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Gisèle Sigal

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Gisèle Sigal

Pau University – Bayonne Campus, France

**DRAMA AND TRAUMA
IN ELIZABETH MADOX ROBERTS' *MY HEART AND MY FLESH***

The line floated from the design in a continual wasting, perpetual dissolution, and her own mind strove to bind its own threads, to regather its lint and impose some well-knit conclusions to the chaos." (*My Heart and My Flesh* 158)

«Fear and pain mounted in her mind Fear that had been allayed arose and multiplied, meeting other curious hurts and shames, meeting pride in a vortex of confusion." (130)

Although seldom read by general public, Elizabeth Madox Roberts' (1881-1941) works contribute to the common representation of the South with all its attributes—a keen respect for the past and a deep awareness of its bygone glory. Her seven novels, two books of poetry and short stories are equally invaluable to those aiming at grasping the mind of the region with its social history and human diversity. In her books, the South becomes a stage, following Shakespeare's famous line. The life that is described there provides a fairly documented history of the region at the turn of the century.

Socially and geographically, Roberts' world centers on poor sharecroppers (*The Time of Man*, 1926), humble farmers (*A Buried Treasure*, *The Great Meadow*, 1930, and *Black is my Truelove's Hair*), insignificant landowners (*He Sent Forth a Raven*), and genteel-families with racial concerns (*My Heart and my Flesh*, 1927) — elements that give southern literature its specific flavor. However, the social depiction of a poor countryside lifestyle serves a double purpose in Roberts' fiction, which is to strive for social history and create a meaningful literary design. Roberts' South is indeed cemented with deprivation, suffering, poverty and fortitude. It is one of gloom and despair.

Her prose is remarkable, forceful and poetic although devoid of any sentimentalism and her strength lies in her unfailing and enduring capacity for introspection into her main characters' inner lives.

My Heart and My Flesh, her second novel, epitomizes chaos and confusion. In a letter to her friend Louise McElroy (Easter 1926 or 1927), she writes: "This is the story of a woman who went to Hell and came back."¹

The action is set in a small Kentucky town at the beginning of the twentieth century. The novel spans seventeen years of the heroine's life and exposes the decaying life of a genteel Southern family. The tone is morbid and bitter which emphasizes hopelessness and despair as Glenway Wescott comments upon the novel:

The whole place hearkened back to its eighteenth century dignity; the foliage wove into garlands, fell in folds, over intelligent gardens, and Jeffersonian dwellings sprang up, and hunting hounds and horses to ride appeared, and there was string music; all was elegance but dilapidated, doomed. – The grandfather when he dies leaves an empty testament, the heiress and her violin sink to the level of the mulatress love-children, she has reasons to reproach herself for having taken part in the emotions of a murder, finally there is not even enough dog-bread for the hounds and in hunger she steals a mouthful of it; but hope steps lightly into the final pages It is hard for me to stop writing about this book; it is my favourite. (Wescott 8)

The reader is immersed in the narrator's perceptions as he observes Theodosia Bell, the central character, from the inside: "She would feel the approach of her own tears and a hurt would gather in her breast and spread as a fog through her members, through the substance of the earth and the air." (14) The consciousness of self through feelings, emotions and the quest for meaning, and the consciousness of the world with the questioning of the position of the self in that world compose the two strands of the stream of consciousness. Events, actions and thoughts only filter through the consciousness of the white heroine who occupies central stage. Other characters in the book are mentioned and included in the narrative only as they affect her.

Roberts' fiction mirrors her own concerns; there is a constant search for the light amidst discomfort and suffering, with mental stability at stake and trauma deeply ingrained. One of her friends at Chicago University assesses her life and career in the following terms:

This strange southern woman never complains, but mourns for the generality; she does not make fun even of herself, but rejoices or is always ready to rejoice with

¹ Elizabeth Madox Roberts Papers. Letter to Louise McElroy (Easter 1926 or 1927), Papers gathered from the Library of Congress in an unpublished collection by William Slavick, 2010.

due soberness. She dresses her characters in bodily charms, in oddities, in verbal elegance; she clothes the landscape with flowers and warm weather; and then – freezes to the very twig, strips to the skin, cuts to the bone, and without weakening or any loss of dignity, weeps, weeps real tears, short clauses that are like tears. (Wescott, 10)

In a troubled world and in a decaying society, the characters' inner lives are essential to balance the external environment and to find a meaningful order. "Life is from within" the writer says in her notes. In her work, that constituent helps characters go beyond the limits of a world distorted by chaos. Such a process is always associated with a life-death-rebirth pattern where physical weariness and unsettling minds refer to - and recall - a deeper secret wound of the soul.

Whatever Roberts does, following the thread of her characters' destiny in a long-lasting novel or compressing time within the scope of a short story, everything inevitably converges on her quest for truth in life despite hardships and pain. In the depths of disarray or at the height of confusion, a dim but persistent light eventually allows the soul to reach knowledge and peace.

This paper will then explore the various phases of perturbation and conflict in *My Heart and My Flesh*. It will first delve into the process of deconstruction of the main character; then focus on the novