the machinery, owned and operated by Mr. Breed, “capitalist, philanthropist, managerial talents, wealth, instigator of events, promoter” (*JITW* 201-202).

The few critics who have touched *Jingling in the Wind* seem to be in agreement that rain-making in the novel is both an allegory for “the excess of scientific optimism—the belief in the ultimate 'complete control' of the environment” (Campbell & Foster 209) and a satirical exposé of “the contemporary battle between 'Religion' and 'Science' which was raging around the Scopes 'Monkey Trial’” (Rovit 95). While this battle indeed raged (and continues to rage) on, these generalized thematic assertions overlook the nuances of the issue: namely, the distinct, actual, and longstanding cultural phenomenon (though it takes different guises) of pluviculture (“rain-making”) and its public reception. In tracing the history of this practice (equal parts dream, determination and demonstration) and the faiths that fostered it, we may not only get closer to its actual significance in Roberts' “phantasy,” but find in its application a better understanding of the author's Modernist sensibilities.

As Mark Twain so prudently purports in an introductory note to *The American Claimant* (1892), “weather is necessary to a narrative of human experience” (viii). Weather has always been utilized as an essential function of literary settings, often conveying as much (if not more) tonal implication as the characters' thoughts, dialogue, actions, and dramatic hookups. Although it obviously bends to the will of the writer, within the world of the story it is generally as fixed as the cosmos, and affects the course and quality of the narrative action with comparable dominion. Accordingly, if this traditional constant becomes, to any extent and by any means, susceptible to human influence, the entire power dynamic that has been in place since Earth's earliest lifeforms indicated a sensitivity to their environment and a preference within it is, to a degree equivalent to the competency of the agent, destabilized. Meteorological physicist W. J. Humphreys' *Rain*

Making and Other Weather Vagaries (1926), whose publication corresponds with Roberts beginning serious work on her novel about a “rain-maker” (coincidence?),³³ establishes three classifications into which all known methods of trying to control rain, both ancient and modern, can be divided: magical, religious, and scientific. He clarifies:

To the magical: Every procedure by which, whatever the art or practice, one pretends to obtain the desired results through an alleged personal control of some secret force or forces of Nature. To the religious: All methods, whatever their form, that, in substance, appeal for the thing desired to a supernatural being supposed either continuously to rule the element in question or, at least, able at will to assume control of it. To the scientific: Every way of trying, by some natural means, to alter in the proposed manner, and to the wished-for extent, the undisturbed course of Nature. (Humphreys 3-4)

By Humphreys' definitions, magical and religious methods often contain a seed or sprout of one in the other, while scientific methods remain “wholly independent” and “distinct” (5). Many practices that have operated under the guise of magic originated, he maintains, as appeals or prayers to some supernatural being or concept, imbuing them with a religious dimension. Over time, this fundamental religiosity often grew vague or simply vanished and the motions

33 The implications of Roberts' use of rain-making in *Jingling in the Wind* would naturally become more significant in light of any research she may have conducted on the subject. It would not only fuel the convictions of her satire and enhance her credibility, but should likewise indicate the possibility of loftier intentions—enhancing, perhaps, the novel's symbolic or satirical dimensions, or perhaps even signaling an attempt to engage with and amplify a certain longstanding tradition. If Roberts did indeed read (at least some of) Humphreys' study, she would have found (what must have been) one of the most comprehensive portraits available at the time of rain-making over the course of known history and the extent of the known globe (outdone only by Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* [first pub. 1890 in 2 vols.; 2nd Ed. pub. 1900 in 3 vols.; 3rd Ed. pub. 1906-15 in 12 vols.], an exhaustive anthropological study from which Humphreys openly and gratefully borrows the profiles of cultures that engage in rain-making rites and rituals). And although it was in circulation elsewhere (first published in the November 5th, 1891 issue of *Life*), Humphreys' study included a poem by chemist F. W. Clarke as a sort of epigraph. Titled “The Rhyme of the Rain Machine,” the sing-songy poem (it intimates a ballad stanza with an added long line before resolving in a line of iambic trimeter; the rhyme scheme is ABAAB) recounts a certain Jeremy Jonathan Joseph Jones (coincidence?) who constructs a rain machine to bring an end to a drought. The machine works—that is, it works *too well*. Tragically losing his farm and even his life to the flood brought on by the conjuring of his successful engineering, the poem ends with a comic twist: “To check the flood you started, I've heard / All efforts were in vain; / Until the Bureau at Washington stirred, / And stopped the storm with a single word, / By just predicting—Rain!” (ix-x). The intended moral of the poem is not only obvious, but had become too hackneyed and insufficiently complex to reflect the current state of the modern encroachment—thus too sentimental and inadequate to have warranted repurposing for Roberts' story. It may be credited, however, as a sort of *ur-text* for *Jingling in the Wind*, with a “Jeremy” refashioned in light (or perhaps in the dark) of the contemporary predicament—the plight of a rain-maker spared from mortal tragedy by his own handiwork in a society that has discovered the means to normalize, institutionalize, and neuter its hubris.

remained, “now degenerated into a traditional means of exercising a personal control over the forces, whatever they be, that make the weather fair or foul” (Ibid. 4-5). Despite its roots in religion, it has become “nothing but magic” (Ibid. 5).

Likewise, he abstains from challenging the anthropological surmise that any Age of Religion is naturally preceded by an Age of Magic. Sir James Frazer, in his exhaustive study in comparative religions, speculates that “a tardy recognition of all the inherent falsehood and barrenness of magic,” that historically performed “ceremonies and incantations did not really effect the results which they were designed to produce,” “set the more thoughtful part of mankind to cast about for a truer theory of nature and a more fruitful method of turning her resources to account” (57). Man had come to realize they did not actually have control over what they thought they had control over. The result was a reluctant “confession of human ignorance and weakness” (Ibid. 57). Yet because the conditions that demanded intercession continued to manifest, these frustrated ancient peoples, recently deprived of their (delusions of) sovereignty over the course of natural events, reasoned that there must be some other beings, unseen and much more powerful than man, who directed the course and ensured the variety of nature. Submission to these powers seemed to be the only reasonable measure to now take:

To these mighty beings, whose handiwork he traced in all the gorgeous and varied pageantry of nature, man now addressed himself, humbly confessing his dependence on their invisible power, and beseeching them of their mercy to furnish him with all good things, to defend him from the perils and dangers by which our mortal life is compassed about on every hand, and finally to bring his immortal spirit, freed from the burden of the body, to some happier world, beyond the reach of pain and sorrow, where he might rest with them and with the spirits of good men in joy and felicity for ever. (Ibid. 58).

The leap in logic was immense and surely required a gradual transition, but a new system (and center) of faith had been established in the minds of men.

Frazer's conception of these systems by which man derives a sense of place, power and

purpose in the universe hinges on the central question: “Are the forces which govern the world conscious and personal, or unconscious and impersonal?” (51). Religion, in its presumption that man can encourage or persuade some higher power to alter the natural course of something to our benefit, insinuates that the general “course of nature is to some extent elastic or variable,” and thus reflects the former; magic and science, which rule that “the course of nature is determined . . . by the operation of immutable laws acting mechanically,” reflect the latter (Ibid. 51). It seems almost a total improbability, given the sensational and enduring reputation of Eliot's first masterwork and the diligence with which Roberts devoted herself to keeping up-to-date with the Modernist literary scene, that *The Waste Land* didn't inspire her creative sensibilities in myriad ways. For one, it encouraged her to engage with *The Golden Bough* if she hadn't already—a work “which has influenced our generation profoundly” (“Notes on 'The Waste Land'” 50) in Eliot's estimation—and, in doing so, provided her with the anthropologist's perspective on the total and respective functions of magic, religion, and science in ancient and modern cultures.

In solidifying a schematic by which we may understand these approaches to a fundamental existential quandary, Frazer gave Roberts a platform for questioning its underlying assumptions. In a world that seemed to be constantly fighting to keep its head above the floodwaters of a general, pervasive chaos, the literary-minded Modernists yet remained wary of any proposal for a way to reclaim and maintain order, to protect valuable cultural institutions. This apprehension maintained that certain systems of power (such as industrial capitalism) would exploit whoever they could by insisting that mainstay traditions and traditional methods needed to be “updated” if they had any chance of combating that vague and greater threat to the people's personal security and their culture's integrity—the enemy always a scapegoat, and the proposed renovations almost always to an extent that would supplant rather than revise the old ways. Roberts did not so much challenge Frazer's conception, but interrogated the worldviews that

divided the systems as he classified them. Either “conscious and personal” or “unconscious and impersonal” forces apparently “govern the world”—but how can we possibly know? This conundrum wouldn't so much agitate the skeptical vigilance of the Modernist penchant for inquiry and challenge were it not for the way that these systems so easily and so often surge to excess (consider Ahab Crouch) or lapse into perversion (consider Mr. Breed).

It is easy to acknowledge rain-making as a science (after all, that's what Roberts calls it), but what about acknowledging it as a form of magic or religion? And what would the implications be? Each system is simultaneously upheld and propelled by faith (magic maintains a faith in mysterious forces of nature always at work and man's ability to tap into them; religion in a supernatural being and divine providence; science in the immutability of recognized foundational forces and their ability to be applied or adapted to meet the needs of man), and because of this necessity each system inherently claims the authority of absolute truth. Maintaining a certain faith is the keystone in each system's suspension. Human history has continually proven that alternate belief systems are often seen as threats or affronts to a chosen people's livelihood instead of potential evidence for a spectrum of truth or welcome additions to a healthy diversity. The issue is not proud faith or defending beliefs against critics, but rather that deep-seated egoistic vanity that Sherwood Anderson describes in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919):

. . . in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful.

[. . .] And then the people came along. Each as he appeared snatched up one of the truths and some who were quite strong snatched up a dozen of them.

It was the truths that made the people grotesques. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.

(4-5)

The inveterate discords between magic, religion and science—most significantly, religion trying

to extinguish the enduring presence of magic and science trying to illegitimize religious beliefs—are symptoms of a general malady, that ideal of “Progress,” that aims to unify thought and method under a single cause. Because these systems are built upon fundamental faiths rather than knowable truths (because they demand total investment rather than partiality or preference), they are all just as invalid as they are true.

Albert Einstein's special theory of relativity, introduced in his 1905 paper “On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies,” is often credited for the inspiration behind such famous literary experiments in consciousness and perspective—more specifically, in subjectivity—as Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Simply put, the theory maintains that, if the speed of light is indeed constant and natural laws are immutable, then both time and motion are relative to the observer; or, in other words, universal time does not exist, and thus each man's experience will inherently be different. Rather than seeing this as a potential confirmation of the type of metaphysical solipsism that Tate, for one, vehemently renounces (he was not alone; solipsism was the natural enemy to many of the Modernists), it seems more appropriate to understand the implications of Einstein's theory as a justification for using alternate lenses when approaching certain forms that appear fixed in a narrative, such as Jeremy's role within sense-making systems as classified anthropologically. The attitudes towards rain-making as expressed by the characters in the novel subscribe to a narrow, absolutist paradigm: rain-making is fixed as a science, and it is either seen as a gift (it benefits man) or a curse (against God) of modern engineering.

When we loosen these constraints, we may distill rain-making down to its fundamentals and straighten out the moralizing bent: namely, that it is simply a form of man engaging with nature, and that it has a long history. To respect this history, the different cultures that have added to its perpetuation should be acknowledged. Thus we can situate rain-making, and Jeremy as rain-maker, at the center of three overlapping traditions. If rain-making is a science, it must also

be magic, for the latter is simply the former without the intellectual framing, each seeking “Change to occur in conformity with Will” (Crowley xvi) to observable ends and by tangible means. Likewise, science may be a function of religion (such was the case with Sir Francis Bacon, the so-called “father of empiricism), in that the translation of nature's various mysteries into knowledge unravels the creative splendor and immaculate design of God's (or whichever supernatural being's—perhaps even a mystical spider's) divine will. Finally, there is the cultural reality that often and much of what bears the title “magic” actually refers to other belief systems. Christianity especially has made a historical habit of denigrating anything pagan (a pejorative term itself), occult, arcane, or esoteric to the realm of “magic.” Bearing this stigma, these belief systems become understood as a direct threat to the preservation of Christian values and society, consequently becoming targets of suppression.

This impulse in religion is the same impulse that shaped Francis Bacon's new investigative method and helped inaugurate the “scientific revolution,” which sought to supplant Aristotelian “physics” and the ensuing tradition of commentary. The authority of ancient texts was replaced with a “mechanical philosophy” and the methodologies of modern science; that is, a new culture of measurement that saw in quantification (along with the qualifications that come with the “collection, compilation, dissemination, and discussion of . . . observations”) the “hope that somehow [this] might lead to understanding and trigger a cascade of new capabilities, including prediction and control” (Fleming 51).³⁴ Whether we are discussing “magic” or science,

³⁴ Herbert Butterfield, in *Origins of Modern Science* (1949), expresses the historical and cultural magnitude of this change in method and approach:

Since the Scientific Revolution overturned the authority in science not only of the middle ages but of the ancient world—since it ended not only in the eclipse of scholastic philosophy but in the destruction of Aristotelian physics—it outshines everything since the rise of Christianity and reduces the Renaissance and Reformation to the realm of mere episodes, mere internal displacements, within the system of medieval Christendom. Since it changed the character of habitual mental operations even in the conduct of the non-material sciences, while transforming the whole diagram of the universe and the very texture of human life itself, it looms so large as the real origin both of the modern world and of the modern mentality that our customary periodization of European history has become an anachronism and an encumbrance. (qtd. in Fleming 52)

ancient, antiquated, or primitive belief systems were being replaced with (in fact eradicated by) newer, more “advanced” systems—the ideal of “progress” seceding from, and rendering incompatible, established traditions. Rather than acknowledging any indebtedness or lineage, these new belief systems aim for a clean and thorough break. In this light and by these standards, Jeremy can only be a practitioner of a science. Any magical or religious dimensions to his art are erased; it is a proverbial “killing of the father.” To approach rain-making as a total tradition, however, would maintain a more comprehensive historical sense, destabilize the authority of by-faith absolutism, signal a respect for alternate belief systems, and reinstate a more comprehensive spectrum or network of connotations that allows access to a wider, deeper range of artistic and intellectual expressions. Rather than committing patricide, a pact is made. This honoring of tradition is central to the Modernist program. When Pound declared,

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman—
 I have detested you long enough.
 I come to you as a grown child
 Who has had a pig-headed father;
 I am old enough now to make friends.
 It was you that broke the new wood,
 Now is a time for carving.
 We have one sap and one root—
 Let there be commerce between us. (“A Pact” 89)

he was not just providing a model relevant to American poetry or American literature or the entire literary tradition; he was advancing a catholic attitude compatible with the entirety of culture that stood in staunch defiance of the ideal of “progress.”

This attitude, integral to the Modernist sensibility that Roberts exercises as both a student of the movement and a sovereign witness to the state of culture, is the driving force behind the magic complexity of Roberts' “phantasy.” Oversimplified or acutely contextualized readings of *Jingling in the Wind* that only see so far as the political feuds between fundamentalist religiosity and scientific optimism incidentally dismiss the trade of rain-making as something inherently

antagonistic to the Agrarian ethos. It signals a “bonded” nature (as Bacon would have it), in which the natural process is rudely forced so as to lower the stakes in the consistent strain of labor otherwise dependent on nature's fancy. Jeremy's practice, in this estimation, devalues the “old way” of doing things. Perhaps, by practical standards maintained in the world as we know it, this is true; but *Jingling in the Wind* is a far cry (the farthest that Roberts sounds) from ordinary. Much of the fantastical depth that she creates hinges on allegory and allusion. Although rain-making as it exists in the world of the story indeed signals scientific optimism, it also hearkens back to an older tradition—one that she would have a source document to work from were she familiarized with Modernist output, and one that she would make a pact with were she following Eliot's and Pound's examples. It seems unlikely that Frazer's chapter on “The Magical Control of Rain” did not serve to some extent as source material for the world Roberts was crafting and the protagonist's distinct predicament. Scientist by profession, yes, but it must have occurred to Roberts that holding Jeremy to this role would make for a rather dull and predictable moral tale with an all-too-thinly veiled satirical pose. To add to the complexity (or even ambiguity) of Jeremy's moral predicament, the following anthropological tidbit could have sparked a novel conception of the protagonist in the writer's imagination: “Of the things which the public magician sets himself to do for the good of the tribe, one of the chief is to control the weather and especially to ensure the adequate fall of rain” (Frazer 62).

Rain-making in *Jingling in the Wind* (whether we understand it as magic, religion, science, or all three simultaneously) is not inherently unethical. To return to the opening scene—following the depictions of natural serenity and harmony, we are introduced to Jeremy as *rain-maker*: “He had brought the rain to the sky. With his science and his apparatus he had engendered the rain and now, as rainman, reve of the rain, he looked about and saw his work well done, saw his work take *purpose* in the clods and the parted loam” (*JITW* 6; emphasis

mine). Although Jeremy essentially tampers with nature, his practice does not bring about any inherently unnatural repercussions, and the medium remains unaffected. He merely serves as an intermediary between the sky and the earth. The “Winkle System,” as it's called, is instated for the purpose of general regulation, to avoid weather conditions that would jeopardize the well-being of the community (droughts and floods have consequences beyond the purview of agriculture). Compare this opening scene to Jeremy's performance in the capital, turned now into a modern Colosseum, which becomes a full-blown battle with a cloud. (One may be reminded of Tiamat and Marduk, or St. George and the Dragon, or especially *Moby-Dick*—although Jeremy has better luck than Ahab.) When utilized with purpose and humility, rain-making may become a sacramental act signifying man in communion with nature. When pushed past its practical utility, whether for the sake of public entertainment, the stroking of vanities, the thrill of scientific advancement, or exploitation by the industrial capitalist system, man abuses his privileges as a natural being and the prospect of communion is revoked.

Thus, the temptation that faces Jeremy is to give into the celebrity of his alter-ego, “The Rain Bat.” To accept the title would ultimately signal an assumption of complicity in the exploitation of nature by the industrial complex; it would be yet another surrender of one's regional temperament to the provincial attitude. And with this abuse of nature comes the extinguishing of tradition, for the Age of Progress demands total cooperation in the actuality of the present. Jeremy's articulation of the predicament almost seems too simple to be true, but when such grand concepts as tradition or history are considered as absolutes, so too does the conflict delineate absolutely: “Before will be picturesquely contrasted with After to the glory of After” (*JITW* 225). Having proven top-tier proficiency in his bout of gladiatorial rain-making, Jeremy, now begrudgingly hailed as “The Rain Bat,” is pressed to lead a celebratory parade—effectively a marching embodiment of the new regime that he scorns. As the celebration amounts

in blinding ecstasy, he is able to slip away and watch the procession as it passes:

As containing the Rain Bat his carriage went forward ... Behind, after an interval of soldiery and police which gave substance and texture to the rest, came then the strong heroines of fiction, moving in honor, reputation, deathless love, and sacrifice, the beautiful and the good having, as magnets, attracted all goodness, the gossips and evil-mongers being scrawny and over-fat, marching in attendance. Soldiery again gave body to the line, and were followed again by the sentimental harlots of song, good women who had sold their joy to support some artist, some widowed child, some aged father. These were a great throng. After them came the faithful servitors, knights, captains, butlers, housemaids, nurses, black or brown mummies, faithful in unselfish zeal for their masters. They were gathered from story and drama and poem. Among them marched harpers and scops, many grown blind in service, Japanese knights, lords, guardsmen. . . .

[...] Two monsters were passing ... One was named Forbidding and the other was Ginbreath. It was said that they engendered each other, for they were of such a substance or kind that where they touched together they were continually renewed.

[...] Beyond after an interval marched another great one ... His name was Bruitabout. It was said that he was the father of all the throng that went before and all that followed ... Men had nicknamed him Advertising. He was the chief cyclops of the world.

[...] When Jeremy looked back to the parade the creatures from the journals were passing, hearty wielders of nuts and bolts, of crowbars and levers. Behind these came travelers, seeing Spain, seeing the Orient, their luggage neat, their cheques ample. Finally there came the queens of the world; they had sold their queenliness to salve and grease ointment companies, they marched with the rabblement. After them came the lame, the halt, and the blind, recognized from Jeremy's weekly paper, the deaf, the bashful, the varicose-veined, the bed-wetters, the unmarried, the expectant mother, teeth we love to show, learn stage dancing at home in six easy lessons, the Jazz music-master, goiters, fits, roup, settings of eggs, burns, bunions, spavin, itch, bedbugs, lice, lost manhood, bad dreams, baldness, falling hair, bowlegs, St. Vitus dance, drunkenness cured at home—familiar monsters from the lowly walks of the world. Finally came the Chicago adjectives, bringing the parade to a magnificent finale, the Chicago epithets—enormous, brutal, unscrupulous, pathetic, amateur, gigantic, huge, heavy, animal, turgid, pulsing, and Titan. (Ibid. 227-232)

In this we find not only a confounding assault of imaginative miscellany, not only a “parade of ideas” (*JITW* 231) as Jeremy calls it—archetypes, stock characters, stereotypes, a prosopopoeia potpourri culled from public politics and consumerism to private matters and personal maladies, Baudelairean *spectres*, marching metonymies, embodied epithets consolidating into the cumbersome wonder of Carl Sandburg's oafish ode to industrial Chicago—

but a deep critique of “modern” society. The rain-parade is more so a flash of extravagance than an honest celebration of diversity. We might call it, as Spender does, a dramatic portrayal of a consciousness “liv[ing] in a single-strand moment, receiving the latest sensation, which obliterates previous impressions” rather than “an extremely complex present moment, packed as it were with experiences of the past related to immediate ones” (61). The passing figures amount to nothing more than the byproducts of a vomiting brain in a feverish bout of automatic writing (perhaps we are looking at the white-water rapids of Jeremy's subconscious), denied the opportunity to make sense of their summons. They do not connect to any whole, have any explicit relation to each other, or come from any necessary or usable past. They are a cast of characters realized in the bare minimum (one may consider them the vapid antithesis of the overtly symbolic procession encountered in the twenty-ninth Canto of Dante's *Purgatorio*), a haphazard sowing by a provincial hand that would have Tate in a tizzy. Without respect for tradition, we may gather, any potential for significance—to be achieved in daily living just as well in art—is limited to the superficial and the ephemeral. And it is the denial of tradition that ultimately tailors the mind to fit the demands of a growing consumer culture (one is reminded of the capitalist Mr. Breed and “Spisserholt, the wood where Faust . . .”), at the fringe of which we find Miss Roberts, in the very preoccupations of her leveraged sensibility and the constitution of her writing, protesting with unwavering conviction.

In abandoning this “parade of ideas,” Jeremy effectively resigns from perpetuating the provincial attitude. This in itself is worthy of claiming as a victory of the human spirit, although one is undoubtedly left yearning for some sort of spiritual compass to reinstate a sense of direction and resume a pattern of living. Despite the “phantastical” nature of *Jingling in the Wind*, and perhaps because of Roberts' intentions to work within the conventions of comedy, nearly everything in the novel characteristic of chaos manages to achieve some degree of order

and bring her vision into resolution. During his visit with Mr. Breed, and in stark contrast to the hissing of “Spisserholt,” Jeremy hears a voice outside singing:

Can Penelope be weaving?
 A wakeful wooer said.
 I hear the sound of heddles,
 And hear the changing tread. . . . (*JITW* 200)

It appears as though this singing helps him snap out of his sibilant trance and resume his quest to find Tulip. It likewise foreshadows the novel's thematic climax. Upon taking refuge from the parade in the park, Jeremy discovers that the voice singing of that wily weaving “widow” of Homer's *Odyssey* belongs, quite appropriately (given the fantastical trajectory of the novel and its dedication to symbolism), to a spider weaving her web, poised over an old pool where a fountain used to stand. She narrates her labor as she goes, moving between whisper and song:

“I have all here in my hands . . . I have it all here, the whole of culture. I draw it all out of myself with my long supple fingers, I pattern it on the air. I make it as I go, but it is made already within me, spinning. I knot a thread, thus, with the thrust of my abdomen, spinning, and I knot another, going ahead, making. This segment here is science, and this a renaissance, or I go thus, spinning, and here is a psychology of love. Or a university. We come now to a dark age, a knot here, my long pliant fingers turning. I draw it out with my hands. A dark age is followed by an age of enlightenment, and here is a new religion. Votes for women, moral prescriptions, Egypt, India, Babylon, I make a knot, a rise and a decline. Morning, noon, mathematics, a one-god, Isis, I make a knot, St. George, Diana, St. Brigid, war, a romantic era, an enlightenment, a new art, a new disease, jewelry, a new vegetable, sin, savagery again, I make a knot, and I am back again, a new philosophy, a Pyramid . . .”

[...] “... female submission, proverbs. They can be sorted on several patterns. I draw it out with my long agile hands. A lust for righteousness, dreams, conquests, a theory of time, spinning, or on some other basis, logic, cause and effect, or across. It is no matter, spinning. All there in the web, spun.”

[...] “Intelligence, gods, Homeric cycles, moons . . . suns, comets, titans, harvests . . .”

[...] “Globes terrestrial and celestial, earth, air, fire, water, assassinations, music, animal spirits, wine. Digging, eating, marrying, walking . . .

“Marrying, walking,
 Spinning, talking,
 Debtors, gamblers,
 Cousins, reckonings,
 Logic, memory,

Under the fingering,
All in the web. . . ." (Ibid. 230-233)

Like James in "The Art of Fiction," so too did Roberts utilize the easy metaphor of a spider's web reflecting an "immense sensibility."³⁵ The image functions as an incredibly apt correlative for consciousness as a perpetually swelling "complex present moment," drawing on the past as thoroughly as setting the stage for the future. The web is the antithesis of the "parade of ideas"; it represents the ideal "modern" mind, and is the only possible attitude that may fully repudiate the industrialized and provincial world. "All webs are analogous," the spider reasons with Jeremy when he fails to "see any analogy between human culture and a spider's web" (*JITW* 234). Just as a spider's silk forms intricate patterns, so too does human history; just as the web is a complex and highly sensitive system, so too are human relations and culture. Whereas *The Time of Man* illustrated plainly and beautifully this first premise (a conviction that remains glaringly evident throughout her entire body of work), it seems as though Miss Roberts felt she did not wholly divorce Ellen Chesser from the possibility of despondently lapsing into a deterministic worldview. Or perhaps her faith in human agency was prone to wavering. Either way, *Jingling in the Wind* more explicitly sanctions human culpability on a scale that transcends the personal sphere of relations and the local environs.

At the heart of this responsibility is the maintenance of tradition. Due to the aesthetic form of *Jingling in the Wind*, boasting a rich, allusive texture that is only dimly realized in *The Time of Man*, we are given here a much clearer portrait of Roberts' conception of herself as an artist *in relation to* distinct artistic and literary traditions. To reap the full significance of the cultural forces at play, "tradition" as it functions in the novel (and throughout the body of Miss

35 Although concrete evidence seems to be lacking, it seems very possible that Robert Penn Warren, an enduring admirer of Miss Roberts, borrowed the symbolic spider web from *Jingling in the Wind*—and with it, the implication that it is the only truly responsible and moral way to conceive of human history (solipsism and determinism take the hindmost)—for his 1946 novel *All the King's Men*.

Roberts' work regardless of what aesthetic markers are present in the literal text) should be understood as a dyadic concept, perhaps two spheres of existence that mirror each other—a microcosm and a macrocosm. In the former, man is defined as a product and reflection of his immediate environment. He may achieve a full and meaningful life with his consciousness rooted in this sphere of being alone. Because Tate's conception of tradition considers locality to be central to experience and the *deus loci* the operative force enhancing sensibility, it functions predominately in this realm. Ignorance breeds the provincial mind, while a predilection for apprehending a locally ingrained past and understanding how it may be cultivated in the expansive present signals the potential for a genuine Regionalist integrity. Thus we have Jeremy baring “the entire budget of his memory, the entire youthful experience out of which his mind was now furnished” (*JITW* 245) as a testament to his love for Tulip and, being moved by such love, breaking out into song. Folk-song functions here just as it does throughout Roberts' works: it is an emblem of, and an invitation to, communion. Tulip is moved by his display (by his “Regionalist” sensibility, if you will, shining ever more brightly given the cosmopolitan context), and answers with a song of her own. They are songs that function as wedding vows; afterwards, “They sang *together* ... and what they sang made a round that spread about the china tree and built a fugue to the evening” (*JITW* 253; emphasis mine).

Similar examples of an intense devotion to a regional tradition abound in Roberts' work, and this impulse seems to approximate the characteristic mode of her fiction. But in light of Jeremy's vision at the spider-web and his consequential knowledge of its mystical mechanics, he becomes complicit in an even grander scheme of tradition. At the insistence of the spider, he must first restore the faded ideals of flattery and chivalry, as “They go before in the design” (*JITW* 237). Thus Jeremy “reviewed history briefly and applied himself to romance. He built back the past, going forward and back on the stairways of the centuries, visiting dynasties and

cultures, making a long detour by the way of the religions and inspecting anatomy with an impartial mind” (Ibid. 238). It is indeed a comedic montage, foregoing the intense devotion and innumerable hours required to develop such a sense of tradition, but the moral is maintained. Roberts must surely have been aware of T. S. Eliot's seminal essay from *The Sacred Wood* (1920), “Tradition and the Individual Talent”; it quickly gained the reputation as a central program in High Modernist doctrine. Its crux is contained in the following affirmation: “Some one said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know” (Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” 52). Even if Roberts did not model the scene at the spider's web with Eliot in mind, she nevertheless maintains his conception of tradition—that which may be understood as the macrocosm.

Tradition, Eliot insists,

involves, in the first place, the historical sense ... and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 49)

Whereas Tate's conception of tradition holds its dominion in an acute sense of place, of man's “time (spent) in *place*,” Eliot's conception is distilled from a perspicacious view of time—of man's distinct moment within it as well as everything that has led up to it. “Poetry,” then (and we may substitute “romance” for Jeremy), is conceived “as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written” (Ibid. 53). Jeremy is not allowed to determine his fate—it is crucial to remember that broad patterns do not account for slight (that is, in the grand scheme of things) particulars—until he reviews the tradition in which he wishes to exercise his will. In doing so, if

we are to follow Eliot, Jeremy engages with the past in a way that ultimately alters it. In this revolutionary view of tradition,

The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new ... work of art among them ... [F]or order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (Ibid. 50)

Once Jeremy is convinced that he needs to radically alter his romantic approach to Tulip, the spider “twitched the last frayed edge of an infinity and left it” (*JITW* 238). And after he and Tulip exchange their sung vows and sing together for the first time (followed by a “vesper song” from the spider to close the ceremony and praise the certainty of cycles, as well as a ballad from farmer John Bolingbroke to celebrate love come to fruition), we know that the entire fabric of history has been rattled and ever so slightly readjusted to welcome the triumphant lovers:

Then that most exquisite spider that crouches at the hub of the web that is the mind stirred, feeling a tremor pass over the web as if some coil of it were shaken by a visitation from without. Life is from within, and thus the noise outside is a wind blowing in a mirror. But love is a royal visitor which that proud ghost, the human spirit, settles in elegant chambers and serves with the best. (Ibid. 256)

In these closing lines we find not only prose on the verge of spilling over into the province of poetry, but, lacking anything like an artist's statement from Miss Roberts, perhaps the most concise and precise articulation of her worldview and attitude towards art that we are likely to find. In the world of the story, and for the sake of its comic structure, the “love” alluded to is clearly romantic (although perhaps tinged with the divine, as Jeremy “offer[s] his hope of heaven” and “his love of God” [*JITW* 244] while courting Tulip). We gather that one is not made through consummated love, nor any other external circumstances. That is, identity is derived from an impregnable sense of selfhood, replete with passions, convictions, and a sensitivity to one's occupied moment in time and space. This is an important distinction, especially in regards

to a work like *The Time of Man* that finds its characters in such close contact with the land, the shape and rhythm of their lives dictated by its cycles and whims, that the land itself functions almost as strongly as any human actor as a character in the developing drama. Ellen Chesser's sense of self and buoyancy of spirit did not develop *because of* the land; they developed *in spite of* the land. Jeremy was able to accept Eliot's revolutionary theory of tradition not *because of* Tulip, but because he was able to find *himself* within a tradition that allows for love.

If we are to accept this passage as an unfiltered glimpse into Miss Roberts' mind as an artist, the idea of romantic “love” seems somewhat irrelevant. Rather, we may think of it in regards to the literary tradition. It is much more than a passion for her craft; this belongs to the province of the self. It is a “love” which houses her literary masters in the “elegant chambers” of her sensibility. This is obviously not an unprecedented approach towards figuring and managing oneself within the tradition. However, the ideological trends from the late nineteenth into the early twentieth century, in part responding to the ongoing modernization of industry and society, grew to reflect social and cultural disintegration rather than combat it. (I am thinking primarily of Stirnerian egoism, although the various movements founded on what were essentially solitary aesthetic principles that characterize the Early Modernist phase also apply.) In order to find some means of reconciliation—and to do so in a more responsible manner than the genteel Victorians or the Romantics, standing supremely alone in the genius of their abstract imaginations—a revision of the literary perspective was necessary. Eliot's conception of tradition was not so much a revival of the Classical attitude as it was a means of proving the enduring relevance of the great works of the past (as well as immediate predecessors and even contemporaries) in the present predicament. It is with these ambitions that Roberts brings those writers, works, and literary movements from which she inherited a profound awareness of the radical possibilities of literature into the very fabric of her own work. It does not simply amount to an imitation of

stature, nor can it be quantified in direct allusions. It is the texture of her sensibility, and thus, these sources achieve a sense of individuation within the very forms of her work.

To round out this lengthy digression, it seems imperative to briefly and casually reconnect *Jingling in the Wind* with Goethe's *Faust*, even if only to illuminate Miss Roberts' epic (in the Classical sense) vision, an ambition that is indeed realized throughout her work, from the obvious example of the long hunters and pioneers who ventured into Kentucky in the 18th century, dramatized in *The Great Meadow*, down to the most unassuming children's poems that make up *Under the Tree*.

We may first turn to the sources of potential knowledge that Faust repudiates in desperation at the opening of the tragedy: the prophecies of Nostradamus, the sign of the Macrocosm, and the *Erdgeist* (or “Earth-Spirit). Although Faust dismisses them as insufficient (a fault of his hubris), they seem sufficient enough for Roberts. The source of Jeremy's redemption and integration into the texture of tradition, the spider at her web, is essentially a composite of these three distinct authorities. The spider herself is the *Erdgeist*, a timeless being forever weaving the substance of reality, the catalyst responsible for worldly incarnation. Because the web follows an intricate and apodictic design, and because the spider toils endlessly to weave it, she maintains an intimate knowledge of the past as concrete as the trajectory of the future. Her “prophecies” can hardly be labeled as such, for they are simply continuations of certain patterns not yet realized. It is with this authority that she convinces Jeremy that the cast of his future, or the future he desires, is a story that has already been written countless times—the microcosm of his private and nearly negligible presence in history reflects, with looking-glass accuracy, the shape of a tradition throughout history.

Faust as divided into its two parts is, in itself, a microcosm (the first part of the tragedy) and a macrocosm (the second). So too can we read *Jingling in the Wind*: Jeremy's narrative

aligns with the traditional narrative of the beginning of *Faust*, while Roberts' method of telling the story, indicative of the High Modernist mode, aligns with the complex form of the latter half. And if the symbolic spider at her web operates within the province of each of these sources of knowledge that Faust abandons for something greater, something beyond the realm of possibility for the human intellect that ultimately signs his soul off to the Devil, then we might also christen her the Eternal Feminine—the role that *Mater Gloriosa*, the Virgin Mary, assumes in the closing of the second part of the tragedy, and the authority who pardons Faust and allows his entrance into Heaven.

IV. Roberts in Colorado: Romantic Imitations, Modernist Intimations,
and *In the Great Steep's Garden*

Perhaps this investigation could have foregone such a lengthy discussion of *Jingling in the Wind* to focus immediately and exclusively on the topic of interest, but to have glossed over it would have left an insufficiently rendered portrait of the tendencies of the artist's mind responsible for the shape, substance, and stature of the poetry as it will be considered. Miss Roberts' body of work is of a single cloth; the positions upheld in her prose are not to be divorced from the vision engendering her poetry. What a precursory investigation of *Jingling in the Wind* ultimately provides is a bulk of evidence speaking on behalf of the necessity of maintaining a working knowledge of regional and literary traditions as a preventative measure, ensuring one's art does not get swallowed up by the modern Charybdis of the anonymous "After" (as Jeremy names the condition). We may continue calling Modernism a single and cohesive movement, rather than a series of distinct and concurrent movements, if we maintain the belief that it represented the first organized insurrection against the dominating provincial trend swelling and swallowing up the twentieth century. Simply put, in the face of abstraction and standardization, it demanded the concrete and the unique. For the early phase of Modernism, this was accomplished at somewhat of a local level, placing stricter limitations on poetic content and approaching form as the natural expression of this content so that, ideally, the poem would stand as a unified and indissoluble whole. The High Modernist mode maintained the same appreciation for form while broadening the poem's range of motion, but did so primarily while consciously working within a greater tradition. The spirits of outmoded aesthetic movements and the substance of individual works were often reanimated in the new poem, and within these confines the old would fuse with the new into a unified and dissoluble whole.

Although Miss Roberts' poetry does not necessarily give the same immediate impression

as what we find characteristic in Eliot or Pound (lacking their conspicuous flair of formal complexity, novelty, and consciously, if not continuously, affording the “Great Tradition” a palpable presence), she was certainly working close to the bull. We may return to the question posed above: why the lengthy coverage of *The Time of Man* and the strong insistence on its consideration as participating within the poetic tradition? Unlike *Jingling in the Wind*, Roberts' first novel provides only suggestive intimations of her distinctly Modernist ethos. It lacks material that *explicitly* translates into intellectual dogma predicated on the awareness (and critique) of culture *as a whole*. The intimate preoccupations of our first person protagonist, toiling in such close relation to the land while affirming her selfhood in spite of it (and with such rhapsodic vigor), do not, in themselves, maintain the overt self-awareness of likewise toiling within a greater tradition that transcends the regional. What *The Time of Man* does illustrate plainly and clearly, though, is Roberts' intense awareness of form, which is undoubtedly central to the Modernist program. It is only once we begin familiarizing ourselves with more of her work that we realize she maintains such Modernist tendencies not in spite of her Regionalism, but rather that the Regionalist mode her writing maintains is, more often than not, an explicit function of her Modernist sensibility. Just as she approached much of her prose with the attitude of a poet, it seems fair to entertain the notion that she approached much of her poetry that appears intensely local or staunchly traditional with a more holistic attitude—the microcosm as a reflection of the macrocosm. And just as the line between prose and poetry becomes blurred when appraising *The Time of Man* or *Jingling in the Wind*, so too should we be aware of the extent of obscurity when mapping the contours of Modernism in Roberts' poetry.

To suggest that the artist's mind is working through a Modernist sensibility even when the products seem so divorced from what is characteristically Modernist is not the same thing as engaging with absolutes, arguing that the sum of Roberts' utilized techniques and the nature of

her assumed responsibilities situate her at the heart of the Modernist movement. This would not only be overzealous, but would contextualize her work in such a way that obscures or obfuscates much of its true character. To refuse elucidation in Regionalist terms when something is obviously cut from the regional cloth would be counterproductive, and to approach a poem with the level of scrutiny one generally applies to the denser texts of Eliot or Pound when bucolic or jejune simplicity seems to be the honest attitude is disrespectful to the poem's own maintained ethos. However, if we can affirm that Modernism is indeed a usable tradition for poets outside the boundaries of its circumscription, operating as both a storehouse of ideas and a model by which to measure resistance to the "modern" predicament, and if we can confirm that the poet in question pursues a working knowledge of the dynamics and substance of the literary tradition taken as a whole, then it becomes possible to see Miss Roberts and the canonized cast(e) of Modernists as confronting the same challenge when considering the formulation of a poem and how to honor the direction and shape it yearns for. Unlike Amy Lowell lusting after Imagism, Roberts had no desire whatsoever to affix her name to a movement: "You are wrong about my joining causes or taking up beliefs, more than a little there. I do not join myself on to things. I am free deeply within ... I have preferred to skirmish not in the inner citadel, but rather out in the meadow beyond the wall and moat" (qtd. in Campbell & Foster 70). The techniques and formal approaches that gave Modernism its distinct savor were not prized over any other measure of the tradition because of their contemporaneity or novelty, but were rather considered for adoption or adaptation only to the extent that they seemed to best aid the poem struggling towards realization. Thus, even though Roberts' mind was attuned to the cultural repercussions and reactions radiating from the "modern" predicament, her poetry may only seldom don the guise of something characteristically Modernist.

Yet beneath the masque that manifests as something bucolic, juvenile, or archaic,

Modernism is alive and well and living in the very texture of Roberts' verse. Her Modernist education began, like many of her practicing poet contemporaries, with *Poetry*. She admitted her debt to the magazine in a 19 November 1914 letter to Harriet Monroe, the publication's founder and editor: "Until I fell upon 'Poetry' I had groped about rather blindly, unhappily. Some of the false trails I have taken would be pitiful if they were not so ludicrous" (qtd. in Keller 113).³⁶ Although in some of her earliest poetry we find characteristic glimpses of her later work—a devotion to folklore and folk speech, attention to natural detail, precise impressions, lilting rhythms functioning within and beyond traditional meters, the conception of poems realized in thematic cycles—it seems to lack the conviction that didn't fully realize until she began work on *Under the Tree*.³⁷

Her awakening as a confident and competent poet was not just indebted to Monroe's editorial selection, faithfully and constantly representing the cutting-edge of the craft, but its critical contributions as well. Ezra Pound was well-represented in both arenas, and it was surely over the course of her early engagement with the magazine that Miss Roberts adopted him as her sage and guide to the burgeoning literary scene abroad. In the January 1913 issue she would have seen his report from London, and it seems likely this would have been her introduction to the dominant aesthetic movements that eventually came to be recognized collectively as the early phase of Modernism. Furthermore, Pound's ability to distill something down to its essential spirit put these localized movements into perspective and in their proper relations to the general literary tradition. Consider his comment on Ford Madox Ford (then Heuffer), who he "would rather talk about poetry with" than anyone else in London, and W. B. Yeats, who "has sung some

36 Roberts' collection of *Poetry* survives in her archives, and many issues contain her markings and notes. It contains a majority of issues spanning December 1912 (1.3) to February 1941 (57.5).

37 All discussions of *Under the Tree* refer to the 1930 expanded and revised edition, which is neither too greatly expanded (7 poems were added) nor too heavily revised (the greatest revision was a slight reordering of the poems, although even in this slightness Roberts saw great potential for nuance of conveyance).

of the moods of life immortally” and is “the greatest of living poets who use English”:

Mr. Hueffer's beliefs about the art may be best explained by saying that they are in diametric opposition to those of Mr. Yeats.

Mr. Yeats has been subjective; believes in the glamour and associations which hang near the words. “Works of art beget works of art.” He has much in common with the French symbolists. Mr. Hueffer believes in an exact rendering of things. He would strip words of all “association” for the sake of getting a precise meaning ... You would find his origins in Gautier or in Flaubert. He is objective. This school tends to lapse into description. The other tends to lapse into sentiment (Pound, “Status Rerum” 125)

Even from this simple sketch Roberts would have gained something against which to reflect on her own intentions and methods: did (or should) her verse seek to preserve immediate perceptions or let these perceptions suggest themselves to a wandering imagination?

In the Great Steep's Garden (1915), Miss Roberts' slim volume of Rocky Mountain flower poems with accompanying photographs by Kenneth Hartley, was apparently “disowned” by its author by the time she joined the Poetry Club at the University of Chicago (Lewis, “EMR: A Memoir” 807-808). Woodridge Spears and Jane Keller, the only critics who have yet offered any substantial evaluation of the work, find in it a fair amount of merit, both as a precursory link to dynamics perfected in the later poetry and as a work in its own right. Spears identifies a “unity in thought as well as unity in harmony and form,” and insists that the nature of the poems are suffused with “the light of possible spiritual relation” (119). (Roberts even refers to it as a “pilgrim road” in “The Hill People,” the first poem of the volume.) The “great steep” suggests “spiritual mountains, the rough hill of spiritual ascent” (Ibid. 119), while the conscious sequencing of the poems enacts “a definite progression in time and space—from the plain to the heights through the pilgrim year” (Ibid. 123). Keller likewise commends the volume's cohesion and its ability to intimate a spiritual peregrination synchronous with the physical journey. Although it's admittedly “apprentice work,” the poems boast “complexity and nuances no one should be ashamed of” (Keller 106).

While the volume maintains certain unities—such as vision (the sequence enacts a pilgrimage), tone (inspired, imaginative, emphatic), content (much is said about the Colorado landscape and all but the first poem are about flowers, whether explicitly or implicitly), and tension (the poignant denotative beauty and acute connotative perceptions of the flowers are juxtaposed against the sublime landscape)—it nevertheless feels disjointed, even cacophonous.

The first poem (“The Hill People”) leads naturally into the final two (“Arctic Gentian” and “Alpine Primrose”), and were the sequence stripped of its meddling in the middle the end product might feel more cohesive. We find the protagonist (it could, and might as well be, a wide-eyed Elizabeth enamored with her new home, having left the Bluegrass State for Lakespur, Colorado in August of 1910 and living rather contentedly until she waved a final farewell in February of 1916) looking through a shop's window in town before being more or less whisked away by a mountain breeze to the “land of air . . . the land of the great white stills” (*ITGSG* n.p., Poem 1). Or is it “only the wind”? Could it be, rather,

. . . Pikes Peak Pixie or Cheyenne Shee
That whispered a gay little rhyme to me?

Or a gnome that lives in the heart of a stone
And dances at dawn around Cameron's Cone?

Did the haunting laugh of the Maid of the Corn,
An Aztec memory trill on the morn?

Or soft did the Navajo Shell-Woman speak
As she passed with a hymn for the great white peak? (*Ibid.*)

Her dream-hazy recollection of these figures of local legend and American Indian folklore testifies to a reverential familiarity with the hills beyond the town, with the *genii loci* of the region. They are her Muses (“They touch me light with their finger tips / And lay little snatches of song on my lips” [*Ibid.*]) and her Virgilian guides (“And swift I am gone [. . .] the pilgrim road unfolds for me” [*Ibid.*]) She climbs “beyond the reach of the timberline, / The long trail [always]

lifting, lifting” as her body and spirit abide and while everything below seems increasingly “[a] fantasy, fading fading, / Lost away in the myth of a dream” (“Arctic Gentian” in *ITGSG* P6). She returns with a “Happy Heart,” her spirit invigorated like “the primrose flamed in the arctic chills” (“Alpine Primrose” in *ITGSG* P7).

This poetic triptych hangs in the sublime mists of William Cullen Bryant's Monument Mountain and breathes deep the tranquil glory William Wordsworth could recall with illuminating clarity from his stroll along the banks of the Wye. Its dazed, emotional abandon (reasonable, yes, but resistant to the faculty of reason) and piney lyricism reeks of Romanticism. It smacks of sentimental sincerity, and indulges so heartily that there is little room for even the prospect of irony. Although this does not necessarily insist on a poverty of quality, and although these poems maintain a certain lilting rhythm and occasional freshness of phrasing, it would not be wholly unfair to say that they are somewhat unremarkable, or at least that they do not seem to possess a surprising and enduring freshness wholly unto themselves. (One wonders how stilted, stunted or stale Pound would have found them.)

The total effect of the volume suggests a striking similarity to Madison Cawein (“the Keats of Kentucky”), whose *Poems* (1911; selected by Cawein) Roberts had, not surprisingly, been reading and thoroughly enjoying. Cawein's reputation was never too far elevated from being a “minor romantic talent,” but he was most popular for his nature poetry about the Kentucky landscape (Romine 496). Although Roberts was enjoying Colorado and although her time spent there produced poems that were predominately about her immediate surroundings, she would have read Cawein with intimate fascination, perhaps even longing for her home state, and felt a kinship between them. His Kentucky wild, however, was much different than her hill country. Its dense woods seem, at times, to be almost primeval, and once the faeries and dryads begin appearing it seems a different realm entirely—one of fantasy. Even when Cawein veers off

this path into the domain of Arthurian legend or classical myth he is seeking to understand the boundary and relationship between man and nature, and the mythological figures his speakers often encounter embody an ideal of an unbroken bond (Ibid. 497).

In the Great Steep's Garden not only maintains similar subject matter and thematic explorations as Cawein's poetry, but exhibits also what William Dean Howells praises in Cawein as “the gift . . . of touching some smallest or commonest thing in nature, and making it live from the manifold associations in which we have our being” (xv). What Cawein calls “Penetralia”—“I am a part of all you see / In Nature; part of all you feel” (*Poems* 21)—is an embrace of what John Ruskin terms the pathetic fallacy, the “falseness in all our impressions of external things” (“The Pathetic Fallacy” 170), that is, the distortion of something objective by the heightened emotions of the ego that perceives it.³⁸ Objects affected thus reveal the internal philosophy of the viewer rather than the truth of external reality. Often bogged down with sentimentality in the hands of the Romantics, Yeats and the Symbolists (especially Jules Laforgue and Tristan Corbière) managed to employ this device with freshness and wit; it became somewhat integral to the total poetic effect they strove to produce.

To a certain degree, the pathetic fallacy is responsible for the character of the poems of *In the Great Steep's Garden*. The imaginative wanderings that enhance the botanical portraits are spurred by the pilgrim's optimism, derived from spiritual elation—revelations of the observer rather than the transfiguration of the flowers. Because of this spiritual elation, the various plants become inspired manifestations of the pilgrim's sensibility. Feeling so intensely *within* nature, she begins to conceive of herself as actually *in* nature. This is not solipsism, but rather organicism. Her wonder with the world while it rises with her on her spiritual journey inspires a

38 Ruskin illustrates the pathetic fallacy with an example from Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke*: “They rowed her in across the rolling foam— / The cruel, crawling foam.’ The foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl. The state of mind which attributes to it these characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is unhinged by grief” (“The Pathetic Fallacy” 170).

certain pantheistic (or perhaps panentheistic) reverence, in the reckoning of which she finds herself. Her sensibility (that which allows her to make sense of the world around her) becomes an osmotic membrane connecting her to a world that seems suffused with divine inspiration and likewise suffuses her with inspiration. The poet in this state of heightened feeling seems to be unhindered by what Eliot identified as a “dissociation of sensibility”; is, rather, attuned to an inherent network of associations and relations, is able “to affirm the gold thread in the pattern” (as Pound would say in a late canto [“CXVI” 817]):

When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. (Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets” 247)

Even if it is just a simple association prompted by a name, the fact that the association even arose in the first place and the fact that it becomes integrated into the poem to form a unified and cohesive whole is in itself an achievement, especially when considering the pervasive social decay and fragmentation of cultural narrative that was only getting worse as the twentieth century chugged along.

Out of the seven poems in the volume, “Columbine in the Hills” perhaps best illustrates a mind that has maintained the faculty of experiential integration. It is not only the content that gives the following lines their vitality, but the rapport between the natural and the cultural:

A carnival gladdens the hills in June,
And Columbine waltzes a gypsy tune;
Or deep in the pleasance, happily met,
She whirls with a gay little pirouette,
Where the long trees lean in a twilight trance,
Dreaming her over the seas to France.

Or quiet under the aspen's shade,
Misty-eyed little pensive maid,
Musing under the Great Steep's tree,

Is it for Pierrot?—where is he? (*ITGSG P2*)

The natural world here serves as a portal through which cultural figures are summoned by recollection, consequently validating and enhancing the natural object—“ethnosymbolic botany,” if you will. The manifold associations surrounding the flower resonate naturally with the poet's creative intuition; she is not straining intellectually to make for a more “poetic” rendering or to prove a certain cultural competency. The poem is more a portrait of her apprehensive mind than it is one of conation. It might be worth noting, though, that the poet does seem a little too enthusiastic over the fruits of her creative intuition. This poem verges on what Stephen Spender (coincidentally) calls the “orchidaceous,” perhaps most common in Romanticism. Keats is his prime example, for “he wished to live in a continuity of a sensuously apprehended experience which was one with the sensuous experience of the poetry he read and wrote. In his poetry there is a tendency to identify experienced sensation with sensation imagined, to think that if he could not live a life that was poetry, then he could inhabit a poetry that was life” (Spender 36). Roberts' allusion to the stock figures of the *Commedia dell'arte* is by no means strained, and the conditions of the poem create a tangible, imaginative restaging of their drama. The concrete particulars of the natural scene and the character of their interplay lend themselves to creative correlation; the presence of Columbine and Pierrot is not imposing. However, the energy that surrounds them feels somewhat agitated, almost as though the poet (as director) is overzealous, is pushing them to perform in an exaggerated manner (almost to the point of caricature) because she is ecstatic over their casting, because she has rendered the poetry of drama palpable in life.

The association is especially interesting as it suggests the possibility that Roberts was familiar with the French Symbolists before she adopted Pound as her sage. The poem predates Pound's essay on “Irony, Laforgue, and Some Satire” in the November 1917 issue of *Poetry*, as well as “A Study of Modern French Poets” in the February 1918 issue of *The Little Review*

(which contains a handful of Laforgue's Pierrot poems in the original French). (The Roberts papers at the Library of Congress contain notes on Laforgue transcribed from Pound's *Poetry* essay, as well as the Laforgue poems included in his *Little Review* "Study" and Pound's own translation of "Pierrots" from *Personae*.) The "twilight trance" seems to hearken to the Symbolists themselves (it suggests a mental state synonymous with their reputation), not to mention that the rhyme is completed in "France." It goes without saying that Pound's essays, as well as her classes in French literature at the University of Chicago, intensified Roberts' appreciation for French Symbolist verse, but the tendency in Roberts studies to attribute the initial spark of this admiration (or even awareness) to Pound ignores the manifold possibilities of inspiration that would have been available to her elsewhere. Maybe, like Eliot, she stumbled upon Arthur Symons' *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) on her own and was introduced to some of its major players. (She would have had to seek out their verse elsewhere, though, as the original study was all portraiture and very little poetry. An expanded version that included a series of Symons' own translations into English was published in 1919.) And maybe she began reading through their verse and stumbled upon Paul Verlaine's "Pantomime," or even Symons' translation of it. While Columbine is greatly absent from Laforgue's portraits of Pierrot, she is very much so present in Verlaine's:

Pierrot, no sentimental swain,
 Washes a pâté down again
 With furtive flagons, white and red.

[. . .] That blackguard of a Harlequin
 Pirouettes, and plots to win
 His Columbine that flits and flies.

Columbine dreams, and starts to find
 A sad heart sighing in the wind,
 And in her heart a voice that sighs. (Symons, "Pantomime" 74)

Roberts' poem corresponds with Verlaine's in sentiment, imagery, and even form—much more so

than any of Laforgue's pieces. Whether or not she truly understood the extent what the Symbolists were attempting to do in their verse at this stage, she surely understood it enough to craft an imitation (which is, as they say, the greatest form of flattery).

Maybe it was not Verlaine or the Symbolists who inspired the poem. A 1917 anthology compiled by Kendall Banning, *Mon Ami Pierrot: Songs and Fantasies*, not only illustrates how commonly Pierrot and Columbine were adopted as subject matter for poetry (Miss Roberts could have found inspiration in any of these poems scattered about in their original publications), but also how standardized the imagery that surrounds them is. It would be nice to be able to prove that Roberts' verse was indeed inspired by the Symbolists as early as 1914 or 1915 (especially as an indication of an early blossoming Modernist sensibility), but it does not change the words as they stand on the page. Separate from the question of a direct Symbolist influence, of Verlaine's "Pantomime" as a potential model for Roberts' "Columbine in the Hills," is the matter of general influence. Even if the Symbolists' subject matter and tone were of a somewhat novel timbre, the techniques employed, attitudes maintained, and approach to form did not arise from the literary tradition like Athena born out of Zeus' skull, and a survey of other poetry produced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indicates that a certain strain of "modern" verse was evolving in a variety of distinct and diverse literary scenes. Furthermore, much of what the poems of *In The Great Steep's Garden* convey as potential Symbolist influence can be found in the Romantic tradition—especially the type of Romantic verse that Cawein was known for. If any direct influence is to be suggested for this early volume, it should come from Cawein's poetic corpus—a body of work that is much more conventional than that of the Symbolists. Consider the following lines, many of which would not raise a single suspicion were they sneaked in alongside Roberts' botanical portraits:

What is it now that I shall seek

Where woods dip downward, in the hills?—
 A mossy nook, a ferny creek,
 And may among the daffodils.

Or in the valley's vistaed glow,
 Past rocks of terraced trumpet vines,
 Shall I behold her coming slow,
 Sweet May, among the columbines?
 (from "Discovery") (Cawein 7)

In pearly, peach-blush distances
 You [Spring] gleam; the woods are braided
 Of myths; of dream-existences . . .
 There, where the brook is shaded,
 A sudden splendor faded.

O presence, like the primrose's,
 Again I feel your power!
 With rainy scents of dim roses,
 Like some elusive flower,
 Who led me for an hour!
 (from "Deep in the Forest") (Ibid. 63)

The wind that breathes of columbines
 And celandines that crowd the rocks;
 That shakes the balsam of the pines
 With laughter from his airy locks,
 Stops at my city door and knocks.

[. . .] The wind has summoned, and I go:
 To read God's meaning in each line
 The wildflowers write; and, walking slow,
 God's purpose, of which song is sign,—
 The wind's great, gusty hand in mine.
 (from "The Wind of Spring") (Ibid. 88)

This is not to suggest that Roberts' volume does not contain any intimations of what we might call "freshness," and even if some of the verse is derivative, at least it can be kept buoyant by a quick, clever turning of a phrase or an unexpected patch of playful soundscaping. And even if the potential Symbolist influence only manifests in ways that recall Romanticism, the substance of the resulting verse is always more riveting than most of what was being done by the Victorians, who the Modernists were reacting most fiercely against. However, the volume does

little to indicate that its author thoroughly comprehended the stature and implications of the new trends affecting the reputation and reality of the Anglo-American literary tradition. Roberts was at least acquainted with the products of contemporary poetry, if by no other avenues than Harriet Monroe's little magazine, but if she was attempting at all to translate the substance of the "new poetry" into her own characteristic mode, the results are sophomoric at best.

To say it another way, Miss Roberts had not yet cultivated fully her Modernist sensibility (she had not yet really the means to do so); she had not yet built up a familiarity that would allow the holistic adoption of the Modernist program or adaptation of Modernist modes. Spears believes that living in Colorado had made her "aware of the vague unrest in the world" and got her questioning whether this was a reflection of individual men or the systems (political, economic, religious) that dictate their livelihood (97). If she was indeed growing more aware of the "modern" predicament, her poetry from this time does not reflect it to any obvious degree, except perhaps in her committed attempts to trace certain connotations that float about her objects of study and bring them together in a new, heightened reality—a sort of bastion against transience that engages with systems less vulnerable to man's penchant for corruption.

V. Roberts in Chicago: A Modernist Education—*Poetry*, The Poetry Club, Early Modernism, and *Under the Tree*

If there is any single event in Miss Roberts' life that can be said to have changed the trajectory of her work, from tiptoeing around trends in contemporary poetry to directly engaging with the Modernist program, it was her enrollment at the University of Chicago in January of 1917. Being enrolled in a university program proved beneficial in all of the expected ways. It provided a structured environment that fostered and forced intellectual engagement with the literary tradition (all held to the general standards of the academy and the expectations of her professors, of whom Robert Morss Lovett had probably the greatest influence on her) as well as fellow students of literature. Although she was able to enroll in a Contemporary Literature class (with Professor Robert Herrick, Winter 1918) that she did quite well in (she got an “A-”), the program was typical in that most of the classes it offered were surveys of historical literary periods or focused on single-authors long-since out of the contemporary limelight. Fortunate for an aspiring poet, though, she was now in a *city*, and although Chicago could not boast the same reputation for its community of literary intellectuals or host to the most distinguished of guests as New York, it did not trail too far behind, and was even gaining renown as the literary capital of the Midwest. The vanguard of contemporary verse, Monroe's *Poetry* magazine, was based out of Chicago. Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg, the leading poets of the city's (and the Midwest's) literary “Renaissance,” were featured prominently in its pages, whether they were contributing poems or comments or were themselves the subject of comment or review. Far from any Ivory Tower, they helped maintain a stimulus of livelihood in the literary scene with lectures and readings. There was more than just local talent, though. During Roberts' years at the university, there were lectures and readings (both on-campus and off) by, to name a few, Robert Frost, Alfred Noyes, Conrad Aiken, Lola Ridge, Yone Noguchi, Alfred Kreymborg, Sigfried

Sassoon, Rabindranath Tagore, Padraic Colum, Eunice Tietjens, Robert Nichols, Maurice Maeterlinck, and W. B. Yeats.

Especially illuminating was the *Poetry*-sponsored and university-hosted banquet honoring Yeats in March of 1920. Roberts got the sense that Yeats was “somehow displeased with America” (Letter to Glenway Wescott, 4 March 1920; qtd. in Keller 179), and she felt similarly. She had already adopted Pound's devotion to natural American speech and his ability to legitimize colloquialism as poetic diction, but the readings given by Sandburg (his poems were “reeking of 'jazz' words”) and Alfred Kreymborg (his free-form “Potato piece!” reads like a shallow and campy Vaudevillian pantomime foreshadowing Beatnikery and Beboppery—perhaps it could be somewhat entertaining were it staged, Roberts probably thought, but it was inappropriate for poetry) proved that this could be taken too far into the realm of vulgarity (Ibid.; qtd. in Keller 179). In her published notes on the banquet, Harriet Monroe took the opportunity to celebrate how far the magazine, and the reputation of contemporary poetry, had come since Mr. Yeats had last (first) been honored at a *Poetry* event:

POETRY, in 1914 a war-cry, a roaring radical, a turbulent bolshevist in a placid and peace-loving world, has become in 1920 (at least the rising generation so informs us with nobly violent gestures) a placid and peace-loving institution in a world still heroically at war. The young rhymes-for-bread troubadour of our first banquet now sings for the rich and great of New York, Philadelphia, soon even London; and the Imagists, who were then a wee small voice in POETRY, have since been heard above the noise of battle in all the four corners of the earth. (Monroe, “Mr. Yeats and the Poetic Drama” 32)

The irony, however, lies in the fact that the caliber of poetry that Yeats not only bemoaned, but sought to rally the troops against back in 1914, was still rampant in contemporary American verse, if not even more so than it had been. Although Miss Roberts had not been present at the earlier banquet, she had read (and briefly annotated) the excerpts that were published in the April 1914 issue of *Poetry*. To whatever extent she knew she was on Yeats' side back then, she had

adopted fully and completely his concerns, as well as his hopes, by 1920. During those intervening years, it was becoming increasingly clear that the truly innovative and inspired poetry was cultivating a more complicated relationship with novelty and tradition. Whereas a penchant for experimentation (equal parts liberty of expression and freedom from form) had been the measure of poetic quality and value in the preceding decades (it was predominately a matter of reinvigorating poetry born or bred out of the stiff and stunted Victorian tradition), experimentation soon began taking precedence over the poetry itself—a corruption and excess that was not uncharacteristic of most cultural institutions in the age of modernity. Roberts was learning that there was an essential spirit or quality natural to the poetry that she derived inspiration from that could no longer conveniently be placed under the title of “modern.” She was learning that the poetry she preferred (to read as well as write), although years away from bearing this designation, belonged to the Modernist camp.

To whatever extent attending university classes and special events helped cultivate her general literary sensibility, they could not have been as integral in shaping her sensibilities as a poet practicing within a major living tradition as was her involvement in the university's Poetry Club. She began attending meetings in January of 1918 (a year after she began taking classes) and was immediately aware that she had found something special—a “mystical circle” (Letter to Maurice Lesemann, 21 Nov. 1921; qtd. in Keller 139-140). The Poetry Club was founded in the fall of 1916. Student Harold Van Kirk had gone to Robert Morss Lovett (perhaps the professor most invested in his students in the department) wondering why the university did not offer any classes in poetry writing or modern poetry. Lovett told Van Kirk that,

while we could teach the history and technique of poetry I should be sorry to have academic standards applied to anything which should be so personal and spontaneous as the writing of verse . . . [P]oetry like athletics should be an extra-curricular interest, supported by the association and mutual admiration of those who pursued it, and stimulated by their competition. I hated to see it made subject

to the marking system and the discipline of the dean. Why not draw together others of like mind and form a poetry club? (Lovett i)

Although Roberts received an invaluable education from her masters (of her contemporaries, Pound was the most significant), it was probably the camaraderie and community of the Poetry Club, of “[writing] for one another, to impress one another—not in competition or to be judged by some outsider” while “inventing our aesthetic as we went along” (qtd. in Keller 138), that gave her the confidence to write the verse she wanted to write, to be wholly and thoroughly herself. To whatever extent there was admiration for the illuminating treatments of formal aesthetics and aesthetic form, both in programmatic doctrine and elucidating poetry, introduced to the literary mainstream by the frequent contributors—the substance, the very “stuff”—of the little magazines, there would have most likely been, especially in Miss Roberts, a comparable apprehension. Placed in the proximity of fellow poets who shared equal admiration (and perhaps for some an equal apprehension) for those trends in contemporary poetry that seemed to maintain integrity, the abyss would have grown closer to locking ledges. Here was a band of inspired and motivated minds not yet paying dues to any concrete aesthetic program, not yet matriculated in any movement. Together, though, they could arrange their conduct and concerns under a series of united causes. They built, together, a support system that recognized sometimes it was necessary to adapt, but oftentimes it was acceptable to adopt. To take the seeming genius of poetic minds like Pound's, along with personal convictions and the honest concerns of what's most appropriate for the verse being written, and distill it down into a unique treaty allowed for new opportunities in genuine expression—alleviated somewhat what Harold Bloom dreamed to be the “anxiety of influence.”

Roberts, along with, most notably, Glenway Wescott, Arthur Yvor Winters, Monroe Wheeler, Maurice Leumann, and Janet Lewis, managed to wedge their formal experiments in

verse into the framework of the early phase of Modernism while maintaining their own personal integrity. Like Amy Lowell snatching the Imagist torch from an increasingly disinterested Pound, they worked from a model that had proven its formal competency and its ability to confront outdated and misguided poetic experiments. Unlike (the somewhat parasitic) “Amygism,” they used honest conviction to shape their tenants, resulting in verse that actually met the criteria it established. The twin demands of their art, according to Keller, were “to confront, release, and portray the maelstrom of their deepest sensibilities and at the same time to contain the storms within word-boxes of strictly controlled verse forms, however ‘free’” (156). Wescott would recall that they all tried to work “in the margin of the experience or emotion which prompted you to write,” and therefore to “write as vividly as possible while keeping a maximum of reticence” (qtd. in Keller 157). In general terms, they worked in the same hygienic spirit as the Impressionists and the Imagists, seeking a new purity of expression between the ostentatious Romantics and the dull Victorians and insisting upon the scrupulous evaluation of accuracy and necessity:

Cardinal sins included sentimentality, self-indulgence, banality, melodrama, wordiness, imprecision, and the absence of logic and intellectual rigor. A poem could have too much or too little rhythm. It could be too “literary” or too condensed or too abstract or “too loose” or a “a bit incomplete” somehow. It could be “well written” but “trite in theme” and thus good only for the “scrap-heap,” but a poem treating a weighty theme could take “itself too seriously” and thereby also go wrong. A fanciful piece, however charming, could be condemned for being “almost too taken up with being light.” Elizabeth herself quickly put aside a poem when her peers quibbled about a lack of logic and “the danger of self-pity” (Keller 141-142)

Although all we have is a rather vague list of “Don’ts” culled from former members’ recollections, we still hear direct echoes of Imagist doctrine as it was famously unveiled and finally laid down in the March 1913 issue of *Poetry*. The University of Chicago Poetry Club was not some group of privileged initiates into a secret fraternity of magic aesthetics; the three

primary principles of Pound's new poetry created a new widespread and public standard:

1. Direct treatment of the “thing” whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome. (“A Retrospect” 95; orig. F. S. Flint, “Imagisme” in March 1913's *Poetry*)

Once these principles were established, all strains of the working world of poetry were essentially forced into choosing a side (whether they knew it or not): to either perpetuate the “old” or else “make it new.” (This might sound a bit dramatic, but someone as full of passionate intensity as Pound or as impressionable as a group of university poets might actually have felt it to be true, might have actually felt certain agitations culminating in an imminent crisis, might have felt that making a resolute stand on either side of an ultimatum was the only choice that could be made.)

The Poetry Club was determined, according to Glenway Wescott, “to be modern at all costs” (qtd. in Keller 156), to learn (and share) everything they could about the new directions of Anglo-American poetry, to read (and know) the popular Pound down to more obscure writers like Adelaide Crapsey, to study the forms and techniques of the foreign literary traditions that influenced their Anglo-American models, from the French of a few decades prior to the traditional Japanese and even back to the Ancient Greeks (Keller 156). But although they clung to those principal tenants of Imagism; although they vowed to follow Pound further into prescriptive formal aesthetics and “Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something” (“A Retrospect” 97), “Go in fear of abstractions” (Ibid. 97), and “Use either no ornament or good ornament” (Ibid. 98; orig. “A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste” in March 1913's *Poetry*); although they hung on his words like a certain shade of gospel when he said “I believe in an 'absolute rhythm,' a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed” (Ibid. 103) and “I want it so, austere, direct, free from

emotional slither” (Ibid. 108) and “I think one should write vers libre only when one 'must,' that is to say, only when the 'thing' builds up a rhythm more beautiful than that of set metres, or more real, more a part of the emotion of the 'thing,' more germane, intimate, interpretive than the measure of regular accentual verse” (Ibid. 108) and “Only emotion endures” (Ibid. 110; orig. “Prolegomena” in Feb. 1921's *Poetry and Drama*)—although they rigorously applied all of these standards to their own poetry, it was not something “modern” that they were striving for, but rather something distinctly “Modernist.”

The difference, and it is a crucial one, is that “modern” poetry clung most vehemently to (and drove towards excess) the ideas of liberation propounded in these early manifestos, while “Modernist” poetry sought to relocate the virtue of poetry outside of the constrictions and restrictions of conventional forms. There was very little to keep “modern” poetry from slouching into solipsism. Although the French Symbolists often leaned toward obscurity in their construction of scenes built from the raw materials of what were often personal semiotics, they all had faith in a force or confluence of forces that operates beyond physical perception.

Whatever the nature of this transcendent realm, it is populated with “images of truth which have nothing to do with the intellect of scientists, nothing to do with time,” for “they exist beyond the possibility of dissociation (even in the paraphrase of critics) in a condition of perfect unity and vitality” (Kermode, *Romantic Image* 102). The poet may be

a magus, calling reality into existence. Or he is the sole transmitter of a mysterious system of correspondences that actually pervades the universe, but only becomes apparent in art. Or he is capable of evoking from the Anima Mundi symbols of the profoundest import, but strictly unexpoundable, for their content is inseparable from the form of their first expression. (Hough 10)

The “modern” poet who flies the banner of experimentation for the sake of free expression often sacrifices psychic form in his abandonment of poetic form—the poem may signify nothing but itself; it could be without any foundation of structural reality or governing vitalities. That is, it

may achieve a certain effect that embodies no transferable or translatable truths; it is without principle. It manifests no steadfast doctrine and is rather defined solely by its technical tinkering. It seeks to achieve or confer nothing other than the nature and glory of its experiment.

The same cannot be said of Modernist poetry. Each of the schools of the early Modernist phase was rooted in a specific doctrine, and each of these doctrines sought to remap and redefine the contours of cogent poetry by some guiding principle. It was not a matter of doing away with anything, but rather a matter of reprioritizing. That is, a poem was to find form under the same pressures and tensions that all quality poetry, however conventional, contains, but emphases on individual formal aspects were distributed differently. (The most obvious examples are meter, rhyme and rhythm: rather than fitting words into prescribed conditions in the translation from imagination, thought, or feeling into a circumscribed event, the nature of what's yearning for expression is granted the privilege of establishing its own conditions, which may, in the end, even resemble the conventional. It's simply a matter—a granting—of agency.) The change in approach is qualitative rather than quantitative; it is not addition or subtraction but rather reappraisal. (Consider emotion: “emotional slither” is to be avoided, yet “only emotion endures.” Likewise, the motive to do away with rhetoric is a logical impossibility; the rhetoric asserted through the presentation of an Image is simply of a different timbre than the presentation of a narrative, a description, or a logical or emotional construct.)

The poems that eventually came to be published as *Under the Tree* are very clearly not “modern” poems, and to a reader approaching the volume with no knowledge of Roberts or her other works they would not seem to participate in the Modernist mode either. Their form and style—the meter, rhythm, rhyme, syntax, diction—appear simple and conventional; the subject matter and perspective are rooted in childhood experience. Upon first reading they seem to be just as they appear: children's poems. Upon further reading, though, one notices not only the fact

that many of the touchstone characteristics of children's poetry that tend to depreciate its value as viable art in the eyes of the critical public are glaringly absent, but that there is an intense hardness, vitality, and precision beneath the plain draperies, an intense psychological and philosophical awareness, that suggests devotion to some immanent doctrine.

Furthermore, there is an even fiercer devotion to *place*. These “butterbeans,” as Roberts called the poems, were the first formal embodiments of her darling native Kentucky—a fountain of inspiration that she drew from throughout the rest of her literary career. Fellow Poetry Club member Glenway Wescott was awestruck by the mystic immediacy of a place-sense that Miss Roberts carried always with her:

. . . wherever she was, [Kentucky] evidently underlay the outbranching experience, folded shadowily into the typical scenes of an author's life—an immense territorial ghost. One who knew her but had never travelled to Louisville and beyond was always aware of it, as vivid in her talk, her sheperdess's [*sic*] far-sighted gaze, the archaic foldings of her hands, as on the most evocatory pages; in her company one never seemed to be altogether where one was in reality, with that spiritual landscape in the air! (“Personal Note” 13)

With whatever formal virtuosity or aesthetic intellectualism the preeminent Modernists boasted and she lacked, she duly compensated for it with her spiritual connection to the land that bore and raised her. While the Imagists sacrificed acuity of place-impression for the complex welding of intellect and emotion in the Image, and while the Symbolists drenched the Parisian cityscape in spectral hauntings, Roberts served as a medium calling forth the very spirit of her region and translated its local luminosity (much more than “local color”) with pride and precision. She was likewise translating its very form. The apparent simplicity of the poems in *Under the Tree* does not come from devotion to convention or fear of experimentation in its literary context, but in the bastion of proud and nearly primeval order the South maintained in its daily communal rhythms against the onslaught of modernity with its expanding complexity of process subsuming the individual voice and spirit. To this extent, she was nearly born into the Modernist mode while

many others adopted it as a counteractive stronghold out of frustration or desperation.

Something, or perhaps a good deal, must be said about the actual translation of this sensibility into poetry. One might begin by insisting that the poems are not actually “*children's* poems,” but rather *poetry* forged through a child's temperament. They are not merely documents of the child's experience in and of the world, but a living landscape with figures and dramatic currents, painted with a language of local precision in broad brushstrokes, expressed through the already hardened imagination of a young rural Kentuckian. There is a restrained magic in their articulation of the mundane; Wescott saw it as “the plain wonderland of a more normal and realistic Alice” (“Personal Note” 13). The dimension of hard fact that anchors her versified Kentucky, more than simply “physical exactness” (Campbell & Foster 257), bears a distinct watermark, and this sense of place filters any Romantic sentimentality from the poetry. It might do it justice to consider it a pervasive regional “inscape” (a coinage belonging to one of Roberts' “masters,” Gerard Manley Hopkins, that, although never given a concrete definition by its creator, can best be understood as “the 'individually distinctive' inner structure or nature of a thing; hence, the essence of a natural object, which, being perceived through a moment of illumination—an [epiphany]—reveals the unity of all creation,” an “inward quality . . . perceived by the joined observation and introspection of a poet, who in turn embodies them in unique poetic forms”) (Harmon & Holman 271) that speaks to the unified design of the Creation through *local* emphasis.

It is useful to know that the aesthetic doctrine that the University of Chicago Poetry Club members subscribed to was one of “specific density” (qtd. in Keller 150), but considering the implications of this applied principle can only account for so much of what is actually being achieved in Roberts' poems. It is necessary to return to the Credo she formulated during her time spent with the Poetry Club and delivered as a lecture during the fall of 1921. Although the

motivation to draft a doctrine of aesthetic intention was a tradition that sufficiently predated Modernism, no other Anglo-American literary movement had ever taken this notion to such an extent where it became central to the mission, sometimes almost eclipsing the poetry itself. That is, the doctrine justified the poetry as much as the poetry justified the doctrine, and without the advantage that the increasingly popular magazines granted of publishing that doctrine in conjunction with the poetry, such a crucial impetus behind the modern literary project as Imagism may have never seen much (if any) publicity, inspired further explorations into the approach to poetry in light of the “modern” predicament it called for, or changed the trajectory of literature as it did. Roberts' doctrine was not a program for any movement, though. It did not seek to rally any troops under its banner. Neither was it intended to publicly defend or justify the apparent simplicity of the poetry by allying it with a theoretical (intellectual, aesthetic, philosophical) source of inspiration. Its formulation was, rather, a challenge to herself, to commit to language her own beliefs and objectives so that they may stand as a reflection before her and testify to her conviction.

A close study of the lecture proves that Miss Roberts was not only codifying her own craft, but was keenly aware of the various intellectual and aesthetic currents within the contemporary literary scene. Many of her central tenants, and those which can most easily be verified in her poetry, were adoptions or adaptations of distinct principles expounded alongside the “new poetry” from the past decade or so that she had been reading in the little magazines and later discussing with the Poetry Club. The most fundamental principle of Roberts' doctrine is her belief that “it is the high function of Poetry to search into the relation between mind and matter, into the one-ness of the flesh and thin air—spirit. Into the wedding of grass, intellect, instinct, and imagination” (qtd. in Keller 201). Roberts' imagination, as evident in her poetry as well as her prose, is distinctly modern, “a centre acted upon by experiences and inventing its own

harmonious inner world” (Spender 13). Despite all the talk of a classical revival (see T. E. Hulme's “Romanticism and Classicism”), the modern mind has not, Spender notes, “returned to the essentially classical view that imagination is the power of illustrating theology, monarchy, or philosophy, dressing up, as it were, preconceived ideas about the important values of living” (13).

And despite all the talk of reacting against past traditions, Modernism could not divorce itself from the Romantic conception of the imagination; they could not deny the Romantic conviction that the “imagination is a primary faculty of the poetic sensibility” (not the intellect) (Spender 12). This conception was a return to the Shakespearean; it is the poetic imagination, Spender continues, “as dreaming yet revealing consciousness in which the circumference of brute facts, experiences, and disparate ideas becomes self-aware, and, in the moment of self-awareness, is transposed into symbols and images harmonious within the complex unity that is the poem” (Ibid. 12). The Romantics saw the imagination as “an independent sovereign activity centered in the poetic genius”; it did not “[owe] allegiance” to any “superior intellectual authority,” did not, like the Augustans, consider it to “be the servant of the intellectual rationalizations of that age” that engendered a poetry of “intellectual synthesis which, in its transparent imagery, had the ambition of resolving discords between different spheres of contemporary reasoning” (Ibid. 11). The Modernists, especially in the early phase, were even more skeptical of cultural institutions and popular thought than the Romantics; they liberated their poetry (and themselves) from external authorities in order to align it with their own personal visions and value systems.

Roberts' insistence that the immanent presence of the material world is integral in the pursuit and formulation of poetry enacting its noblest and purest potential does, however, signal a divergence (not a divorce) from the Romantic tendency to elevate the imagination to the

position of sole arbiter of poetic value. She believes that a dissociation between psychic faculties and the physical realm renders an entire sensibility essentially sterile, as it is only through a meditation on the nature of the verifiable that a sense of its opposite can even begin to be ascertained: “We go into the unseen by way of the visible, into the unknown by way of the known, into Nous by way of the flesh and the dust” (qtd. in Keller 201). This process of poetic apperception, of attempting to make sense of something distinctly foreign (and even inconceivably mystifying) by assimilating it to a body of domestic awareness, hinges on philosophic alterity, of using similarities as a gateway into conceiving the nature of differences. The enduring facts of the material world—the permanence distilled from mystical resonance and perpetuation of presence, as well as the rhythmic cycles of life and death, of organic decay and spiritual release—comprise the only body of data the “Nous,” that faculty of the mind that intuits reality and truth (although the connotation of a metaphysical interconnectedness, of human complicity, of Spinoza's revisionary pantheism, as implied by the French “we” is also relevant), can adequately process. The lofty Romantics were too cerebral; the “new poetry” (as Roberts sees it) needs to return to the soil and take root. In light of the “modern” predicament, it has become more crucial to reaffirm man's place in the natural order than to prolong dissociation in the demonstration of man's sovereignty.

While the most successful poems of *In the Great Steep's Garden* derive order from an intensity of feeling rather than a strength of intellect, there yet remains a catalytic strain between the raw materials of the poetry and their formal and aesthetic incarnation. It is not until *Under the Tree* that Roberts begins writing poetry that may be called “organic” as Spender defines it:

Poetry tends to be organic when the words and form of the poem seem to grow out of the poet's experience of his environment . . . [as] a continuous process. . . Organic poetry is, then, that in which there is identification of the poet's experience of nature (meaning by this the life around him sensuously apprehended) with the words used, without there being the feeling that mental

activity [or the orchidaceous conviction of life as poetry, with its excess of poetic ecstasy] falls like a shadow between the experience and the realized words and form. (26-27)

Whatever differences the various schools of the early Modernist phase maintained, there is, in each of those most influential on Roberts' poetic mode, an avoidance of rhetoric in favor of a devotional pursuit of organic immediacy and precision (what reads as imprecision on the Symbolist's part is often the poet at his most precise in his own conception of the world around him). Although this impulse is most pristinely rendered in the Imagist school, it can be traced back to literary Impressionism, “a manifestation of Aestheticism that fixes the poet's attention on moments of visual beauty or intensity in the transient impressions received from the surrounding world” (Trehearne 40). Brian Trehearne notes that “the affinities Imagism maintains with such a school are obvious,” especially “the visual emphasis, the submission to perception” (40). The movement was most ardently supported and (sometimes reservedly) advanced during the early years of Modernism by Ford Madox Ford. Ford was more or less the only bona fide advocate expounding the movement's tenants in public prose at this time, as was he most responsible for its consideration as a distinct approach to literature that could be traced back to (honorary members in the movement—majuscule “Impressionists,” more than the merely those whose writing gives an effect of the “impressionistic”) Joseph Conrad and Henry James in fiction, and Arthur Symons, Oscar Wilde, and Walter Pater in their critical prose.

Explicit Impressionist doctrine is most transparently evoked in the work of Pater, specifically his “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*,³⁹ and without this seminal piece of prose Ford would have had himself a much more arduous task of explicating the aesthetic theory he tried always to maintain. Pater posits that we do not actually experience the world as a compository of

39 The following summary on Pater owes itself to David Perkins' *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode* (55-57).

external objects. Rather, once perception naturally yields to apprehension, “each object is loosed into a group of impressions” (Pater, *The Renaissance* 195), personal ephemera of the consciousness. And, Pater elaborates,

if we continue to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them, it contracts still further: the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind. Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. (Ibid. 195-196)

These impressions are “in perpetual flight,” ephemeral, and “infinitely divisible,” such that “to such a tremulous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with a sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments gone by, what is real in our life fines itself down” (Ibid. 196). The Impressionist worldview lent itself to a natural filtering of reality into something somehow more manageable, because rooted in and likewise limited by the capacity of the subjective consciousness.

Because the external world, in its validation and apprehension by intellectual faculties, is forever in flux, Impressionism presumes an epistemological skepticism and relativism. This was a direct challenge to the strains of positivism that were beginning to dictate the course of “modern” society, as well as a rejection of the Victorian model of omniscience. The only possible truth the artist can attempt to render is the motion of the mind, “the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off—that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves” (Pater, *The Renaissance* 196); to seek any relation or impose any meaning upon these impressions would go against the basic premises of the doctrine. If the truth of the art is in the energy of the motion, the measure of its quality is

in the intensity of the emotion, in being “present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy” (Ibid. 197). (This idea was adopted and translated into doctrine by the Poetry Club, whose members advocated a doctrine of “specific density” in seeking to “write as vividly as possible while keeping a maximum of reticence” and working “in the margin of the experience or emotion which prompted you to write” [qtd. in Keller 157].) The ultimate goal (pulled from one of Pater's most famous passages) is,

To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy . . . Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the very brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways . . . With this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch. (*The Renaissance* 197)

Against the uncompromising forward march of the industry of “Progress,” Pater and the Impressionists offer an alternative—one that holds, and takes a step, back; to reflect on man's instinctive and fundamental desire simply to verify the reality of his presence in the external world.

If Roberts was not all too familiar with Pater, she was definitely aware of Ford's Impressionism—even if Pound's somewhat inconsistent and oversimplified appraisals were her introduction. The “Speculations” Ford offered in the August and September 1913 issues of *Poetry* did little to expound his doctrine, and even his more seminal essay “On Impressionism” in the June 1914 issue of *Poetry and Drama* lacks the explication that Pater offers. (Not that it claims to tackle the topic with the same gusto as Pater; Ford's tone throughout is entirely, and somewhat characteristically, casual, even blasé.) It does, however, render the ideas into more straightforward prose. The most enduring proposition Ford offers is that Impressionism, unlike other literary schools, “recognises, frankly, that all art must be the expression of an ego, and if Impressionism is to do anything, it must, as the phrase is, go the whole hog” (“On Impressionism” 167). He emphasizes this point: “the Impressionist gives you, as a rule, the fruits

of his own observations and the fruits of his own observations alone” (Ibid. 170-171).⁴⁰ The way that this method manifests in the Impressionist work, regardless of the medium, is that it presents “the record of the impression of a moment; it is not a sort of rounded, annotated record of a set of circumstances—it is the record of the recollection in your mind of a set of circumstances that happened ten years ago—or ten minutes. It might even be the impression of the moment—but it is the impression, not the corrected chronicle” (Ibid. 174). In this way, all purely Impressionist writing meets the criteria for Spender's conception of the “organic.”

We know that Impressionist doctrine had some bearing on the quality of Roberts' work: her notes tell us that she conceived of *The Time of Man* as a “drama of the immediacy of the mind” that set out to record “the swift flow of impression” (qtd. in Spears 174). Roberts clearly valued the purity of Impressionism, of it not being a “corrected chronicle,” as an aesthetic model, and to a comparable extent that she achieved the vision of her first novel (although, interestingly enough, she claimed to have saw the book as a poem [Letter to Harriet Monroe, Aug. or Sept. 1926; Spears 183]), its poetic precursor likewise indicates a devotion to organic Impressionist principles. Although the entire volume is comprised of the matter of childhood and reflects a child's psychology, Roberts insisted the poems were “not for little ungrown children,” but rather “for *people* between the ages of 8 and 80 and upwards” (qtd. in Keller 197). It is extremely telling that she considered *Under the Tree* to be “the first – 'Canto' of a Work” (Letter to Maurice Lesemann, 8 Feb. 1923; qtd. in Keller 197-198)—that is, she considered it to be the first taste of a grand poetic banquet that would place her alongside Dante and Pound in the revisionist epic tradition. And like Dante's *Commedia* and Pound's *Cantos*, Roberts composed and ordered the poems to reflect a sort of spiritual journey, just as she did with *In the Great Steep's Garden*.

40 This is a direct echo of Pater: “Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end” (*The Renaissance* 197).

Keller notes that Roberts “meant *Under the Tree* to convey the narrator's progression from naïveté to a far more nuanced and essentially tragic view of life,” a progression that would “begin with 'simple' verses to reflect the narrator's innocence,” gradually adding “layers and depths of meaning to the poems [to mirror] her growing awareness of unresolvable mysteries” (Keller 195). The maturation of the narrator's worldview into one that recognizes tragedy even in the mundane is not only a more realistic portrait of growing up than one that clings to sentimental notions of childhood as a prelapsarian ideal, but reflects “modern” anxieties in the world at large—the microcosm as a reflection of the macrocosm.

Consider “The Sky,” in which the passing of a bird's shadow inspires a little girl's meditation on the nature and mechanics of the heavenly firmament:

I saw a shadow on the ground
 And heard a bluejay going by;
 A shadow went across the ground,
 And I looked up and saw the sky.

It hung up on the poplar tree,
 But while I looked it did not stay;
 It gave a tiny sort of jerk
 And moved a little bit away.

And farther on and farther on
 It moved and never seemed to stop,
 I think it must be tied with chains
 And something pulls it from the top.

It never has come down again,
 And every time I look to see,
 The sky is always slipping back
 And getting far away from me. (*Under the Tree* 1)

As the first poem in a volume meticulously ordered into a progression of experience, we should not expect any earth-shattering epiphanies out of the narrator. It is important that the volume opens with a portrait of a child's mind inflamed with curiosity, though, as it sets the tone for the poems that follow. When the little girl sees the bird's shadow, she somewhat instinctively looks

up to try and catch a glimpse of the bird itself. Having just trailed the shadow with her eyes, the sky, at first, seems frozen by comparison. As she continues peering skyward, her eyes recalibrate, and she notices the clouds inching along (or else her gaze is simply absorbed by the sky's immeasurable and inconceivable depth). We get the impression that this is the girl's first sustained survey of the sky, as every subsequent time she looks up it seems to continue moving farther away from her. She contemplates the phenomenon, and concludes that it has been hitched up with chains while “something” (she doesn't know what) pulls it along.

Even in a poem that reads as simply as “The Sky,” we find manifestations of Roberts' Credo. The little girl subjects an unfamiliar phenomenon to scientific inquiry, and her hypothesis reflects the few experiences she has racked up thus far. That is, she uses what she has seen (chains being used to secure something) and knows (if the chain so secured around an object is pulled hard enough, the object will follow) to enter into the realms of the unseen and unknown (empyrean mechanics).

There is nothing in “The Sky” affecting the timbre of the little girl's “sensuously apprehended” experience in its transposition into poetic form. Likewise, there is nothing in the poem that cannot be attributed to direct impression. The same could be said for the vast majority of the volume. If we look at other serious poetic attempts from the century and a half preceding *Under the Tree* to render the psychology of the child into verse whose utilitarian import transcends the circumscriptions of childhood, the same effect is rarely achieved. William Blake and Walter de la Mare immediately come to mind. (Robert Louis Stevenson's 1885 volume *A Child's Garden of Verses* comes to mind as well, but in its affective sentimentality it rarely and hardly transcends its distinct value for children.)

Walter de la Mare is diagnosed as a “non-recognizer” by Spender in the way he “regard[s] dreaming as an alternative to the nightmare of contemporary wakefulness” (160). His poetry is

“orchidaceous,” like much of Keats, and like most of the poems from *In the Great Steep's Garden*. It removes the subject from the immediate physical world and situates him in a transcendent and immaterial realm of fanciful associations—the mind turned in on itself searching for a security that the external world can do little to guarantee and much to jeopardize.

Consider, in contrast, Roberts' “In My Pillow”:

When Mother or Father turns down the light,
I like to look into my pillow at night.

Some people call them dreams, but for me
They are things I look down in my pillow and see.

[. . .] Sometimes they are plainer than I can say,
And while I am waking they go away.

And when nobody is coming by,
I feel my pillow all over and try

And try to feel the pretty things,
The little brown bowl and the flying wings. (*UTT* 4-5)

Roberts' child narrator never turns to the dream-hazy expanses of the imagination as a place of refuge. Rather, she tries to validate the stuff of dreams in her waking life, to seek out the relation between her waking and sleeping imaginations in the hope that their coupling may provide a key to unlocking certain mysteries gathered about in some transcendent realm.

The poem is a perfect example of why Roberts chose the subject matter she did for *Under the Tree*: “I have used child speech and child psychology for my images. *Man is a child in his gropings for the objects which lie just beyond the present limitations of sense*” (qtd. in Keller 202). To some extent, nearly all of the poems in the volume reflect an implicit yearning to translate impressions of objects, singularly and in relation to each other, into fundamental concepts that can be used to order the narrator's world. The desire is never vanquished in the active mind—active in its own faculties and actively moving through while parsing the world

beyond it. To a child, this inherent “groping” yields innumerable epiphanies, ranging from mundane cause-and-consequence contemplations, semiotic correspondences, and degrees of correlation; to more sensitive degrees of spatial and temporal awareness, personal definitions for abstract concepts, and the meaty building blocks that amalgamate into nuanced ideas of existential morality.

The value of *Under the Tree*, as well as the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual progress it maps, can be derived from the probing philosophical inquiries contained in nearly every poem. Some of these inquiries are implied from what is external to the poem, and the poem documents an epiphany; other inquiries make up the poem itself, and the assumption of knowledge falls below a further horizon.

“The Sky” captures the realization that there are great natural forces at play, while “The Cornfield” recognizes that these forces can manifest in ideas of order—the little girl notices how the corn “grows / Across the world and up and down / In very straight and even rows,” and wonders if the farmer notices “how / It comes together like a fan” (*UTT* 2). In “The Branch,” she begins to cultivate a sensitivity for the coinciding subtlety and intensity of sensation in the natural world, feeling “the sand at the bottom that bites at your feet” or “how the water runs over your toes,” noticing how “hard and stiff and cool” are the “little black spiders” “that walk on the top / Of the water,” seeing the difference between “where it is smooth” with “moss on a stone” and “where it is shallow and almost dry” with rocks “broken and hot in the sun” (*Ibid.* 43). In “At the Water” she returns to the branch and has a similar experience, this time focusing exclusively on how things smell and concluding that “All went together very well” (*Ibid.* 50).

“The Butterbean Tent” concerns the domestication of nature—the little girl begins finding herself in relation to the world, recognizes the mutability of utility (much like she does in “The Sky”), and begins realizing her Ego as she makes a butterbean tent into “a nice little house” for

herself (*UTT* 11). In “The Rabbit” are the epiphanies that nature can look back (this occurs in “Strange Tree” as well) and that there are distinct, individual consciousnesses and perspectives outside of the self—a rabbit’s “big still eyes looked hard at me, / [. . .] And I looked back very hard at him” (*Ibid.* 25).

“Milking Time” shows a developing understanding of routine (and thus of ritual), as well as a social consciousness that recognizes tenderness and compassion, both as evident in the behavior of the father towards his daughter (*UTT* 3). “The Woodpecker” reflects a mind becoming more aware of the needs of others—the little girl is glad that the woodpecker “made him a house in the telephone pole” so that when it storms (she assumes the “streams of rain,” “sparkles of lighting . . . flashing by” and “the big, big wheels of thunder roll[ing]” are likewise terrifying for the bird) he has shelter, a place to “snuggle back” into (*Ibid.* 9).

“Miss Kate-Marie” suggests a developing awareness of local community and increased competency in matters of association—the little girl discerns “Sunday everywhere” as she and others prepare to attend church (*UTT* 6-7). In “Mr. Wells” she tones these associative faculties and finds new correspondences—“when the little blacking smells / And camphor balls and soap begin, / I do not have to look to know / That Mr. Wells is coming in” (*Ibid.* 13). “Dick and Will” captures the epiphany that things which seem identical are not always identical—a set of twins helps the little girl learn ways to differentiate, to find nuances (*Ibid.* 14). “The Pulpit” reflects further nuances of association and relation, and concerns cultivating a sense of self and other—the child imagines the pulpit as a “little . . . house,” and “wonder[s] all about / The little ones that live inside,” “wonder[s] if *they* sit inside” or “walk up stairs” or “have a cat” or “say some kind of little prayers,” or “if *they’re* ever scared / Because the bedroom lamp goes out, / And what their little dreams are like / And what *they* wonder all about” (*Ibid.* 18-19). Roberts notes that “This is a searching child. Man is a searching child. Here he is searching into his world by the

way of fantasies [*sic*],” adding that “He tries to interpret the invisible in terms of the visible” (qtd. in Keller 196). To this extent, it recalls “In My Pillow” (where she finds that dreams are made up of the stuff of waking life) (*UTT* 4-5), where she attempts to estimate where imagination ends and reality begins.

In “The Twins,” the little girl begins to understand the playfulness of language—“twins” is really just “two-ones” said “very fast” (*UTT* 8). “The Star (A Song)” finds her beginning to understand the nature of distance and dominion, the limits of influence, and the limitations of language—“O little one so far, / You cannot hear me when I sing. // You cannot tell me what you are, / I cannot tell you anything” (Ibid. 10). “Firefly (A Song)” reflects a cultivation of modesty or humility (among fellow men or perhaps even in a schematic where man is subordinate to some divine Creator, or else some other cosmic force or confluence of forces) as well as a tragic awareness that perhaps the potential of the imaginative mind is limited—“I never could have thought of it, / To have a little bug all lit / And made to go on wings” (Ibid. 15).

In “The Worm” one can see “how the close observation of even the humblest of nature's creatures can engage a very deep philosophical issue” (Keller 196). In Roberts' notes we find that she “had been contemplating the difficulties of the philosopher from solipsism and the egocentric predicament to the transcendental unity of”—and there she cuts out, finishing her thought in a letter (1 Jan. 1921) to Maurice Lesemann—“apperception” (qtd. in Keller 196). The philosophical issue is one of self-consciousness, a sense of self, a sense of identity: “I wonder if / He knows that he's a worm” (*UTT* 44-45). In “Water Noises,” the girl hears the water raising questions of its own—“And do you think?” (Ibid. 51) Just as she realized nature can look back at her, she realizes it has a certain level of consciousness, although presumably different from our own. In “A Child Asleep” the narrator sees something in a sleeping boy look back at her—an adequate catalyst to spur later ruminations on the existence and, if these stipulations are

accepted, the nature of the soul, or whatever else dwells immaterially within the human body (Ibid. 46).

The little girl acquires the knowledge of death simply as a concept, a suggestion of some drastic change in being, in “Babes in the Woods,” although she does not yet understand its implications. She imagines “two little children that died long ago” listening to bees talking and ants walking, seeing “some of the sky” “through a crack in the leaves” of a bush, watching and waiting for a robin coming by (*UTT* 36-37). Roberts wanted to show how the “mind is unable to comprehend death. Impossible for thought to think of itself as non-existent,” while also suggesting “an intimation of immortality . . . founded on the fact that children cannot think of the dead except as living” (Letter to Simpson Roberts, 18 May 1920; qtd. in Keller 197).

“Father's Story” finds the girl learning that stories, like dreams, are made up of the stuff of life. In her father's tales of Jason and his ship of Argonauts, the golden fleece, and “a town called Troy,” she begins becoming familiarized with tradition (*UTT* 28-29). It forms a natural pair with “Christmas Morning” (the two appear alongside each other). It shows the little girl using her imaginative faculties to reconstruct the story of the birth of Jesus with herself present among its happenings—the artistic sensibility finding itself in relation to tradition (Ibid. 30-31).

In “Shells in Rock,” the little girl is beginning to gain some awareness of the fact and ways that man reshapes, repurposes, or imposes new distinctions of order upon nature. She had noticed shells “packed away in rock” at the quarry, and now notices that “everywhere it was the same.” But “Suppose the sea should come back here / And gather up its shells”—do they not rightfully belong to the sea? And if they do not even belong in the landscape of terra firma, “under sand and under clay” and “packed under all the hills,” how could they possibly belong to man who uses this raw material to build churches, bridges, jails and roads? (*UTT* 74-75)

Although the little girl is a long way from realizing this, we get a sense that Roberts is suggesting

an allegory for the “modern” predicament—suppose Nature should reassert itself in some catastrophic way to wipe the slate clean and allow things to fall back into their natural habits and patterns.

In “People Going By,” the little girl reflects on all the people who “pass by our tree,” and she begins to understand and appreciate the abundance and variety of the world outside of her immediate, domestic sphere (*UTT* 34-35). She can still maintain skepticism over the magic of “The Circus” that parades by, though—she somewhat entertains, with reservation, that “beautiful ladies” each in a “golden dress” and with a “golden whip” “were the queens of Sheba, I guess,” and when someone yells that the “big wild man” in a cage with snakes “eats them alive!” she retorts, “But I didn't see him eat” (*Ibid.* 40-41).

Perhaps the most significant (and most tragic) thread of knowledge that the little girl affirms throughout the immaculate pattern of *Under the Tree* is that which concerns knowledge itself. In “Numbers” she adopts the naive faith that the realm of knowledge is quantifiable and measurable, and just as she will be able to “count the numbers far, / And know all the figures that there are,” she thinks she will eventually be able to “know everything some day” (*UTT* 53). In the following poem, “The Dark,” we get the foreboding sense that knowledge, like the lights in the houses on the hill that are extinguished one by one until there is only darkness, and like life itself (although the girl cannot comprehend this notion yet, as evident in “Babes in the Woods”), is susceptible (or even prone) to that darkness which is ignorance (*Ibid.* 54-55). The terrifying panther (a shadow) and the ominous “Something” (a garment draped over a chair) that appear “In the Night” likewise suggest obscurity or oblivion, as the little girl is unable to use her intellectual faculties to bring the mystery of the monsters back into the realm of the mundane and quell her fear (*Ibid.* 58-59). Or, in this moment of apprehension, could they actually be what they appear to be? One cannot know for sure. “August Night” compounds this anxiety, further

crippling the optimism that we found in “Numbers” (to some extent; the poem is also a subtle exclamation of wonder)—“A dust is coming through the sky! / And I felt myself begin to cry. // So many of them and so small, / Suppose I cannot know them all,” the girl concludes while she gazes at the stars (Ibid. 79). “All illusions of order, stability, or certainty collapse,” Keller suggests, as the girl becomes “overwhelmed by the enormity of the sky with its uncountable stars” (Ibid. 197). Roberts' notes confirm this reading: “Fixity of the world crumbles . . . Mind, as a knowing instrument is inadequate. Mind is appalled before the horrors of what we know as space” (qtd. in Keller 197). And then we advance to the last phase of this sequence, the final line of the final poem of *Under the Tree*: “But nothing answered anything” (UTT 82-83).⁴¹ This was the only way Roberts could envision the little girl's progression of experience ending. “The Hens” confirms, Keller notes, to the little girl, to the poet, and to the reader, that “there are no final answers to our deepest questions. We cannot reach an ultimate truth. We can sometimes sense (and always hope) that it might be there” (Keller 197), but the little girl's most desperately impassioned inquiries into the fundamental nature of life hang unanswered in the still silence of a darkening barn.

Thus comprises a measure of progress in a child's assumption of knowledge which is that loss of innocence (the phrase is surely hackneyed but there is no better way to put it). To the initiate into “experience” who has secured himself a strong enough foundation in such matters, however, further “gropings” begin to adopt more severe implications. The entire “modern” predicament is rooted in this fundamental aspect of man's nature, but so are the means by which it might be rejected or rectified.

41 Roberts herself noted the affinity between “The Hens” and her early conception of *The Time of Man*: “But the play of the mind comes to an end through a sort of disaster, a trifling disaster, scarcely noticed in the physical action and the emerged clod goes back, and the traces of the flame that leaped once are effaced by time and forgetting, a very little time, only she who had the experience dimly remembers there was something, once, now gone, but what was it? and, nothing answers anything” (Letter to Monroe Wheeler, 29 July 1922; qtd. in Keller 211).

One of Yeats' strongest admonitions from his 1914 *Poetry* banquet lecture concerns the Victorian commonplace of “preach[ing]” and moralizing: “Real enjoyment of a beautiful thing is not achieved when a poet tries to teach. It is not the business of a poet to instruct his age. He should be too humble to instruct his age. His business is merely to express himself, whatever that self may be” (qtd. in Monroe, “Poetry's Banquet” 26). Roberts was clearly moved by this sentiment, and it is echoed in her Credo: “I do not preach. I do not give you tacked-on morals. It is not the function of poetry to exhort or to utter moral precepts. Morals differ with customs. Art is eternal” (qtd. in Keller 202). Her priority was not to insist to her readership how they might live their lives, but simply offer them the fruits of experience—transfixed by some notion of form and thus subjected to the poet's idea of order, which, in most poetry that clung to the “modern” epithet at this time, either intrinsically offered a model for rectification in light of this ordered experience, or else went only so far as the poem having fallen into whatever degree of recognizable patterns on the page, tried, rather, to reflect the endless strains of social, cultural, and experiential fragmentation—and allow them to draw their own conclusions. Adopting this stance not only divorces her poetry from the great tradition of children's poetry forever marked as such by its refusal to relent in apologetic moralizing, but places it in the current of Modernism. Yeats was disheartened by the fact that in “the ordinary American magazine, I find that all we rebelled against in those early days—the sentimentality, the rhetoric, the 'moral uplift'—still exist here” (qtd. in Monroe, “Poetry's Banquet” 25). His “little group of rhymers . . . wanted to get rid not only of rhetoric but of poetic diction . . . tried to strip away everything that was artificial, to get a style like speech, as simple as the simplest prose, like a cry of the heart” with an “instantaneousness of effect” (Ibid. 26). He tells his audience that the issue American poets face is not that “you are too far from England, but because you are too far from Paris. It is from Paris that nearly all the great influences in art and literature have come, from the time of Chaucer until

now” (Ibid. 26). For Yeats and the Modernist tradition, the French Symbolist school was that primary influence. It is through this influence that poetry begins to move “toward pictures, sensuous images, away from rhetoric, from the abstract, toward humility” (Ibid. 27).

Spending her formative years as a poet in the company of the Poetry Club, Roberts could not avoid being caught in this current, and in her adoption of Pound as literary mentor, she could not, and did not, refuse a Symbolist education. Matthew Nickel, (to my knowledge) the first and only scholar to identify and pursue the Symbolist influence in Roberts' work, finds resonances between the two in “the play of language, the degree to which language is, as Pound wrote, 'charged with meaning to the utmost degree,' and the way self-consciousness reflects and envelops the anxiety of self” (Nickel, “EMR: Modernist” 7). Sensing the greatest resonances to be issuing from Laforgue, Nickel finds in the deceptively “simple” “children's poems” of *Under the Tree* “complex philosophical dimensions at once playful as much as they are foreboding,” even uncovering such characteristic Symbolist themes as “the inward gaze and self-conscious despair” in a poem like “In the Night,” whose setting is in itself “an equally ambiguous and complex symbol” (Ibid. 8).

To establish further resonance between Miss Roberts and the French Symbolists is a rather precarious task. Many of the movement's signature peculiarities—*vers libre*, the trifecta of mystery, melancholy and mysticism, the social and moral plight of the artist, evocations, essences and intimations, neuroses, fear and loathing, archaisms, synaesthesia, personal semiotics, general obscurity, what Alexandru Philippide sees as “the revelations of the subconscious,” “the deepening of the dream,” and “crepuscular psychic states” (qtd. in Pedersen 594)—seem to be glaringly absent from *Under the Tree*. The only poem from Roberts' early work that maintains a tone thoroughly analogous with the Symbolists is “Afraid,” published in the January 1917 issue (this still predates Pound's Symbolist studies) of the *Kentucky High*

School Quarterly:

I fear me not when the great winds rock,
And the caverns quiver under their shock.

The Polar voices hiss and speak
A death chill over the tall white peak.

The great bear lurks in the flag-strewn gulch,
A serpent glides through the mesa's mulch.

I fear them not, in the midnight chills
I run with the swift-limbed things of the hills.

But oh, little heart of me, keep you near!
Myself I fear. Myself I fear! (55)⁴²

It was not Roberts' best work, and definitely not very characteristic, but in its archaic syntax, its brazen audacity juxtaposed with “the anxiety of self,” and its vivid images that give intimations of lofty symbolic import, it suggests that Roberts was, if for only a brief period in her career, toying around with Symbolist tendencies.

In *Under the Tree*, however, the influence is much more subtle—lurks deeper in the shadows, if you will. It seems counterintuitive to consider Roberts' volume in light of Arthur Symons' claim, from his seminal study on *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, that the movement is essentially a revolution against “the contemplation and re-arrangement of material things” (2). And we see how Symbolism is both an extension and a divorce from Impressionism (and thus partly an extension and partly a divorce from the mode that *Under the Tree* very clearly employs throughout) in Edmund Wilson's estimation, from his equally seminal *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870 to 1930* (1931), of the movement's underlying assumptions:

Every feeling or sensation we have, every moment of consciousness, is different

42 “Afraid” is published alongside two poems from *In the Great Steep's Garden* (“Columbine in the Hills” and “Saxifrage”), two poems from a sequence titled “In the Sierra” first published in the September 1915 issue of *Sunset* magazine (“The Mariposa Lily” and “The Aspen Tree”), and one other new poem (“December Song”).

from every other; and it is, in consequence, impossible to render our sensations as we actually experience them through the conventional and universal language of ordinary literature. Each poet has his unique personality; each of his moments has its special tone, its special combination of elements. And it is the poet's task to find, to invent, the special language which will alone be capable of expressing his personality and feelings. Such a language must make use of symbols: what is so special, so fleeting and so vague cannot be conveyed by direct statement or description, but only by a succession of words, of images, which will serve to suggest it to the reader. (21)

Where Symbolism diverges from Impressionism, however, is what makes it unique. But although a poem like “In My Pillow” claims no peculiarities characteristic of Laforgue and company, it nevertheless seeks to challenge distinctions between reality, dreams, and the imagination (by the faculties of the imagination, the awoken girl tries to “feel” in her pillow the stuff of dreams), to justify enhancing the real world with the sense and syntax of dreams (the first instance of “feeling” suggests an examination by touch, but the second could just as well imply an emotional or intellectual conjuring), to verify in the stuff of dreams complex signifiers that manifest endlessly in countless circumstances and to different effects but nevertheless retain some universal signified. Ultimately, the persisting influence of Impressionism on *Under the Tree* begins yielding somewhat to Symbolism as the child begins philosophically probing and starts drawing conclusions about the mystical forces that govern the world.

Roberts believes that poetry should engage with those portions of the intellect or imagination that yet remain shrouded in mystery. She condemns poetry that is too stooped in its objectivity or too elevated in the singular intellect: “It is not enough that Poetry states accurately physical facts, and not enough that it expresses the high thoughts of men, their ideals and hopes for the future of the universe. It searches further than this in searching out obscure relations” (qtd. in Keller 201). In his 1901 essay on “Magic,” Yeats affirms three principles in the spirit of Symbolism:

(1) That the borders of our minds are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow

into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.

(2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.

(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols. (29)

We find a similar idea in Roberts' Credo: "Around logical thought and all conception hovers the nebulous Beauty—Mind in its potentialities. . . Through the chaos of the world runs the pattern of art—searching out hidden relation—prophesying of the mind and its nebulous Beauty" (qtd. in Keller 200, 202). Thus, the very search for hidden or obscure relations (that same type of symbol the French school tried to make incarnate in their verse) anticipates, summons, even signifies that infinite potential of mind, an imaginative or creative capacity, that cannot be attributed merely to the intellect, cannot allow for any stabilizing conception of the world to settle into the singular mind. Yeats' schematic is more indicative of deductive imagining: the essence of things, as impressions of a unique personality, are evoked so that they might simultaneously confirm and be validated by symbolic ideals in their total complexity as they exist in the memory of Nature. The goal is to suggest an immediate, intense, and immanent precise measure of something that can only be rendered imprecisely by the poet. Roberts' is more indicative of inductive imagining: the proposition of affinity, the act of affirming the thread of an invisible spider web between two distinct phenomena, locks experience into distinct patterns that both verify the organicism of Nature and give art its vitality. Her "poetry is forever trying to make clear obscure relations in the worlds and systems of things and ideas" (qtd. in Keller 201), she claims in her Credo. The goal is to evoke both a moment of clarity in the concrete relation between phenomena (removing the opacity of mystery and airs of isolation from the quiddity of things) and an immediate, intense, and immanent vision of inexhaustible potential that the mind, engaged in such a manner with the world beyond it, possesses. When a precise and distinct incarnation manifests out of this ethereal, ineffable potential while still trailing traces of it, it evokes the Platonic ideal of Beauty.

Beauty always lingers hazily about the mechanical logical faculties and concrete definitions for the external world, but it does not flash theophanically until the imagination challenges the stability and sufficiency of these ideas of order.

The only individual poem in *Under the Tree* that explicitly illustrates Roberts' adaptation of Symbolist doctrine in its first impression is “Firefly Song”:

Firefly in the pool of water,
Bring me up a little silver,
Bring me up a star for the delight of it,
Bring me up a broken moon.

Firefly, firefly, in the water,
Bring me up a golden river,
Bring me up a fish with a light on it,
Bring me up a crooked moon. (*UTT* 78)

The firefly serves as an imaginative nexus of associations and verifies the potential of the mind that seeks hidden or obscure relations. The manifold associations, everything that is asked to be conjured by the firefly, do not so much offer testimony to the depth of Nature's memory as they signify that “nebulous Beauty” that may always enshroud a poem in a mystical aura and prevent art from falling into commonplace stagnation.

The other way that Roberts' theory manifests in the poems is in a cumulative effect. The four poems that bear the subtitle of “A Song” follow the little girl in her progression of experience from feelings of dissociation (“The Star”) (*UTT* 10), to recognizing the prospect of attaining associative faculties (“Firefly”) (*Ibid.* 15), to allowing her imagination to influence and reshape her reality (“Little Bush”—“I ran away / And hid myself, / And I found a bush that could talk to me, / A smooth little bush said a word to me”) (*Ibid.* 47), to finally cultivating a sensibility that testifies to the “wedding of grass, intellect, instinct, and imagination” (qtd. in Keller 201) necessary to seek out hidden relations (the example of the girl assuming a gentle breeze upon her resting face is “A Little Wind” when in reality it is a butterfly [*Ibid.* 70] is perhaps not the most

explicit illustration of this, but when these “Songs” are reintegrated into the greater progression of experience that comprises the volume, we find that “A Little Wind” is the one “Song” falling between “In the Night” and “Firefly Song”—the poems that most clearly define the extremes of the associative faculty, and most leisurely align with Symbolist concerns). These “Songs” as they appear throughout the girl's intellectual, emotional, imaginative, and spiritual progress recall August Wilhelm Schlegel's thoughts on the Greek Chorus in that they create a situation in which the girl becomes “the ideal spectator” (70), a fusion of herself as a real child experiencing reality and of an artistic self-portrait. The “Songs” suggest “lyrical and musical expression[s] of [her] own emotions” as they unravel and mature throughout *Under the Tree*, and celebrate, in continual refrain, a life in which all sensation may be “[elevated] to the region of contemplation” (Ibid. 70).

At the other end of the spectrum of attempts to transform the stuff of childhood into serious art is William Blake. His *Songs of Innocence* (1789) is comprised of short, lyrical poems rooted in childhood experience, but in its diptych pairing with *Songs of Experience* it aims to expound a rather heavy-handed thesis. The poems themselves do not make incarnate the experience of the external world filtered through the prized innocence of a child's sensibility (though increasingly susceptible to the corrupting institutions of the postlapsarian world), but rather bear the burden of the poet's ideas regarding a Miltonic “innocence” and loss of innocence (“experience”), and the longing to reclaim a sense of the former while wallowing desperately in the latter. Spender claims that it is “as though Blake thinks that for the adult the childhood immediacy can only be retained by seeking evil in experience where the child found good” (25), and this reading seems especially poignant when we place Blake alongside Miss Roberts, who proves rather that childhood immediacy can be reclaimed by applying objective Impressionist principles (objective insofar as the subject is apprehending only the sensuous surface and

refraining from imposing meaning) to a first-person child narrator that the poet attempts to embody through means of the intellect (returning to a sense of things in their fundamental natures), instinct (suppressing the enhanced impulse that seeks relations between objects and ideas as part of a complex cultural rather than natural network—suppressing that sense of “tradition” as Tate estimates it), and imagination (retaining a sense of wonder at the expense of final knowledge). Part of the reason Roberts achieves what Blake cannot is simply that she attempts to place herself in the child's shoes. Rather than trying to portray an accurate portrait of childhood through sympathetic reflection, she attempts to embody it. Instead of trying to summon the immediacy of childhood, she forces herself into direct relation with it, displacing the “experienced” faculties operating on accumulated and structured knowledge.

Spender identifies this tendency in the Romanticism of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge as well. He characterizes it as a “regret . . . for a period of innocence in which environment, existence, and poetic expression formed a single harmony” (Spender 24), as evident in Wordsworth's “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”:

What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
 Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower . . . (157; qtd. in Spender 24)

and Coleridge's response, “Dejection: An Ode”:

But now afflictions bow me down to earth:
Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth;
 But oh! each visitation
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
My shaping spirit of Imagination. (241; qtd. in Spender 24)

For Wordsworth, childhood is “a metaphor for a world in which there is no divorce between feeling and seeing” (Spender 33). As a child, the poet was able to see the world about him as

something inseparable from his own being, while as an adult the world has seemed to develop an impenetrable and immiscible exteriority. In her notebooks, Roberts explains that her poem “On the Hill” is about “the mind trying to see itself in relation to physical objects,” and further clarifies that “All the children are on the hill. The yard is deserted. The child is trying to see her world, herself in it” (qtd. in Keller 196). Thus we have presented the earliest stages of what Wordsworth recognized to be the quintessence of childhood:

Mother said that we could go
Up on the hill where the strawberries grow.

And while I was there I looked all down,
Over the trees and over the town.

[. . .] And over and over I tried to see
Some of us walking under the tree,

And the children playing everywhere,
And how it looks when I am there. (*UTT* 20-21)

In “The Pilaster,” the child has cultivated an imaginative and integrative sensibility—the ability to weld the mind with matter. Nothing external is truly beyond or separate from her own being:

The church has pieces jutting out
Where corners of the walls begin.
I have one for my little house,
And I can feel myself go in.

I feel myself go in the bricks,
And I can see myself in there.
I'm always waiting all alone,
I'm sitting on a little chair.

And I am sitting very still,
And I am waiting on and on
For something that is never there,
For something that is gone. (*Ibid.* 24)

The trouble with Wordsworth and his fellow Romantics was their approach to the issue. Rather

than using the poem as a platform to lament what has been lost and the resulting state of dissociation, Roberts approaches her subject matter with the hope of possessing it in all of its indwelling vitality. It is simply a matter of seeing and using the imagination as an active rather than passive verb. If this can be done, if she can accurately portray a child's consciousness in which mind and matter are inseparably fused, then (given that she has not and could not actually *become* a child again) she has proven that poetry written out the “modern” predicament is able to do the same thing, that a “dissociation of sensibility” is not a terminal condition. The “artist as child” becomes a “rhetorical stratagem” that Levenson attributes to certain shades of Ford's writing, but is thoroughly maintained throughout *Under the Tree*: “It puts in stark terms . . . the shift in attention from large things to small, from public responsibility to private expression, from an 'adult' earnestness and self-seriousness to 'childlike' intimacy, sincerity, and amoralism” (57).

Pound-era Imagism, a natural extension of Impressionism, took these tendencies and transformed them into concrete formal and aesthetic doctrine. Their function as a “rhetorical stratagem” was subsumed by the holistic conception of what poetry in general should strive to achieve if it is to be anything “new” and not simply a perpetuation of hackneyed themes, conventions that do not reflect the current state of society and culture, and methods that restrain the poem from flashing like a theophany in the face of the “modern” predicament. In Pound's review of Ford's (then Hueffer) volume *High Germany* in the March 1912 issue of the *Poetry Review*, we get an explicit account of what he saw as the limitations of Impressionism, and from this perspective we can begin to understand how Imagism sought to rectify these shortcomings:

[Ford's] flaw is the flaw of impressionism, impressionism, that is, carried out of its due medium. Impressionism belongs in paint, it is of the eye. The cinematograph records, for instance, the “impression” of any given action or place, far more exactly than the finest writing, it transmits the impression to its “audience” with less work on their part. A ball of gold and a gilded ball give the same “impression”

to the painter. Poetry is in some odd way concerned with the specific gravity of things, with their nature.

Their nature *and* show, if you like; with the relation between them, not with show alone.

The *conception* of poetry is a process more intense than the *reception* of an impression. And no impression, however carefully articulated, can, recorded, convey that feeling of sudden light which the works of art should and must convey. Poetry is not much a matter of explications. (qtd. in Lindberg-Seyersted 10)

The primary aim of Pound's Imagism was to shape and tone the poem so that “the specific gravity of things . . . their nature” was made precise, explicit, and immediate, to make the poem a manifestation (“nature *and* show . . . with the relation between them”) of a distinct phenomenon rather than an impression, explanation, or still-life portrait of it. He thought that Impressionism too easily “lapse[s] into description” (Pound, “Status Rerum” 125), is “too visual, too superficial, too relaxed and discursive, and too passive” (Saunders 114). It may be true, as Max Saunders suggests, that Pound's stress on exact description in his critique of Impressionism is misguided (is rather a critique of Realism), and by reducing the method to objective description, he “obscures what's most striking—and strikingly Impressionist—about it: the evocations of subjectivities that spark around such descriptions” (119).

What is important, however, is not how right or wrong Pound was in his appraisal of Impressionism, but how he found in Ford's principles something to define his own doctrine against. While both doctrines, as David Perkins notes, advocated “direct presentation of the object without discursive reflection ('abstraction,' 'rhetoric'),” precision (although each by their own standards), calcified actuality (again, each by their own standards), and “economy in language without 'poetic' heightening or ornament,” Imagism was decidedly “more militant, self-conscious, craftsmanlike, manifested . . . reflected Pound's positivism rather than the skeptical, relativistic uncertainties of the Impressionist mind” (59). Furthermore, it focused on distinct phenomena rather than sweeping or surveyed scenes, and on “static things, or on motion in a

phase of stasis, as opposed to the Impressionist sense of flux” (Ibid. 59).

Pound implicated this sense of flux in the paradox of Impressionism that carried over from its roots in Aestheticism. Brian Trehearne unpacks the issue:

. . . on the one hand the Aesthete [and the Impressionist] seeks to acknowledge quite frankly the lack of solidity and stability in his situation, thereby submitting joyfully to the flux, while on the other he struggles rhetorically against the flux, to stop time, in order to maintain the beauty and intensity he has chanced upon . . . Hence a contradiction in the poetry itself: while claiming neutrality to the visual setting and seeking only to record a passive impression of it, the poet brings to the scene such moods and imaginative colours of his own that the poetry inevitably gives off a subjective aroma. (44)

It is precisely Pound's positivism that allows him to clean up the contradiction even in his own doctrine. When Ford claims that “Impressionism is a frank expression of a personality” (“On Impressionism” 169), he admits that the apprehending subject takes preeminence over the content being rendered. Impressionism ultimately constitutes a psychological case study of an individual in which all of his personality, his predilections, his preferences, his hopes, dreams, fears—his entire psychological make-up—is suppressed, is denied a voice, to the extent that it colors the quality of his impressions, is evoked in the nuances of the scene being surveyed. Threading through the desire to render total impressions, the fact that in each infinitesimal fraction of a moment an entire mind can shift with tectonic consequence, and the limits of language (especially under temporal and spatial constraints), runs the anxiety (even if hushed to a whisper) that the task at hand is not being faithfully fulfilled. Pound silences this alienating anxiety for good by placing the emphasis on the object. If the poet fails to whatever degree, he has not done himself an injustice, but the “thing” being treated in the poem. Pound obviously learned this from T. E. Hulme, and what Levenson says of Hulme's “Autumn” can be applied to what essentially came to be the second phase of “the School of Images”: “to the extent that the poetic subject remains muted and slight does the role of the image become predominant. In the

absence of any narrative, any development of ideas, any articulation of character, the images themselves come to attract the poetic regard” (45-46).

The first principle of Pound's initial formulation of doctrine, “Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective” (“A Retrospect” 95), demands more than just poignancy, although poignancy was indeed a crucial factor—for *des Imagistes* as well as Roberts, who claims to have “worked for a poignant statement” and “tried for a poignant speech, as direct as cause and effect is direct” (qtd. in Keller 202, 200). This differs from Ford's approach in its attempts to wholly suppress the effect of the apprehensive subject on what's being treated. It does not attempt to remove all traces of the subject, though, for the idea that “only emotion endures” (Pound, “A Retrospect” 110) is absolutely central to the doctrine. In the Impressionist piece, the scene affects the surveyor, whose impression, in turn, affects the scene. In the Imagist piece, the object affects the surveyor—and *c'est tout*. If that emotion is to be rendered explicitly in the poem, it should do so through juxtaposition. If it is to be rendered implicitly in the poem, it should make the reader feel first and foremost as though it issues forth from himself. Then, in the phase where feeling yields to contemplation, the emotion should be transferred to the subject (or the poet himself). The Imagist poem should dupe its reader into thinking he is witnessing the phenomenon itself and its full splendor—not the impression of another transposed into a poetic form. The emotion should never eclipse the object being treated to any degree; it should rather maintain its intensity in spite of the object.

But this is an ideal, and Imagism, as something wholly distinct from Impressionism, is ultimately an ideal form. Roberts, like essentially every other student of Pound's doctrine, is not a true Imagist poet through and through. Neither does she write truly Imagist poems. Imagism in its pure form, coming from honest revelation (“I dare say it is meaningless unless one has drifted into a certain vein of thought”) (Pound, “Vorticism” n.p.) rather than deliberation and an honest

attempt to meet fully certain criteria, perhaps exists only in Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" (and, to a lesser degree, perhaps a handful of H.D.'s poems). The content of his "Retrospect" (not to mention the vast wealth of his other critical commentary that tackles the same issues, sometimes with inconsistent results) is incredibly thorough and highly prescriptive (even if he says to not consider his three primary principles "as dogma—never consider anything as dogma") ("A Retrospect" 97), and it ultimately seems to only achieve *distinct* autonomy from Impressionism when the tenants have been transformed into poetry in the name of Imagism (the tenants themselves do not indicate enough of a divergence).

The primary justification for this, the reason for "all the confusion about Imagism," as Hugh Kenner divines, is that "its specifications for technical hygiene are one thing, and Pound's Doctrine of the Image is another" (186). There are Pound's three primary principles and their extensive illuminations, and there is the conviction that "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time . . . It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art" (Pound, "A Retrospect" 96). It occurs when "one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective" (Pound, "Vorticism" n.p.). The idea evolved out of Pound's understanding (or misunderstanding) of the Chinese ideogram, and it either inspired or coincidentally merged with a handful of similar doctrines forged out of the minds of the Modernist heavyweights.

It corresponds most neatly with James Joyce's "epiphany," which he employed as a device in *Dubliners* (1914) and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Hough offers a definition:

. . . the moment in which the essential nature of an object reveals itself . . . The moment of revelation need not be a revelation of beauty or transcendence . . . [any common object] might suddenly be epiphanised—manifest itself in its essence. Or, more frequently, a quotidian object suddenly reveals not only its own nature, but that of the forces that went to make it, or of the whole circumambient situation . . . This can be something like a form of Imagist doctrine; more sophisticated, without the pinched prohibitory air that hangs round Imagism. It produces similar technical results—the instantaneous glimpse of a phenomenal object as the basic symbolic counter. (16)

And we might likewise throw Eliot into the equation. In his 1920 essay “Hamlet and His Problems,” he claims that “the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative,'” which he defines as “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (100).

These correlations are not presented to suggest that they each helped shaped Roberts' poetic Credo to whatever degree, but rather to illustrate that she had cultivated a finely-tuned Modernist sensibility, was keenly aware of the intellectual and aesthetic currents affecting and comprising the contemporary literary scene. And, in crafting her own doctrine, she had proven herself to be an active participant, a veritable torchbearer of the tradition. If we are conceiving of this tradition as a whole, the correspondences between Pound's, Joyce's, and Eliot's doctrines are worth more than their nuances. The trend in Modernism was towards immediacy, towards reclaiming unmediated apprehension of the external world and preserving that direct relation with it. It sought to divorce poetry from the rhetorical meddling common in Victorianism and the cerebral preoccupations of the Romantics.

Roberts held the same ambition, apparently with enough conviction to place it at the center of her doctrine:

We perceive that the mind is forever trying to possess physical things in all their fullness and beauty. It wants flowers or grass or winds or the green of leaves or the wetness of water, to hold in the very hands of the mind. Poetry searches into

this desire.

I have attempted to bring this possession a little closer. *As in Little Rain, I have attempted to bring the fact of rain—its wetness—fact of wet leaves and animals in upon the mind with a richer immediacy. . . immediacy of thought/physical objects, & between sensuous ex[perience] and imagination.*

If I can, in art, bring the physical world before the mind with a greater closeness—richer immediacy—than before, so that the mind rushes out to the very edges of sense—then mind turns about and sees itself mirrored within itself. (qtd. in Keller 201-202)

By her prescriptions, the function of poetry necessitates engaging the mind with matter, initiating an intensified interplay between the two. The poet accentuates the “facts” of natural phenomena, their essences as they manifest sensuously, to stimulate the mind as though it were processing literal sensations. In drawing these faculties out from the centers of their settled routines in such a way, the emancipated mind becomes charged with the capacity to look back upon itself and recognize its functions, while simultaneously acknowledging its freshly forged and intimate connection with the realm that, in the prevailing spells of disenchantment, lingers hazily about its periphery. In providing “a concrete and immediate rendering of life” (qtd. in Keller 202), Roberts suggests, poetry can achieve what T. E. Hulme had championed in an August 1909 essay for *The New Age*: “It always endeavors to arrest you, and to make you continuously see a physical thing, to prevent you gliding through an abstract process” (10).

A pathetic appeal was just as crucial, though: “Poetry must appeal to the emotions each time it appears with the freshness and the vigor and the charm of a clear first impression. It flashes into media where the intellect goes crawling and groping” (qtd. in Keller 201). Similarly to what Pound had proposed for Imagism, the initial emotional bond should form between what's being evoked in the poem and the reader—the perceiving subject should be subsumed by the reader's instantaneous apprehension of the substance of the poem, as if momentarily blinded by the flash of poetic sublimation. Although Pound's configuration suggests a instantaneous simultaneity of intellectual and emotional response, perhaps even one in which the two are

indistinguishable from each other, he admits that “only emotion”—and not intellect—“endures” (Pound, “A Retrospect” 110). If the two faculties are indeed fused together in the exact instant the image manifests itself, it is only through emotional processing that any lasting impression of clarity can be construed, just as it is for Roberts. The intellect can only carry comprehension as far as it can articulate it; where it falters, affective faculties translate the shortcomings into sense.

In formulating his “Image” as such, Pound inadvertently admitted the significant effect the Symbolists had on him. As Graham Hough notes:

Certain aspects of Symbolist doctrine persist [in Imagism], but the nature of the attention is changed. Revelation becomes technique, incantation becomes a code of prohibitions. What emerges is a new phenomenon . . . we can describe it roughly as Symbolism without the magic. The symbol, naked and unexplained, trailing no clouds of glory, becomes the image . . . the symbol has become *opaque* in transforming itself into the image. No transparent envelopes, or mysterious absences, or invisible essences. Direct treatment of the *thing*, we are told, is the great object. (11-12)

Pound, however, was very adamant about the fact that “IMAGISME IS NOT symbolism”

(“Vorticism” n.p.). He clarifies his position in an essay on “Vorticism” in the September 1st, 1914 issue of the *Fortnightly Review*:

They symbolists dealt in “association,” that is, in a sort of allusion, almost like allegory. They degraded the symbol to the status of the word. They made it a form of metonymy [*sic*]. One can be grossly “symbolic,” for example, by using the term “cross” to mean “trial.” The symbolist's *symbols* have a fixed value, like numbers in arithmetic, like 1, 2, and 7. The imagiste's images have a variable significance, like the signs *a*, *b*, and *x* in algebra. (Ibid.)

“Moreover,” he concludes, “one does not want to be called a symbolist, because symbolism has usually been associated with mushy technique” (Ibid.).

The “prohibitions” that Pound instated were not simply those that fall under the prescriptions of “[Using] absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation,” “[Using] no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something,” “[Using] either no ornament or good ornament” (“A Retrospect” 95, 97, 98) (preferably no ornament—Pound

says elsewhere that “the point of Imagisme is that it does not use images *as ornaments*. The image is itself the speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language”) (“Vorticism” n.p.), et cetera. Imagism fought the imprecision and hermeticism of Symbolism; symbols were no longer allowed to mix “an abstraction with the concrete,” and “the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol” (Pound, “A Retrospect” 97). “If a man use 'symbols,’” Pound continues, “he must so use them that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that *a* sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such” (Ibid. 103). (Roberts achieves this with a greater efficiency that perhaps even Pound. There is really no pressing need for examples; there is not a single instance in *Under the Tree* that betrays this tenant.) Even more fundamental, though, is the denunciation of poetry that simply doesn't *do* anything, doesn't bring the faculties of the intellect, instinct, imagination and emotion into intimate and intense relation with the world beyond the self.

Roberts maintained similar convictions, and there are indeed true “Images” in *Under the Tree* (especially more so than there are “Symbols”), but not a single poem *is* that “Image” alone, the “Image” free from excessive verbiage, the “superfluous word,” or the adjective “which does not reveal something” (Pound, “A Retrospect” 97), the “Image” in relation only to itself and not part of a plot or servant to rhetoric. One of the most striking Images in the volume comprises the second half of “The Sun and a Birch Tree” (the first two stanzas rope the Image into a narrative). In an August 17, 1921 letter to Maurice Lesemann, Roberts mentions that she had, earlier that day, read Pound's volume *Lustra* and then wrote a poem “about a white birch tree” (qtd. in Nickel, Email). *Lustra*, of course, contains “In a Station of the Metro,” and in Roberts' poem we find her paying explicit homage to the man of the metro, her Modernist mentor. Matthew Nickel notes that Roberts had concerns that the poem might have been “too profound” for the general reader, but he doubts that a child would not “feel the emotional intensity of the image of dark

trees 'bending down with rain' . . . and the sudden image of darkness redeemed by a *white* birch” (Nickel, Email), which “made a bright spot in the air, / And I thought the sun was shining there” (*UTT* 57). The poem indeed presents an “intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (Pound, “A Retrospect” 96): “There is darkness, then a light *as if* the sun, the fleeting glimpse of hope, a disillusionment that becomes a mere white birch tree” (Nickel, Email).

It is curious to consider the reasons why Roberts would have pulled “The Sun and a Birch Tree” away from pure Imagism the way she did when we view it in light of an earlier poem —“Twilight,” published in *Youth: Poetry of Today* in December 1918—in which we find both similar imagery and a similarly pointed homage to Pound's “In a Station of the Metro.” This earlier explicit attempt to write under the constraints of Pound's prescriptive doctrine is surprisingly unencumbered by the type of content superfluous to the Image that fills out her later “birch” poem:

The leaves of the birch tree
Quiver,
And it is as if lithe woman feet
Were tapping a dance rhythm
To the whispers of draperies. (Roberts, “Twilight” 41)

It is close—but it is not pure Poundian Imagism. The dual images that construct the metaphor pathetically cling to each other with syntactic linking. Had Roberts been trying to write the next “In a Station of the Metro,” she would have done what Joseph Frank, in his influential essay “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” (1945), attributes to Pound: “undermine the inherent consecutiveness of language, frustrating the reader's normal expectation of a sequence and forcing him to perceive the elements of the poem as juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time” (227). In simply removing the syntactical linkage, the poem suddenly attains a startling vitality:

The leaves of the birch tree

Quiver;
 Lithe woman feet
 Tap a dance rhythm
 To the whispers of draperies.

The intensity of each image becomes more striking, and the intensity of their relation is heightened with synergistic insistence not present in the original poem.

Along with “The Sun and a Birch Tree,” “The Dark” and “Number Song” comprise the core of *Under the Tree* that most explicitly showcases an indebtedness to Pound and his meditations on form. These poems, written in 1921 and intended for a poetic project under the tentative title “Interlude,” were instead added in to the revised and enlarged version of *Under the Tree*, published eight years after the original edition. In their original versions they were two parts of a single poem titled “Number Songs,” and Roberts always stressed, as Keller notes, “the importance of keeping them together as a unit, as mirror images of each other” (354). They also reflected a distinct mathematical bent in Roberts' conception of her art. She considered some of her symbols, like the fox in “Fox Hunt” (drafted in early 1921, revised several times in order to make the fox more “organic” [Letter to Maurice Lesemann, 4 March 1921; qtd. in Keller 351], and published in its final form in *Song in the Meadow*) to be “algebraic” rather than “literary” (qtd. in Keller 354). Roberts seems to have been contemplating the essential and unique components to each art or discipline, which could have easily been spurred by Pound's 1914 essay on the “Vortex” in the first issue of *BLAST*. In Pound's estimation, it is the “IMAGE” that belongs solely to poetry, is its “primary pigment,” and “the vorticist relies on this alone” (“Vortex” 153). Where Pound was a positivist, though (he later relaxed his demands and expanded his definition to include *melopoeia*, *phanopoeia*, and *logopoeia*), Roberts was an opportunist. She saw that each art's “primary pigment” served its artist in the same way: they were “all visible, concrete things denoting invisible, abstract entities” (Keller 354), which she

described as “some undefined mass or fund or pattern—absolute and without flaw” (Letter to Janet Lewis, 15 Jan. 1922; qtd. in Keller 354). (“We go into the unseen by way of the visible, into the unknown by way of the known, into Nous by way of the flesh and the dust” [qtd. in Keller 201].) The poem, manifesting as an achieved clarity of relation, was both a representation of the total pattern and an integral link in the pattern's chain—“Something that radiates Something” (qtd. in Keller 354).

What all of these meditations on relation and patterns centered on was the contemplation of Form, the Golden Idol of Modernism. Roberts had claimed that the way her poems always started was through “a felt—pattern” (Letter to Janet Lewis, 22 July 1922; qtd. in Keller 211) and that “the beginning of a work is the beginning of a state of mind, a sense of impending form, of crystalizing [sic] design” (Letter to Grant C. Knight, 11 June 1930; qtd. in Spears 220). We find the same instance in Pound's account of the provenance of “In a Station of the Metro.” Having experienced a quasi-spiritual vision of beauty at a Paris metro stop and continuously struggling to articulate what it had meant to him, he “found, suddenly, the expression. I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation...not in speech, but in little splotches of colour. It was just that—a 'pattern,' or hardly a pattern, if by 'pattern' you mean something with a 'repeat' in it. But it was a word, the beginning, for me, of a language in colour” (Pound, “Vorticism” n.p.). In her notes, Roberts claimed that “the Highest Beauty and the deepest emotions pertain to the beauty of form—pattern—the little order that we know and sense in the chaos of the universe, know less and sense more, through the high and unconscious moments of faith” (qtd. in Keller 304). She thought that apprehending (and possibly recreating) this beauty of form was “peculiarly rich in the body of the artist,” but she likewise saw the gift of “comprehension of pure form” in “very lowly people” and children, whose instincts demand “that things, lines, masses of matter, be placed in certain relations to give satisfaction or

These pieces are living in form,
 Their moves break and reform the pattern:
 Luminous green from the rooks,
 Clashing with “x's” of queens,
 Looped with the knight-leaps.
 “Y” pawns, cleaving, embanking,
 Whirl, centripetal, mate, King down in the vortex:
 Clash, leaping of bands, straight strips of hard colour,
 Blocked lights working in, escapes, renewing of contes (19)

Poetry to Pound, one could say, was no longer about “direct treatment of the 'thing'” (“A Retrospect” 95), but rather something like a “direct processing of action” or “activity,” a “vital infusion of the process.” Levenson suggests that the poem's “governing conceit is to make sensuous the abstract relations of the game” (129), and we may carry that over to a wider context in which poetry's singlemost aim becomes simply to “make sensuous [any] abstract relations.” The real transition, then, between Imagism and Vorticism, became a matter of revitalizing or reinvigorating the flux of Impressionism rather than freezing it in the frame of phenomenal relations.

“The Dark” concerns “six little houses upon the hill / And when it is night, / There are six little windows with light” (*UTT* 54). The lights gradually go out one by one until just one remains. The second half of the poem hangs in the nighttime air with suspense so thick it makes the darkness even darker. But rather than providing a deeper contrast for the light to shine through, this potential beacon of hope is obscured by the chilling suspicion of Death in the mysterious dark: “Somebody sings three words, just three, / And five cool shivers go over the tree, / And a shiver goes over me” (*Ibid.* 55). The five “shivers” that shake the tree correspond to the extinguished lights in the houses, and the final shiver that shakes the little girl seems like a forewarning of her own eventual fate. Suddenly, like a divine messenger (or perhaps an angel of death), “A night fly comes with powdery wings / That beat on my face—it's a moth that brings // A feel of dust . . .” (*Ibid.* 55). One is reminded that “All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and

all turn to dust again” (*King James Version*, Eccl. 3.20). Finally: “. . . and then a bright / Quick moment comes to the one little light. // But it flickers out and then it is still, / And nothing is left upon the hill” (*UTT* 55).

The moth prefigures “The Hens,” when “nothing answered anything” (*UTT* 83), and the poem functions as a classic rendering of *memento mori*. But what is most impressive is the suggestion of form, or perhaps more so the assertion of pure form in lieu of the mystical extinguishing of content. Working titles for “The Dark” included “ $X - X = \text{Nothing}$ ” and “ $X - X = 0$,” and in one version, Roberts drew a downward-pointing arrow alongside the text to illustrate “how the lights go *down* into the nothingness of darkness” (Keller 354-355). The most significant piece of the equation, though, is not the value of its solution, but the process of the operation. The impression the poem leaves the reader with is not “nothing,” but rather that “everything has been taken away.” Although the final stanzas come close to approximating a Poundian Image, the total effect of the poem suggests that Roberts was toying around with ideas of the Vortex. The images throughout the poem—the six lights going out one by one, the singing katydids, the chirping frogs, the barking dog, the owl, the three disembodied sung words, the five shivers in the tree, the little girl's shiver, the moth's wings on her face and the feel of dust, and that last flicker of light—do not exist in frozen fullness at any given time or in relation to any given point, but rather rush through the form of the poem like a blustery wind. When the poem is complete, all we are left with is the empty form, faint traces of a simple pattern (-1 -1 -1 . . .).

“Number Song” presents the same phenomenon:

Sixteen pigeons flew over the spire
Of the church, and as they went higher and higher

They gathered in to be twelve, and ten,
And then they were seven, and then,

When I saw them last they were four—

Wings going and then nothing more. (*UTT* 56)

The church reinforces the spiritual dimension of the girl's observation, and the poem is an obvious foil of optimism and spiritual transcendence to the preceding portrait. Ecclesiastes is evoked once again: "Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?" (*KJV*, Eccl. 3.21) The girl is left in "The Dark" in the previous poem, out of the light of God's grace, relegated to the position of the beasts. Here, though, she is not only in the light, but in the light of the church. The enjambment of "four— / Wings," recalls the bodiless wings from "In My Pillow" ("I saw some wings, as many as four, / They were all blue wings and nothing else more. // Without any head and without any feet, / Just blue wings flying over a street") (*UTT* 4). to blur the lines between fact and fiction, and we get a sense that she longs to verify her soul through the vision of the birds just as she longed to verify her dreams in the fluff of her pillow—"trying to make clear obscure relations in the worlds and systems of things and ideas" (qtd. in Keller 201).

Working titles for "Number Song" included "But the Sky Is Bottomless," "But Something Goes Away into the Sky," and "But the Sky Is Profound," and in one draft she drew an upward-pointing arrow to show "how the birds go *up* into the bottomless nothingness of the light" (Keller 355). Like in "The Dark," we are not left with a feeling of "nothing," but rather the sense that "everything has been taken up." In a September 1922 letter to Janet Lewis, Roberts notes that the birds lifting off in perfect formation revealed to her "the sacred entity of form" and verified that "substance and form are one" (qtd. in Keller 304-305). The pattern of the birds ascending to the sky (+1 +1 +1 . . .) or leaving the ground (-1 -1 -1 . . .), this process of flux, *is* the poem itself, is not something auxiliary. The only appropriate way to leave these poems is to invoke Rosamond Milner. Although her object of regard was *A Buried Treasure*, she offers a perfect summation of Miss Roberts' artistic sensibility astutely centered on her devotion to, and

proficiency in, form:

She has the poet's unity with form . . . She seems to feel idea as if it were of the same substance as flesh, or simply an extension of that substance. She is a vehicle of the universal rhythm, beginning with Terra, the earth, accelerating into men and women, on into pure idea, but always the same rhythm. So she makes patterns beautiful in every part . . . They are the creative work of a great artist, true symbols. [*Under the Tree*] is a miracle of design, and out of it, as out of the great design all art reflects, thrusts the strange sharp flower of beauty, whose roots are hidden. (Milner 31)

The Poundian core of *Under the Tree* (“The Dark,” “Number Song,” “The Sun and a Birch Tree”) represents a special and explicit devotion to the specific and developing Doctrine of the Image. *Under the Tree* taken as a whole, however, cannot deny its relation to the tradition as meeting holistically the program set up by Impressionism (which asks for much less than Pound does) while failing to measure up completely to the prescriptive, collective standards of Imagism. But we will attribute the Modernist dimension of Roberts' poetry to the influence of Pound and his Imagist school: because Pound had the ability to *inspire* in ways that Ford simply *didn't*—and this because he wrote doctrines out like manifestoes, because he infused matters regarding the current state of poetry and all of his critical judgments with a histrionic gravity, because he was a bombastic force on the literary scene in every capacity. We will say *Under the Tree* reflects a thorough understanding and steadfast devotion to the Imagist program because Roberts was indeed holding her poetry to its standards, and not those of Impressionism, even if they seek to achieve similar effects by similar means, and even if she did (could) not always meet all of Imagism's criteria all of the time, in every single poem.

I have already illustrated some of the ways in which Roberts' Credo reflects an Imagist influence, but there are a few more crucial instances that require explanation if we are to begin to understand how Imagism truly affected her general poetic mode. Consider her thoughts on “proportion,” which, upon unpacking their implications, ultimately signify an allegiance with

Imagism as it differentiates itself from Symbolism:

Apparent proportions, those visible to the eye, are real for purposes of beauty and art. Art moves among the living, the impermanent, the apparent things. Constructive proportions—that is mathematical and local proportions, may be agreeable to the mind where they are perceived, but they belong to the mind-within-itself and not the mind moving through the world. They are abstractions. Fixity is their characteristic. They are categories and each one is like every other one. But art speaks with gentler words than these. (qtd. in Keller 201)

Roberts seems to have been inspired by John Ruskin, and we might turn to *Modern Painters* (Vol. 2, 1846) for a better sense of her jargon: “In Unity of Sequence, the effect of variety is best exemplified by the melodies of music, wherein, by the differences of the notes, they are connected with each other in certain pleasant relations. This connection, taking place in quantities [or masses], is Proportion” (“Of Unity” 55). Simply put, “Proportion” is relation. For Ruskin, proportion is “*Apparent* when it takes place between quantities [or masses] for the sake of connection only, without any ultimate object or casual necessity; and *Constructive*, when it has reference to some function to be discharged by the quantities depending on their proportion” (Ibid. 55). He sees the former as “lying at the root of most of our impressions of the beautiful” (Ibid. 55). Imagism, which relies heavily on “striking visual metaphors” (Levenson 129) (put into relation by way of juxtaposition) deals in “apparent proportions” in that the Image is allowed to speak for itself. It is not a means to an end, like the Symbols evoked by the *fin-de-siècle* French school. What the Symbolists attempted to tap into was indeed a world fixed in abstraction, and despite the fact that the raw materials of their poetry reflect the “mind moving through the world,” their translation of this sense-data engages the “mind-within-itself.”

Although Roberts evokes those masters of evocation in *Under the Tree* (thus honoring the roots of the active tradition she was actively trying to participate in) by making a principal theme out of the relation between reality, dreams, and the imagination, it seems fairly obvious that her poetry doesn't largely operate the same way the Symbolists' does, and fairly obvious that this was

a conscious decision.

Ruskin's definition of proportion lends itself to the Imagist (and general Modernist) suggestion “regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (Pound, “A Retrospect” 95). The complex relation between the notes that make up a musical phrase in classical music, the way they simultaneously lock into and dance freely above the insistent pulse of the tempo and the steady bars of the metered measures, signifies a liberation of expression sought after by the poet with equal fervor. The maxim of “melody over metronome” combats the monotony that might wear a poem down into a vapid hypnotic trance, forcing the reader's mind into an abstract process and his attention into abstracting recognition. Although Roberts boasts a highly trained ear for subtle rhythmic cadences, her verse prefers traditional forms and conventional meters. How can we account for this in light of the Imagist approach to rhythm, and more generally, form? Is it simply an aspect of her poetry that operates in spite of these evolving notions of poetry, or does her poetry yet manage to maintain a nuanced approach?

It is a critically slighted fact that Pound did not advocate *vers libre* with the same ferocity that the “modern” poets did. And considering his profound fascination with and devotion to the literary tradition (the “it” in his maxim “make it new” is not “poetry” as a whole, but rather “the old” in poetry that has been worn out—a crucial distinction), it naturally follows that his stance on *vers libre* prioritizes the needs of the poem over the poet's desire to simply feel unencumbered: “I think one should write *vers libre* only when one 'must,' that is to say, only when the 'thing' builds up to a rhythm more beautiful than that of set metres, or more real, more a part of the emotion of the 'thing,' more germane, intimate, interpretive than the measure of regular accentual verse” (Pound, “A Retrospect” 108). What he is actually advocating is an “absolute rhythm,' a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade

of emotion to be expressed” (Ibid. 103). Roberts claims in her Credo that she has “tried for organic rhythms, intrinsic with the images” (qtd. in Keller 202). The images she uses are culled from childhood experience, specifically the experience of a child growing up in rural Kentucky. They may occasionally present “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (Pound, “A Retrospect” 96), but it cannot be stressed enough that the child's temperament is attuned to a different caliber and shade of experience than the adult of Blakean “experience.”

Neither the intellectual nor the emotional faculties of the little girl in *Under the Tree* have been fully cultivated; the volume presents an early phase in her progression into experience. The physical matter that grabs her attention, the imagery, the rhythm, the cadences, the language, the form, the contingent stand-in subtlety of rhetoric compensating for the poet's protest of persuasion, the hesitant logic, the timbre of emotion, the general restraint of the poems all reflect this. It is as “organic” a poetry that can be rendered out of the substance that shapes and defines it, preserved in its elementary divinations, enamored with the “small things,” engaged completely in the wonders of the world beyond the self, untouched by the mature intellect, uninhibited by time as a social construct, still largely ignorant and resilient to the pressures of moral authority enforced by major cultural institutions. It is not unaffected by culture, though. Every aspect of Roberts' poetry is, in a very distinct and special way, endowed with the Southern temperament, inflamed with the predilections, personality, and passions of her local, rural Kentucky.

Where Pound pulls from the antique East and the spectral European metropolis, and where H.D. and Richard Aldington pull from Classical Greece, Roberts showcases her intimate sense of place and pulls from familiar terrain. *Under the Tree* does not evoke some nondescript Edenic realm of childhood or a faerie-ridden dreamscape superimposed over the natural realm, nor does it suggest the prudish, austere England—New, “Old,” or the spirit of—that so much

“children's” poetry seems to be drawn out of. And her Kentucky is neither provincial nor stunted; it reflects a living tradition that suffuses its inhabitants with a dignified humility, a tenacious observance of folklore, a firm commitment to community, and an invaluable regard for communion. The “organic rhythms” that Roberts claims drive *Under the Tree* are indeed far from what one expects *vers libre* to read like, but the apparent conventions that the verse nestles so comfortably into are not implemented primarily out of some desire to conform to tradition—at least not the poetic tradition. Roberts had confessed to Glenway Wescott that she is “still a musician deeply within,” having “the old ballads 'in the marrow of my bones and in my flesh” (qtd. in Slavick 769, 756). If we cannot attribute the same musicality that Pound and his compatriots sought to evoke in their verse, we can at least acknowledge the fact that *Under the Tree* bears the distinct musical watermark of the folksong tradition.

The key word is “organic.” Throughout her entire career, in both poetry and prose, Roberts always managed to maintain this distinction. It is likewise the determining factor that separates the “moderns” from the Modernists. The “organic” approach to poetry prioritizes the needs of the poem before the fancies of the poet; it demands from the poet the ability to utilize his uniquely cultivated sensibility as an osmotic membrane through which experience is both sensuously apprehended and directly translated into concrete form that maintains the intimacy of the experience, and without any cerebral recalibrating or pretentious enhancements. It is under these conditions that Roberts is able to evoke the very quintessence of childhood in her poetry. The rhythms of *Under the Tree* are “organic” because they maintain (they do not disrupt) the sensuous thirst and wonder, the emotional vitality, the intellectual fragility, and the unrestricted imagination of youth in the margins of lived experience and the culture of a living tradition.

In her Credo, Roberts claims to have “discarded all poetic fancies and 'pathetic fallacies' and have kept close to my own experience and to the truth of American life as we live it here in

Kentucky” (qtd. in Keller 202). One of the defining truths of rural Kentucky is the centrality of folksong in the daily lives of its local population, helping foster communion, vitalize the community, and preserve the folk tradition—all in the face of the depersonalizing ideal of “Progress.” Roberts had written in a letter to Wescott (15 August 1921) that it was there, in those homegrown and homespun ballads, that “the deep currents of our life flow” (qtd. in Keller 188). In their preface to *Our Singing Country* (1941), John and Alan Lomax note that one does not find in these “folk” who comprise the spirit of the tradition

an overwhelming desire to forget themselves and everything that reminds them of their everyday life. The American singer has been concerned with themes close to his everyday experience . . . His songs have been strongly rooted in his life and have functioned there as enzymes to assist in the digestion of hardship, solitude, violence, hunger, and the honest comradeship of democracy. (xxv)

For the child in *Under the Tree*, these songs, as integral an element of the environment as anything of nature, functions as an enzyme to assist in the processing of her progress from innocence into experience. Much of children's poetry uses similar traditional forms, metrical conventions, rhythmic consistency, simple and often repetitive diction, syntax and sound, and the penchant for rhyme as we find in Robert's volume for the obvious reason: modest verse works best on immature minds. A poem will not appeal to a child if she cannot comprehend it, if she cannot derive any amusement or sense of security from the play of language, if it does not stimulate the senses or the imagination in any way.

We can attribute the conventional dimensions of *Under the Tree* to folksong because that is precisely how they function. Although they bear distinct philosophical probings and psychological nuances unique to the little girl, the poems ultimately convey a common journey and a shared experience with all children growing up in the conditions Roberts has chosen to contextualize this unraveling state of innocence in. Those general contours of sense and shades of spirit portrayed, however, are cut from the same cloth, fixed in the same pattern as the

experiences of all children, regardless of social or cultural conditions. That is, at their very core, the poems comprise a glimpse at the universal fact of childhood: innocence always yields to experience. Roberts gives us poems that any child can read, but more importantly, she gives us songs that any child can sing, for in singing the spirit rises out of the body and into the world, and in those moments of transcendent suspension, the singing subject draws in spiritual emanations from all the rest of this weary world and finds herself a piece of something greater than herself before she inevitably returns to herself. The poems of *Under the Tree* seem heavy with this phenomenon, seem almost proverbial (although they eschew moral prescriptions). For the little girl who proceeds from finding herself lost in the sky for the first time to learning from a plain-draped old hen that life cannot provide the truth to all of its mysteries, though, these distinct rhythms that have been frozen into form become, in their perpetual reenactments in the mind that can be felt on the tip of the tongue, the musical accompaniment to her further progression into experience. The poems are essentially mnemonic devices that stimulate reflection and allow for growth; they continually reenact revelation and work it into the patterns of that ongoing experience.

VI. (New) Songs of Innocence and Experience, or Singing Beyond the Genius of
Under the Tree: High Modernist “Wholeness” and Unity / Continuity
 in *Song in the Meadow*

Song in the Meadow (1940), Roberts' second and final (substantial) volume of poetry, reveals the fruits of those further probings that constitute experience.⁴³ To some extent the volume is a conglomerate reconstituted into a new, holistic form from a handful of abandoned and unfinished projects, and some of the poems date as far back as 1921. After *Under the Tree* had been finished and the poems rigorously ordered, Roberts began considering ways to bring the little girl's experience forward. First there would be an “Interlude”⁴⁴ that would “look upon the child of the first book” and be something like a “chorus” to it (Letter to Maurice Lesemann, 12 Jan. 1921; qtd. in Keller 188). The second project would be a sequel to *Under the Tree*, in which an older narrator is taken “over into a wider experience of life. I want to finish saying what I have to say with clarity and restraint and with hard, clear, naïve sayings” (Ibid.; qtd. in Keller 188).

Then there were several attempts to draft a long narrative poem concerning Daniel Boone, Kentucky's prized folk hero. “By the Fireside,” “very strange but strangely moving” as Keller appraises it, fused ancient myth with local legend to tell the story of Cinderella's rescue from her evil stepsisters by a rather curiously transformed Boone, no longer the historical figure from folklore, but rather a shape-shifting demi-god forged out of Ojibway legend (Janet Lewis'

43 A good portion of this section has been adapted or lifted directly from an essay of mine titled “Singing *Song in the Meadow*” and included in the Elizabeth Madox Roberts society publication *Keenly Aware of the Ceremonies of Place: Essays on Elizabeth Madox Roberts* (Eds. H. R. Stoneback, Matthew Nickel & Jessica M. Nickel; 2017). It is a culmination of exploratory (and increasingly cogent) meditations on the complex and distinctly Modernist dimensions of Roberts' final volume of poetry as they were presented at various Roberts conferences and panels, and was intended to be expanded upon and integrated into the wider context of this thesis.

44 Keller notes that Roberts “may have taken the title from the English morality plays of the medieval period. Elements of these 'interludes,' as the old plays were sometimes called, survived in Shakespearean drama as occasions for song-and-dance numbers and other brief entertainments inserted for comic relief or so that actors could show off special talents. She would have studied all this in her Shakespeare courses [at the University of Chicago]” (N61n7).

influence) and Greek myth, a “Manibozho, Eros-like figure” that is “part hero, part trickster” and “neither benign nor demonic,” but rather simply “a life force” (Keller 188, N62n14).⁴⁵ (Roberts lifted *Song in the Meadow's* “Cinderella's Song” and “Boone Alone in Kentuck” from this project.) Boone remained a subject of fascination for Roberts, as evident in *The Great Meadow*, and she later attempted to write an epic poem with Boone playing a more traditional role and placed in the company of his “Long Hunters.” (“When Daniel Was a Herdboy” and “When Daniel Was a Blacksmith” were most likely pulled from this project.) While her first attempt was largely incomprehensible without a working knowledge of Ojibway legend, this second attempt (if *Song in the Meadow* is any accurate measure of her refined capabilities as a poet) seems to have had the potential to enact a culmination of poetic achievement within the poet's (admittedly sparse) corpus. The fragments contain such thematic portrayals of Boone as an “apostle to chaos” and “singing alone in the wilderness,” and Roberts had notes linking the Kentucky legend to fellow historical giants Thomas Jefferson and James John Audubon (qtd. in Nickel, “Kentucky” ii-iii). Slavick claims that these pieces primarily suggest “man reaching into the chaos of the wilderness to give form to it” (Ibid. ii)—an aspiration that Roberts sought to make manifest in some of her most enduring work, and one that she often achieved organically and with distinction.

Song in the Meadow does not read as though it was pieced together from fragments, though. Like *Under the Tree*, it maintains concrete cohesion and organic unity while it documents a clear progression through experience, even in its expansion to account for an entire life—from innocence into experience, through the challenges of modernity into a rectifying and total vision of order, through suffering and into redemption. Surprisingly, though, it did not fare

45 Janet Lewis' Ojibway poems can be found in *The Indians in the Woods*, first published by Monroe Wheeler as the first installment of his “Manikin” series. A handful of these poems were republished in the January 1923 (21.4) issue of *Poetry* (pp. 190-192). According to Lewis, Manibozho is “protean and, like the spirit of life, takes all forms and all moods” (190).

nearly as well with the critics as *Under the Tree* did. Of the book-length studies, Campbell and Foster's gives it the most attention (about eleven pages, which seems fairly generous for a study on an "American Novelist"), although they conclude that the earlier volume "is very likely the better of the two" (253): "More is attempted" in *Song in the Meadow*, but "there are occasional failures, which is certainly not true of *Under the Tree*" (261). McDowell is slightly more generous, although he claims the poems lack a certain distinction in light of other contemporaneous verse and are eclipsed even by Roberts' own achievements in prose: "Her verse, for the most part, lacks the incisiveness and originality of the best modern poetry and of the style of her best novels" (32). The reviews mostly follow suit. A pleasant exception is Peter Monro Jack's write-up for the *New York Times* (5 May 1940), which is perhaps the least concerned with the earlier volume *and* the most insightful in regards to the fundamental structure and sense of the latter. Until quite recently, his unrelenting praise stood supremely alone in (the admittedly few) appraisals of the volume's merit, and it seems appropriate to momentarily revive his convictions before diving headfirst into the current appraisal:

What we have is a complete poetic character. It is not a novelist, not even a poetic novelist, writing occasional verse: it is a poet writing a natural idiom, fresh and gay and assured of itself, delighting in the variety of rhyme and rhythm, creating its own special world of imaginative reality. Novelists have a hard time saving their poetry from the pigeon-holing critics, but it seems quite natural now, at least to this reader, to discuss Miss Roberts . . . independently as a poet. (98)

Part of the reason, I think, that *Song in the Meadow* went underappreciated upon its publication hinges on the fact that Roberts had a reputation as an occasional "children's" poet and a prolific "poetic" prose-writer who primarily tackled the "fallen" realm of "experience" in her novels and stories. Many of the critics, even those who wrote comprehensive studies, were unable to comprehend the volume as a part of the writer's own progression through experience. In *Song in the Meadow*, Roberts had created a sort of companion piece to her novels, a sort of

Chorus to her epic legacy in prose, just as the second collection was a natural extension of *Under the Tree*. In its concise, precise, direct, and concrete handling of the major themes that Roberts concerned herself with during her stint in prose, it might even be constructive to read the volume as a sort of scripture that the novels expand upon in the exegetical mode. Perhaps Roberts conceived of the work as a sort of swan song that sought to bring all of her own divine Creation before her mind with a richer immediacy, so that mind would turn about itself and she would be able to appraise the magic of her own faculties as a distanced observer, and perhaps even affirm her own gold thread in the pattern. Perhaps in her weaving the string of poems devoted to the familiar protagonists of *The Time of Man* (the dream-hazy “Ellen Chesser's Dream of Italy”), *The Great Meadow* (the philosophical “Diony in Albemarle”), and *A Buried Treasure* (the comedic “Philly in the Kitchen”) into the fabric of the volume, she was able to begin developing her faculties to conceive of the world as cut from the same cloth, uninhibited by spatial and temporal constraints and allowing for a vision of wholeness.

This was, after all, one of the primary ambitions, if not the fundamental aim, of the High Modernists. Spender conceives of it as a matter of history and tradition, a “confrontation of the past with present” (80). He elaborates:

The feeling that the modern world, even if its values are fragmented, nevertheless shares a fate that in being modern is whole, is important. It results doubtless from contrasting the European past, as consisting of many different traditions, and the present, as an all-embracing fatality which is progress. The present it looked upon as knowledge, and the results of true knowledge that has overtaken the whole of civilization and has broken the line of tradition with the past. This situation can therefore only be apprehended as a whole, as tragedy or overwhelming disaster, unless indeed it were possible to consider it optimistically. (Ibid. 80)

Without recognizing that the present is a moment dislodged from an entire duration, without conceiving of the “modern” predicament as a great schism that has generated two distinct and discordant realms, without realizing that dissociation will not mend itself naturally, that

“progress” does not push forward but pushes apart, and that it fuels only more of the same, without conceding to the fact that, out of everything that stands stark against the sky as a testament to man's competency in engineering his dominion over nature and everything that pushes to pry open every last molecule of mystery, none of it can reclaim what has gotten it to that point, without forcing oneself to *feel* the reality of this scandal, and not merely trick one's mind into believing it—there can be no hope for the rectification of a moral and spiritual center.

The transition from the early phase of Modernism into the High Modernist phase was more of a slow overturning crescendo than an initiation, more of an abject accumulation of private desperation than a caucus brought together to draft and sign off on some contractual initiative. Heavyweights Eliot and Pound had realized that their early poetry was too aesthetically motivated, too enamored by the prospect of wringing minor revelations out of immediately manifested phenomena and rendering them with exactitude. Eliot's “Preludes” and Pound's “Images” signaled a changing of the guard in the contemporary literary scene, but they tackled the problem of dissociation one fragment at a time. What defines High Modernism is not simply the aggrandizement of ambition or the transition of the Image from total doctrine to technical device, but the reintegration of morality into the texture of the poetry (specifically an intellectual morality for Pound and Eliot). We could have seen Pound's critical proselytizing eventually seeping into his verse from a mile away, but Eliot had always maintained proper (or perhaps prudish) distinctions between his critical persona and his poetic one (even if the early poetry does feel a bit too intellectualized at times). High Modernism signaled a reversal of attitude: the only way to combat the fragmentation of values (growing only more incoherent) was to reconstruct it out of a personal vision of order. To obscure this personal vision (if it is even indeed possible) in the fabric of the poem would defeat the purpose entirely, would perhaps subside into the pure idiosyncrasies of Symbolism.

The assumption, or perhaps more so that burning *hope*, that writers like Eliot and Pound predicated their poetic programs on is one that presupposes the idea of an “art which will transform reality into *shared inner life*” (Spender 86). This is essentially a blending of Imagist and Symbolist doctrine into a new method of sensuous apprehension and translation into form. As Spender defines it, “it is the idea that the images of the materialist modern world can be 'interpreted', made to become symbols of inner life where they are reconciled with the older things symbolized by words like 'jug', 'mountain', 'star', 'cross'” (86). The means of achieving this required an expanded arsenal of poetics—a greater repertoire of technique and a wider context for admissible or appropriate content. What this amounted to was the initiation of a “revolutionary concept of tradition,” a sort of *tradition libre* that liberated the poet from the obligations of his distinct role in literary history and the regulations imposed by whichever literary current carried him. The penchant for stigmatization was loosened; in its place was a new freedom of choice for the poet “to view the whole significant past of art at all times and in all places as an available tradition out of which modern forms and style,” as well as a personal vision of order, “might derive” (Ibid. 96).

In the examples of Eliot and Pound we find two distinct methods or modes that use the materials of a total tradition to establish new definitions of order and revitalize (or bring into first vitality) the past in the hopes that it can be reintegrated into the collective spirit of the present—a new era of “making it new.” Eliot's method in *The Waste Land* is one of unity, of unifying. His disembodied polyvocal and allusive literary “fragments” function simultaneously through juxtaposition and reconstructive assembly to create a cross-stitch of culture, a mosaic of meaning. They build up into a disorienting blend of East (the Buddha's Fire Sermon) and West (Saint Augustine's *Confessions*) to allow the narrator to voice his desperation—“Burning burning burning burning / O Lord Thou pluckest me out / O Lord Thou pluckest // burning” (*The Waste*

Land 46)—before yielding to the austere decree of “What the Thunder Said,” in which the wisdom of the *Upanishads* is bestowed in the simple directive of “give, sympathise, [maintain] control” (“Notes on the Waste Land” 54). The poem ends with the formal closure of spiritual conviction in the *Upanishads*’ “Shantih shantih shantih” (*The Waste Land* 50)—“the Peace which passeth understanding” (“Notes on the Waste Land” 55). The fisherman has managed to put the “arid plane behind [him]”; he has “shored” the “fragments” “against [his] ruins” (*The Waste Land* 50), has found a way to make them cohere and, consequently, validated the past as a means of rectifying the present. The epiphany is handled with humility, but the optimism is palpable.

Pound's method, on the other hand, as R. P. Blackmur has argued, is one of continuity:

The Cantos are not complex, they are complicated; they are not arrayed by logic or driven by pursuing emotion, they are connected because they follow one another, are set side by side, and because an anecdote, an allusion, or a sentence, begun in one Canto may be continued in another and may never be completed at all; and as for a theme to be realised, they seem to have only, like “Mauberley,” the general sense of continuity—not unity—which may arise in the mind when read seriatim. The Cantos are what Mr. Pound himself called them in a passage now excised from the canon, a rag-bag. (“Masks of Ezra Pound” 45)

Where Eliot accumulates, Pound extends; where Eliot locks up, Pound looks back. Pound seeks to affirm the thread in a pattern, Eliot seeks to affirm the pattern itself. Both enact a distinct form, and the pressures that shape the substance of the poetry likewise impress, with the same scheme of distribution, upon the apprehending mind of the reader—a formal enactment of sympathetic magic.

Whereas *Under the Tree* leaves us with the dauntingly enduring image of “nothing answered anything” (*UTT* 83), *Song in the Meadow* provides an answer. Although this answer comes too long after the initial blooming of High Modernism to consider her voice among the harmony, the volume reflects that, like Eliot and Pound, she aspired to do something more in her poetry—and largely by their methods. We might consider *Song in the Meadow*, then, as a second

flowering of High Modernism, filtered through the sensibility of a writer who felt both the pressures of modernity and the gravity of her literary masters' formal responses to the “modern” predicament. *Song in the Meadow* might, likewise, be considered a natural extension of *Jingling in the Wind*. Both works enact, simultaneously, the modes of formal ordering of experience that Eliot and Pound worked out to their natural ends of pure, cogent revelation. We find Eliot's “unity” in the vision of the spider weaving her web, and we sense Pound's “continuity” when Jeremy traces the ideal of Romance down to its roots and back up through its branches. *Song in the Meadow* enacts the same rituals, but the vision contained in the heart of the volume (“Conversations beside a Stream”) and set into motion in the closing section (“Legends”) testifies to the care and conviction of a real mind (even if it is in an imaginary meadow) forging necessary order; it does not sacrifice its vigor or vitality to validate of the security of comic conventions.

Against *Under the Tree*, *Song in the Meadow* presents a great leap in maturity, exuding the confidence in style and substance necessary for (disciplined) experimentation while retaining an overall sense of what made the first volume so appealing. Even the titles suggest development. Whereas the former paints a portrait of a lazy summer afternoon of shade and daydreams, the latter seems more suited for an enterprise of activity. And we find this activity: *Song in the Meadow* sings boldly beyond the genius of the meadow, field and farmland where *Under the Tree* sings to itself. As a whole, the volume reads as a big and beautiful declaration of man's dirt-born rise through melody and into harmony, a symphony of earth and earth-child greater than the sum of its parts. Miss Roberts' “song in the meadow” is not just *any* song in *any* meadow. It is both *her* song—and there is great importance in her feeling so inclined to sing it—and *everyone's* song, in *every* meadow. The pervasive musicality of the collection, in style, sense, and substance gradually makes apparent the underlying narrative and unifying attitudes of her

personae. It likewise holds a slow-burning glow to draw all outliers towards its singing center. Even in her most experimental verse, she is able to maintain a voice of authenticity and sincerity that gives the whole reading experience a feeling of sanctuary. Stripped to its emotional core, *Song in the Meadow* is an invitation to communion, made more inviting by presence of song.

It is difficult, though, to ascertain just how these poems may register to the reader who is not approaching them with any degree of lived experience participating within the folk music tradition, or any musical tradition comparable in its open invitation to a shared sacramental experience, such as that of the singing church. There is definitely something to be felt beyond the scholarly satisfaction of identifying an allusion from, say, Stephen Foster's songbook or the dusty pages of English balladry. It is not an experience that can be emulated by critical theatrics, however precise or articulate. Although I cannot provide the evidence, I can comfortably assert that many of the commentators who find fault with *Song in the Meadow* lack this crucial understanding of the caliber of emotion that sustains that singing, shared sacrament and allows for the ritualized knowledge of communion. This must be the reason why "Conversations beside a Stream," the clear (and merited) heart of the volume, pieced together from the fragments of nearly forty songs, is considered on multiple accounts to be one of the weakest poems—or else the volume's greatest failure. Although the musical foundation of *Song in the Meadow* is not rooted in the longstanding folk tradition of protest songs, the experience of reading the volume is nevertheless somewhat commensurate. Above whatever injustices are being committed (social and political for most, but for Roberts, spiritual as well), a like-minded collective gathers to voice dissent, but more importantly, to sing and inspire hope.

Although we, as listeners as much as readers, may hear our own voices blending into the choir, what Miss Roberts has coordinated is a concert corralled in her native Kentucky. She wastes no time in divulging to the audience what her intentions are. The dedication of the work,

a poem bearing the title “Sonnet of Jack,” extends a grand invitation to the world orchestrated within. Enunciating with that tender, yet austere tone of an expecting mother, she gives this imminent child her blessing as she welcomes him into new life. The poem begins: “I give you day, our day, any day, for entering / Man's time on the earth, his world, for cutting aslant through his track” (*SITM* 5). Because the poem stands as the volume's dedication, we may assume that “you” at least partially refers to *us*, the readers, who, in opening the pages of the book, have formally RSVP'd as guests to her invitation into the concerns that gradually develop throughout the progression of experience enacted in the poems' unraveling. Roberts seeks to stimulate the reader's sympathetic capacity; she wants to both share her intimate knowledge of her local world and cultivate her guests' propensity for forging their own intimate relations. The invitation is motivated as much by the spirit of hospitality as it is the didactic opportunity offered by the rural patterns of living as a model of experience. Although she considers the mind of the factory worker to be “prosperous, abundant, commercial, expedient,” the mind of the farmer is one “freer, lonelier, less acute perhaps, [but] more dreaming and more wise” (qtd. in Slavick 768). She clarifies: “The agricultural people are close to their mortality. They touch it daily and finger it with slow deliberate hands. Whatever rises above mortality or frees itself from the earth escapes with greater ease and more swift flight by reason of their identity with the earth” (Ibid. 768). In this appraisal lies justification for the substance that comprises the volume to sustain conversations turning about the “modern” predicament “I believe then, that for the uses of this tragic muse, images can continually be drawn from some region close to the soil” (Ibid. 768).

In this poetic intonation of her native soil, there is a unifying principle of “one-ness” that assumes the name of “Jack”—“Jack Plumber, Jack Plowman, Jack Scrivener, dowered with much or the lack / Of it, man-willed, washed up as beach drift out of protean weltering” (*SITM* 5). This “Jack” recurs throughout *Song in the Meadow*, and is summoned (by name) at the

volume's most critical junctures: in “Conversations beside a Stream,” the heart of the volume, he is “Little Jack, little self, Jack Self, Jack Me, / Jack Anyman” (*SITM* 74), a blessed “Jack at the Fair” in a “Cradle Song,” and “Jack the Giant Killer,” “Jack Man, / Good jack of all, / All Jack / [. . .] All-jack, Jack a-root, Jack a-man” (*Ibid.*100) in the volume's closing poem.

“Jack,” then, is the “Everyman,”⁴⁶ a body that, in allowing ourselves to abide by the truths of His world, we will come to inhabit as well. This archetypal presence infuses the entire cast of characters in the volume with an essential “Jackness,” enhancing instead of eclipsing. The timbre of this “Jackness” is fantastical rather than essential, and in this aspect alone we find a divorce from the realistic impressions that define *Under the Tree*. This degree of artifice brings to mind Oscar Wilde's claim in “The Decay of Lying” that “Life,” as well as “external Nature,” “[imitate] Art far more than Art imitates Life” (Wilde 55)—that is, “art does not imitate life but invents the archetypes by which we perceive it” (McGrath 20). If Roberts did not stumble upon this idea firsthand, she surely recognized it in J. M. Synge, one of her confessed “masters,” who, as F. C. McGrath notes, created a “dynamic metaphor” in, most evidently, *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), “where the 'real' world eventually conforms itself to an imaginative fiction” (28). And there is a good chance that she found Pound's Vorticist challenge to Aristotelian mimesis (and Impressionism) in the 14 January 1915 issue of *The New Age*, where he states, resolutely,

46 Multiple critics have noted in the figure of “Jack” a direct indebtedness to Gerard Manley Hopkins. Campbell and Foster detail a series of technical analogies, and point out that the very title of the poem “suggests an affinity with Hopkins' poems of the common man, 'Tom's Garland' and 'Harry Ploughman’”—and here I will note the likely influence of William Langland's *Piers Plowman* on both the Hopkins poems and perhaps Roberts' entire body of work—and “particularly with the conclusion to his 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection,' which reads: *In a flash, at a trumpet crash, / I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and / This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond, / Is immortal diamond*” (262). McDowell notes that “‘Jack,’ as in Hopkins, is any man; he and his friends, male and female, manifest their origin in God by their instinctive adoration of him” (31). Also of interest are Roberts' own notes on the poem, which prove her fascination with a pervasive vernacular “Jackness”: “Jack, a portable machine for lifting... / Jack / The house that Jack built / J. Spratt / J—a—diamonds, / J—a—clubs, / J—a—hearts / J.—John is so long at the fair / J. in the pulpit . . . Union Jack / Jack-Straw, J—a—napes / Jacks (The Great Common Man—the pawn, the worker, the lover, the richman, poorman, beggar-man, thief) / Jackdaw / Jackal, Jackass——Jackboat / Man's common Jackness / Jack-a-lantern . . . Jackknife . . . Jack Rabbit / Jack Sreen—(Jacobin) / Jackie be nimble and turn me a sault / Jackie be nimble and think me a thought” (qtd. in Campbell & Foster 262-263).

that “Vorticism means that one is interested in the creative faculty as opposed to the mimetic. We believe that it is harder to make than to copy. . . You do not demand of a mountain or a tree that it shall be like something; you do not demand that 'natural beauty' be limited to mean only a few freaks of nature, cliffs looking like faces, etc.” (“Affirmations” 277). *Song in the Meadow* found Roberts repudiating Impressionism as her primary poetic mode (she used it instead as a barometer of experience and a means of juxtaposition; the most “Impressionist” poems of the volume come early on when the subject remains the groping, probing child) in favor of the more adaptable High Modernist *mélange*. The very nature of the project almost demanded it. The High Modernist temperament demanded an active approach to achieving a sense of order rather than a passive approach to apprehending it. The situation at hand was simply much too urgent to wait around for reality to conform to expectations and confirm personal convictions.

Wilde prefigures his proverbial doctrine with important insight: “All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals. Life and Nature may sometimes be used as part of Art's rough material, but before they are of any real service to art they must be translated into artistic conventions. The moment Art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything” (54). Likewise, for Miss Roberts, successful art demands investigation into the symbiotic relationship between external reality and internal sense, as evident throughout her Credo. Less provisional than Wilde, she believes that life and nature comprise the *essential* wealth of raw material for poetry, but require the poet to draw from, and compose within, a reality that has been revitalized—a sharpened image by way of enhanced focus. Rather than inflating reality to the extent in which it becomes an abstraction, the poet must notarize essential, concrete details. The means by which this is accomplished, and the character of what is rearticulated, reveal the poet unto herself—her dreams, deficiencies, values and desires, the shade of her fears and the hues of her hope, the timbre of her inspiration and the dialect of her

imagination.

Roberts does little to hide her assurance that in reading through *Song in the Meadow* (or perhaps engaging in its performance), the reader will be instilled with a sense of hope and lend his voice to her singing vision. The “opening ceremonies,” if you will, in which we readers and the versified characters are initiated, take place “At the crossroads [. . .] where his damned-to-perdition sin and his sheltering / Spirit join his throat-throbbing, bird-singing / Joy” (*SITM* 5), that point of contention where man's propensity to proliferate suffering is checked by the aspiration of his own capacity for redemption. Without acknowledging one's own complicity, the prospect of innocence remains out of reach. Though geographically—and even mythically—Kentucky, this somewhat Purgatorial territory is meant to blanket *Song in the Meadow* as its moral landscape. Again, Roberts emblazons even her simplest verse with a degree of artifice, dictating the conditions under which her work is to be considered.

Following the dedication and before Section I opens is the diptych poem “And What, Dear Heart.” Through both parts of the poem the speaker lists off what she will see as she walks the country roads into town. There is a shift in focus between the two, though. Whereas Part I is essentially nothing more than an Impressionistic, sentimentalized task-list of the daily responsibilities of Kentucky's rural able-bodies, Part II delves into the conditions of the human heart. Here we see that the agrarian actors are not only working, but “telling their joys, or [. . .] singing / Their loves, and the earth be renewed in the giving. / The tales of their fathers retelling, and looking / In prayer to their God” (*SITM* 11). These lines contain the cardiac rhythm that drives the filling blood and spirit of the work as a whole: a life-rhythm of story, song, love, earth, place, history, faith in the divine, and communion. Likewise, the commitment to the present participle suggests a Vorticist vitality, placing the reader at the crossroads of early Modernist doctrine, and establishing further contrast between the two sections.

Following these wholesome concerns, though, Roberts cracks the hinges of Pandora's box with juxtaposing stanzas of horror: “The voice of the air loud speaking, and making / Of hunger and death, and our brothers be dying. / And over the earth will the War Witch be flying // With pestilence . . . wrath, / With famine and pillage and death. / Cursed-bes in her hath, / And the downfall of tyrants will be in her breaking” (*SITM* 11). Wilde's position that “Life goes faster than Realism, but Romanticism is always in front of Life” (Wilde 55) prefigured the accelerated violence that dominated the 20th century, namely out of the first World War. The historic debate between these artistic doctrines was only further aggravated while modernity materialized as a force as likely to piece together the universe as it was likely to blow it up. These lines showcase a distinctly *mature* concern that is avoided in *Under the Tree*, as it would have disrupted the integrity of the volume. In the wider progression of experience that comprises *Song in the Meadow*, though, this concern serves as both a catalyst and a means of measuring the extent of experience.

The assurance that, “And more, dear heart, will we see, will we hear” (*SITM* 10, 11) that closes both sections of the prefatory poem makes it clear that there is indeed more to uncover, and this road to discovery will lead through *Song in the Meadow*. It becomes crucial, then, to consider the volume as another poetic enactment of an Arthurian quest for knowledge or a pilgrimage that seeks to verify eternal truths and the ceremonies that sanctify them. In this light, the function of “And What, Dear Heart” becomes strikingly apparent: it is a condensed set of sentiments and experiences that is recalled and relived under new initiative in the bulk of the work. Section I, then, correlates with Section I of the poems, “Maidens and Loves,” and Section II accounts for “The World and the Earth.”

The first section opens with “Song for a Girl Sent to Drive Cows,”⁴⁷ in which a young girl

47 In “Maidens and Loves,” there are seven poems—eleven if we consider each of the “Cradle Songs”

“shout[s] a song from [her] hand to hush” (*SITM* 15) in the wake of a birdsong, and begins to eat from a thorn-apple tree by a creek. We know that birds are capable of communicating an idyllic vision from the “throat-throbbing, bird-singing / Joy” (Ibid. 5) alluded to in the dedication, and the girl's uncultivated yawp from *under the tree* as she looks up to admire a true songsmith, followed by a controlled execution of cow-herding, seems a coy and clever intimation that *Song in the Meadow* is set up to go beyond *Under the Tree*, beyond the circumscribed world of a child's sensibilities. Furthermore, the poem's Edenic imagery sets a precedent for the first section. It becomes increasingly clear that each tiny victory does more than simply chart a child's ripening into maturity: together, they build faith in the potential for redemption—albeit one that, at this point, remains somewhat vague. “In the Chapel” recognizes that “there is gladness in the turning of a hymn,” but assuming faith in the intangible divine also begets “sorrow in the turning, long, / High rolling throb and questioning it bears” (Ibid. 20). The celebration of “Love in the Harvest” is supplanted by the mournful “Lean Year” of the next section, when man's faith in the earth is tested. “Tapestry Weaving: A Ballet Song of Mary” tells the story of the Annunciation but ends in anxious anticipation of the birth of Christ, acknowledging what will be His redeeming love but with humanity still cased in ignorance (Ibid. 42-43). The significance in each of these poems lies in the felt presence of something equal, though opposite, that is lacking. Although there is a sense of yearning, this absence is necessary: knowledge rooted in deprivation—of joy, prosperity, love, grace, all other dreams and desires of the heart—provides the means of understanding its substance.

The section ends with five “Cradle Songs,” said-sung from mother to child. The second, “Jack at the Fair,” validates “Jack” as a living symbol of the volume's vision. Almost entirely

independently—that contain “song(s)” in their titles, although many of the poems in this section possess the simple and highly *singable* metrical and rhythmic qualities characteristic of *Under the Tree*.

composed of lighthearted nursery rhyme verse, the poem ends on a sentimental reversal: “I cannot unravel life's mystery / Nor sing the whole of life's way” (*SITM* 51). The child, housed in his haven of innocence, is gradually prepared for an unknown future that cannot be mitigated by loving mother-songs. The third poem-song, “Sleep, My Pretty, My Dear,” invites change to the doorstep, claiming “the world is ready for spring” (Ibid. 51). “The Bird House” arms Jack Everyman for the unknown with “a song to say and to sing / Low and sweet in the spring” (Ibid. 52)—essentially, *Song in the Meadow* itself—while “Blessed Spirit Guard,” the final chapter in the sequence, further arms him with a prayer of profound hope and optimism: “Life has come again with gladness; / Man may seek again its fullness. // [. . .] Life renewed and here restoring” (Ibid. 53).

The shift in weight felt in the second section of “And What, Dear Heart” is immediately, continuously, and increasingly realized as prayer-protected Jack Everyman travels through “The World and the Earth.” Campbell and Foster note that this section is “more disturbing artistically than the first . . . for the note of social protest,” which they believe feels “forced,” “strained,” and “lack[ing] the air of complete inevitability, of total integration, achieved in her successful poetry” (266). Their observations may be accurate, but their appraisal is misguided. In light of the progression of experience, this section *should* feel forced, and *especially* strained. It finds the poetic subject in entirely new terrain, having to reconcile truths of human nature that deny sense and confound the imagination. It is curious that Campbell and Foster can only sense the organic quality of sensuously apprehended phenomena translated into form in Roberts' child poems, as the quality is matched with an almost equal purity in the poems of “The World and the Earth.” Here we find Roberts' experiments in *vers libre*, whose rhythms, syntax, diction and soundscape correlate precisely with the anxiety, awe, and desperation felt by the protagonist.

There are strong hints of W. B. Yeats and Richard Aldington throughout the section, as

well as the obvious presence of Pound, who had a hand in both Yeats' and Aldington's careers and poetic idioms. We would not be surprised to find the carnivalesque misfits of “Men of the Earth” “down where all the ladders start / In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart” (Yeats, “The Circus Animals' Desertion” 81). “Man Intolerant” recalls the first movement of “Maunderley” in the somewhat bureaucratic way it correlates moral degradation with aggrandized violence, and its final lines seem an assured nod to “The Second Coming”:

Man's spirit wanes here, his slow-got spirit fades, his poor small hold on God's
 favoring
 Is loosed. He, Man, is here set adrift on a deep that can never be sounded,
 And hurls without compass and grace
 Toward the last holocaust, the infinite merciless first-last unknowing abyss. (*SITM*
 69)

The influence *The Waste Land* is perhaps the most transparent, though, as well as the most pervasive and substantial. What Campbell and Foster note to be a “sad and resigned but not bitter” dimension, “what man thinks of after the glad exuberance of the 'Song in the Meadow' passes into the mood of reflection and meditation”—the “images of the ancient sea and rock, of cold and nonhuman seasons, of fossil shells bearing various witness to an ancient and lost flow of life . . . a note that lies below the floor of a preracial memory but never breaks through” (267) in a poem like “The Ancient Gulf” (whose sentiments were prefigured in *Under the Tree's* “Shells in Rock”), as well as “Disconsolate Morning,” “The Asking,” and even “The Lean Year”—seems too superficial an understanding, and too incongruous within the poetic sequence, to account for Miss Roberts' full intent. Just as countless other Modernist works appropriated Eliot's desolate landscape with full import of moral and spiritual allegory, so too does “The World and the Earth” find its pilgrim traversing this harsh symbolic terrain before finding respite in the oasis of “Conversations beside a Stream.”

The two preceding poems, “A Man” and “The War Witch,” function better in conjunction

with “Conversations” than autonomous poems. “A Man” emphasizes the idea that you can “start anyplace to construct a man” (*SITM* 70), as the unanimous “Jackness” of humanity, here facing the existential dilemma of modernity, affords no privileged immunity from the curse of complicity. Regardless of details of personal origin and narrative, Man, as a unified whole bound to the soul-inscribed opportunity for redemption, is at a crucial juncture: “He can cease to love” or “He can take his way” (*Ibid.* 72). Like Satan tempting Christ in the desert, “The War Witch” attempts to rattle the sensibilities of the modern man, and arrogantly proclaims “I’ll drain ye of love and I’ll drain ye of lust, / And give ye a lavish of hate for your dust” (*Ibid.* 73). It follows, then, that Roberts believes the central concern of the modern condition to be a deficiency of love, or, as Eliot would have it, “*Dayadhvam*”—the capacity to sympathize. On this point, Roberts and Tate are in agreement; it is an issue of solipsism, that “failure of the human personality to function objectively in nature and society” (“Narcissus as Narcissus” 596).

If “Conversations beside a Stream” makes anything clear, it is that art has the potential to construct a sturdy foundation of knowledge, and in validating and perpetuating these shared sentiments by way of equal affinities therein lies the means to forge communion. In communion, then, it follows that a single voice supporting a single cause, brought to the brink of its efficacy, has now a larger vessel to boil over into, where it can homogenize—*harmonize*—with other like-minded voices to extol a cogent, cohesive, and resounding “We Shall Overcome” to rattle the roofbeams of enveloping tragedy. The form of the poem, as much vessel as vehicle, is crucial to its singing message. McDowell notes that the poem was “written for oral presentation,” and “use[s] the rhythms and vocabulary of the spoken language and the long line and catalogues of Whitman” (32). Campbell and Foster describe it as “two voices speaking antiphonally [in an] attempt to sum up America in an impressionistic *mélange* of bits of folk song, historical allusions, and democratic mottos” (268). The poem is doing much more than either reading gives

it credit for, though.

Beyond even the sharing of central concerns, “Conversations beside a Stream” may be considered, to a certain extent, something of a rewriting of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The poem, like the volume, opens with a concession to Jack, whose status as “Everyman” is now made explicitly clear: “Little Jack, little self, Jack Self, Jack Me, / Jack Anyman, what now will we do? What is left to be?” (*SITM* 74). At this point of the pilgrimage, the speaker of the poem, both *of* and *separate* from Jack, has made it through the desolate landscape to a fertile crescent through which baptismal waters flow. We are reminded of the closing stanza of Eliot's poem: “I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me” (*The Waste Land* 50). “Conversations,” however, refuses to leave the stream by which the congregation gathers without distinct character. The sense of unanimous anonymity, like distinct voices blended into a choir, that emphasized the inconsequence of origins in “A Man” is likewise evoked in the system of American waterways—“We will sit here by this stream . . . the Chenoa River, the Kentucky . . . the Missouri, the Niagara, the Tennessee, the lovely Housatonic, the Sacramento, the Brazos, the Columbia, the powerful Colorado, the gentle Cedar River, or the Echo River that flows under the earth, a strange stream . . . Or by the Wabash [or] the Suwannee” (*SITM* 74)—that are all tributaries of “the great flowing water of mankind's unbounded way” (*Ibid.* 79). Left hanging in a moment of existential crisis from the questions proposed by the opening lines, the narrative voice quickly realizes that the answers have been there all along. Sarcastically dismissing singing of “war's high glory” or “tell[ing] stories of the high aims of invading armies of men,” Roberts follows with a resolute proposition to bring her vision of *Song in the Meadow* to fruition: “Better, let us sing and tell, now at the beginning, the songs that will come at the end, after the poor sour winnings. // Or tell of song in the meadow, in any meadow, in all meadows” (*Ibid.* 74).

The spirit of fertility and restoration rides the myriad waterways and empties into a delta

where dreams remain a form of currency, and the poem enters into a rich assemblage of music. Just like *The Waste Land*, “Conversations beside a Stream” thrives upon “fragments” to “[shore] against [the] ruins” (*The Waste Land* 50). The following statement from her Credo applies to this poem as much as it does the entire volume: “Many fragments, beautiful and highly perfected in themselves, do not make metaphysical searchings; but these, when arranged in the sequence of the artist's work, are seen to contribute to those forms which more surely carry on the theme” (qtd. in Keller 201). For Roberts, these fragments are songs, and through their allusive evocations, recontextualization, and mosaic arrangement, the substance of her vision is legitimized in the frame of concrete tradition and made palpable in her present situation. Furthermore, her adoption of *vers libre*, albeit more Whitmanic than early Modernist, allows for the total, amalgamated emotion of these songs to sing over their own circumscribed rhythms. These fragments are both, as Roberts tells us, the “song[s] [of] the meadow” and the “songs [of] the end” (*SITM* 74). Her “meadow-songs” are taken from the popular (and mostly secular) American songbook, those songs that the country grew up singing. It should come as no surprise that, of these song fragments, a handful (most of which come at crucial moments in the poem) are from the songbook of Stephen Foster, widely regarded as “the father of American music.” Furthermore, in an acknowledgment that the folksong tradition indeed extends back long before the formation of America, a handful of traditional English and Scottish ballads that found new sung popularity “across the pond” (some even becoming staples) are evoked. The “songs that will come at the end” (*Ibid.* 74), many of which not only America, but much of the Western world grew up singing, are unveiled to be songs of a religious temperament: traditional hymns and gospel compositions.⁴⁸ In mining the wealth of America's musical tradition and appropriating

48 This list includes (at least) the following songs: from Stephen Foster's songbook, there is “Old Folks at Home” (“Swanee River”), “Jennie with the Light Brown Hair,” “My Old Kentucky Home, Good-Night!”, “Hard Times Come Again No More,” “Nelly Was A Lady,” “Nelly Bly,” “Beautiful Dreamer,” and “Oh! Susanna”; from the popular American songbook, barring Foster (and including two Christmas carols, as well as a Negro spiritual),

the capacities of nearly forty songs, Roberts taps into a similar creative impetus that gave Eliot his *Waste Land* and Pound his *Cantos*.

An early alternate title for *The Waste Land* was “He Do the Police in Different Voices.” Eliot wanted it to be known and understood that his poem is one of separate and distinct voices, all at the mercy of the “waste land,” but with the potential to overcome. “Conversations,” as the title implies, uses this same technique. Roberts prefaces a conversation between a “First” and a “Second” voice with fragments of Foster's “Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair,” noting his eponymous object of longing to be “a name with which to conjure a past and a present” (*SITM* 74). Foster laments the “wild notes her merry voice would pour” and “the blithe birds that warbled them o'er” (Foster 108). However, in the act of turning his stagnant memory into new song, his departed maiden is able to live on. Miss Roberts' appropriation of Foster's “Jeanie,” then, showcases song's ability to linger at the furthest reaches of emotion while validating its potential for necessary catharsis in the name of redemptive progress.

The conversation between the two anonymous voices begins with alternating Southern folkloric portraits of joy and sorrow, told through the reminisced stories of the various “meadow-songs.” Foster's “Beautiful Dreamer” is there when the “Second Voice” thinks of “the Beautiful Dreamer who is withdrawn from life's mystery, being all the while at the heart of life's strange

there is “On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away” (Paul Dresser), “Darling Nelly Gray” (Benjamin Hanby), “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” (Edmund Spears), “Christmas Brings Joy to Every Heart” (Bernhardt S. Ingemann), “Juanita” (Trad.), “Old Dan Tucker” (Daniel Decatur Emmett[?]), “Ol' Man River” (Oscar Hammerstein II), “Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child” (Trad.), “Yankee Doodle” (Trad.), “(I Wish I Was in) Dixie” (Daniel Decatur Emmett[?]), and “The Star-Spangled Banner” (Francis Scott Key); the Scottish and English ballads included are “The Nut-Brown Maid,” “Lord Thomas and Fair Ellender,” “Lord Randall,” “Lord Lovell,” “Barbara Allen,” “Old Bangum,” and “Black is the Color of my Truelove's Hair”; then, finally, of the category of hymns and gospel numbers, there is “Hear the Lambs A-Cryin’” (Trad.), “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” (Trad.), “Salvation, O the Joyful Sound!” (Isaac Watts), “Are You Washed in the Blood?” (Elisha A. Hoffman), “Jesus Loves Even Me” (P. P. Bliss), “His Blood Has Redeemed Me” (Arthur T. Pierson), “A Shelter in the Time of Storm” (Vernon J. Charlesworth), “In the Garden” (C. Austin Miles), “We're Marching to Zion” (Isaac Watts), and “Come, We That Love the Lord” (Isaac Watts). The implied content of many of the songs referenced intensifies the emotional, moral, and spiritual import of the poem, while populating its poetic landscape with a wealth of concrete and commingling personalities and narratives—an effect equal to that achieved in Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

way” (*SITM* 76). This “Beautiful Dreamer” becomes the characterization of Jack Everyman's anxiety that “all the world is sad and weary now” (*Ibid.* 75)—the anxiety that resounds throughout Foster's “Old Folks at Home”—who, lacking agency, refuses to continue facing the scandal of suffering. Like the bartender's refrain of “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME” in *The Waste Land* (41-42), “Conversations” extends its desperate plea to take up responsibility in the unwritten but allusive refrain of “Beautiful Dreamer, awake unto me” (Foster 161).

Eventually, there is no longer a “First” and “Second” voice, but one singular “Voice.” The transition comes at the most religiously charged moment in the poem. The “Second Voice” demands the audience listen down the street to people singing, and they are singing gospel. And then it is this singular voice, the voice of Jack Anyman, Jack Everyman, Jack as, perhaps, an equivalent of Tiresias in *The Waste Land*. Here we find a coalescence of “In the Garden” and “We're Marching to Zion”; it is no surprise that each of these is concerned with communion and the active, insistent pursuit of transcendent joy. It is this “Voice”—many voices, though singular in common “Jackness,” joining together in communion—that tells us “One man cannot make a song” (*SITM* 79). However, as the voice continues: “The truth of a song is the truth of another thing” (*Ibid.* 79).

Roberts asserts that the “two great songs [that] have been sung in America” are, somewhat curiously, not even *songs*, but rather *Moby Dick* and the Declaration of Independence (*SITM* 79). The collection of songs summoned, both secular and religious, translate the simple yet crucial theses of these two works into a living language. Thomas Jefferson's Declaration, according to the poem, “gathers into one fiat the wills, the desires of a people, / of thousands of thinking and feeling men” (*Ibid.* 79). This collective desire is for progress towards autonomy and a distinct identity, but Roberts places a strong emphasis on the fact that it is a progress as much *from* something as it is *towards* something. She takes us “back to England, our England” (*Ibid.*

77), back to where America began, and back to the songs that either influenced or were adapted to make a distinct American music. She knows that no worthwhile meditation on the direction the future should take can begin without first understanding the past. For America, part of this relationship with the past entails making somewhat of a Poundian “Pact” with England. Rather than dwelling on past transgressions like Captain Ahab and forging identity *against* the past, she advocates acceptance and communion.

“Conversations beside a Stream”—and *Song in the Meadow* as a whole—is an open invitation into her Kentucky home, heart, and spirit, where song is both the blood and the pulse that drives it. Her appropriated “meadow-songs” work towards building up her homeland's cultural credibility as having the merited wealth of social, historical, emotional, moral, and spiritual currency—a “still point of the *singing* world,” to adapt a line from Eliot's “Burnt Norton”—to barter in the market of redemption, while her use of songs of a religious temperament broaden the scope to lay witness to the singularity of the total human struggle and direction of fulfillment. Her comprehensive songbook is a tract against conflict—a call to communion, consummated as chorus. Following “Conversations beside a Stream,” “Moonlight in Summer” reiterates the desperation of Eliot's adamant refrain. It is a softer plea, though still with its strength, that comes as the “joyful shrilling” of a mocking-bird, “lexicon of song, summary singer” (*SITM* 81). And just as *The Waste Land* ends with its “Shantih shantih shantih” (50), “The World and the Earth” closes with “Evening Hymn,” whose final lines extend a blessing: “Quiet and love and peace / Be to this, our rest, *our place*” (emphasis mine; *SITM* 82).

Whereas the diptych of “And What, Dear Heart” corresponds to and accounts for “Maidens and Loves” and “The World and the Earth,” the final section, “Legends,” is left unrepresented. This seems as though it would imply that the initiated “quest” is completed by the

closing lines of “Evening Hymn.” How, then, are we to read this final section?

If we are to accept Miss Roberts' invitation and participate (in what's as much a congregation as it is a conference) in the movement towards rectifying humanity's moral and spiritual compass through a selfless lending of our voices to a communal song of faith, joy, and love, then we can read it not as distinct epics of heroes of their own cultures, in their own time and place, but a collective mythology, a collective achievement in which the fibers of tangible, lived experience weave together into the fabric of Art. The chorus that Miss Roberts orchestrates validates a single reality against the fragmentation of modernity. Myth was a valuable resource to the Modernists; aside from Eliot and Pound, it factors prominently in the writings of Aldington, H.D., and Joyce. Perhaps Campbell and Foster are correct in their claim that “Legends” is the “slightest of the three sections . . . aesthetically” (269), but they were not reading for—or simply could not see—cohesion throughout the volume.

The poems included in this section are decidedly fables, not of ethereal fairies, but pioneers of self, spirit, and terroir: “The Meeting” of consciousness and the soul, “Cinderella's Song,” a rehashing of the Genesis narrative through which the world fell into nomenclature (“I, Adam”), a piece of Miss Roberts' own family lore (“Sailing for America”), the “Orpheus” legend retold in a Kentucky idiom, a lighthearted folktale of a musical “Stranger,” three poems devoted to Kentucky's own Daniel Boone (“When Daniel Was a Herdboy,” “When Daniel Was a Blacksmith,” and “Boone Alone in Kentuck”),⁴⁹ and a somewhat bathetic rendition (it is, typographically speaking, a “concrete poem”) of “Jack the Giant Killer” and his beanstalk.⁵⁰ By

49 Campbell and Foster note that: “The Boone poems are simple, lilting poems dealing with Boone as a woodsman; they have no suggestion of Boone as the symbolic omniscient figure lead us from the chaos of modern thought—the theme which her notes indicate she hoped to develop in an epic composition on Boone” (270). Perhaps this is true to some extent. There is no real indication that Boone distinctly alone assumes this role, but as a part of the final section of the volume, he becomes one of a colorful cast of characters who collectively illustrate the reintegration of the past into the present for a vision of wholeness, a model of transcendent authority, and a pattern of durable and enduring morality.

50 The long phrasings of staccato accents making up the beanstalk ascension and descent are admittedly frustrating to read, though the poem's grounded conclusion, which develops as a Kentucky creation myth, reads like any of

the end of the first two sections, Miss Roberts manages to convene a world of human joys and sorrows. By the end of “Legends,” acute distinctions between foreign lore and Kentucky commonplace are blurred. The eternal is invited to the realm of the finite; the legendary is allowed to have distinct local import. It is only through this concession, a loosening of vanity, that the capacities of love are unveiled. This is, essentially, the primary impetus that drives *Song in the Meadow*, from Jack “washed up as beach drift out of protean weltering” (*SITM* 5) to the Jack who, after defeating the giant: “brought up his trusty plow / And he plowed himself a field. / He grew his corn on the giant's breast, / And he reaped a mighty good yield” (Ibid. 110). The existential floundering brought on by the “modern” predicament is, according to Miss Roberts, best combated by the knowledge of the “root” and the “weave,” a rooting in Place with the capacity for communion, cased in song and backed by faith.

The nuances of *Song in the Meadow* are bold, abundant, and of a distinct and concrete beauty, even as a second flowering held to the standards of High Modernism in its prime. They manifest as the fruits of a sustained meditation on the various aesthetic and formal positions contained within the early phase of Modernism, and the resonances between these later poems of Roberts' and those inspirational models of Impressionism, Symbolism, Imagism and Vorticism are of a timbre refined to a degree hardly achieved in the early poetry. Like Eliot and Pound, though, Roberts came to conceive of this early phase more as a storehouse of poetic techniques to be adapted into a more encompassing vision than a debate between different aesthetic and formal doctrines in which she was pressured to choose a side and stand by their governing principles. The total effect of the ways that this adjustment of attitude and approach manifests in the later poetry—the desire to create a total vision of inspirational morality, putting the fragments of dissociated traditions and value systems into new arrangements of relation, ordered under the

Miss Roberts' tightest folk-speech verse.

governing forces of unity (Eliot) or continuity (Pound)—testifies more to Roberts' developing Modernist sensibility and persistent devotion to the Modernist cause than being able to identify distinct traces of a doctrine's influence in an individual poem.

It is a shame that we do not have more poetry from Miss Roberts (although much of her prose does maintain a distinct “poetic” air). It is a shame that her vision of a Daniel Boone epic in verse will go forever unrealized. But in the two substantial volumes that we *do* have (and even what exists outside of the bounds of these bindings), we find a unique and enduring character, a modest spirit that manifests with an intensity packed dense with the light of illumination. It is one that reintegrates an intimacy of place-knowledge into man's deracinated modernity, one that regards the patterns of living and life-affirming labor resistant to the “progressive” ideal and the model of values this lifestyle both props itself up upon and engenders as a talismanic catalyst of reformation and rectification, one that finds in the tiniest things intimations of the greatest truths, in the simplest fact the most complex mysteries, in the mind of experience the ability to recognize and even reclaim, if only for a moment, the nascent purity of innocence. It reflects a mind with the instincts of the most sensitive and devout Regionalist and the cultivated sensibility of an abiding Modernist. It might be a stretch to consider Miss Roberts to be “the Pound of the Pigeon River country,” but a sustained investigation and meditation on the distinctly Modernist dimensions of her poetry has been long overdue.

Appendix

Here is Miss Roberts' "Credo," her lecture read at a fall 1921 meeting of the University of Chicago's Poetry Club, whole and restored to its original form, the hand-written insertions printed in italics:

I do not know how poems are made. I do not even know how my own are made for I do not make them by a rule. Some of them spring full armed from the head of Zeus and some of them float in from the sea on a shell.

But observing the mind in its conscious and un-conscious functions—a posteriori—I find these observations to be true.

I find that I have tried for a poignant speech, as direct as cause and effect is direct.

I have not had to avoid all *cliché* [*sic*] expressions, all outworn figures and frail rhetoric. I had no temptation in that direction.

I believe that the total mind is greater than any one of its functions and greater than all its analyzed attributes in sum-total.

Around logical thought and all conception hovers the nebulous Beauty—Mind in its potentialities. . . .

Now poetry differs from prose in more than mere metaphor, though this is a concrete difference, the difference which is most often stated because it is most obvious—the visible difference of color and diction.

Poetry must appeal to the emotions each time it appears with the freshness and the vigor and the charm of a clear first impression. It flashes into media where the intellect goes crawling and groping.

Poetry is forever trying, in each reaction, in each "new age," to come nearer to a statement of the universe, or to a statement of some small contributory factor of it. Poetry is forever trying to make clear obscure relations in the worlds and systems of things and ideas.

It is not enough that Poetry states accurately physical facts, and not enough that it expresses the high thoughts of men, their ideals and hopes for the future of the universe. It searches further than this in searching out obscure relations.

I believe that it is the high function of Poetry to search into the relation between mind and matter, into the one-ness of the flesh and thin air—spirit. Into the wedding of grass, intellect, instinct, and imagination.

Many fragments, beautiful and highly perfected in themselves, do not make metaphysical searchings; but these, when arranged in the sequence of the artist's work, are seen to contribute to those forms which more surely carry on the theme.

Apparent proportions, those visible to the eye, are real for purposes of beauty and art. Art moves among the living, the impermanent, the apparent things. Constructive proportions—that is mathematical and local proportions, may be agreeable to the mind where they are perceived, but they belong to the mind-within-itself and not the mind moving through the world. They are abstractions. Fixity is their characteristic. They are categories and each one is like every other one. But art speaks with gentler words than these.

We go into the unseen by way of the visible, into the unknown by way of the known, into Nous by way of the flesh and the dust.

We perceive that the mind is forever trying to possess physical things in all their fullness and beauty. It wants flowers or grass or winds or the green of leaves or the wetness of water, to hold in the very hands of the mind. Poetry searches into this desire.

I have attempted to bring this possession a little closer. *As in Little Rain, I have attempted to bring the fact of rain—its wetness—fact of wet leaves and animals in upon the mind with a richer immediacy. . . immediacy of thought/physical objects, & between sensuous ex[perience] and imagination.**

If I can, in art, bring the physical world before the mind with a greater closeness—richer immediacy—than before, so that the mind rushes out to the very edges of sense—then mind turns about and sees itself mirrored within itself.

I have discarded all poetic fancies and “pathetic fallacies” and have kept close to my own experience and to the truth of American life as we live it here in Kentucky. And so there are no fairies and no exotic legends. Not that there are not “little ones” “little people,” hauntings of the mind and the personality of place. But in American life we do not know this element as faerie. We have not yet organized this into a lore, we get it out of books.

But among the negroes [*sic*] we have witch lore and the conjur-man—organic and actual in their everyday life.

I have avoided all literary words and all literary phrases.

I have worked for a poignant statement.

I have striven for a concrete and immediate rendering of life.

I have tried for organic rhythms, intrinsic with the images. I have used contemporary speech and contemporary thought.

I have used child speech and child psychology for my images. *Man is a child in his gropings for the objects which lie just beyond the present limitations of sense.*

I do not preach. I do not give you tacked-on morals. It is not the function of poetry to exhort or to utter moral precepts. Morals differ with customs. Art is eternal.

Through the chaos of the world runs the pattern of art—searching out hidden relation—prophesying of the mind and its nebulous Beauty. . .

But I do not know how poems are made.

*The words *thought* and *physical objects* are stacked one atop the other, with *thought* on top.

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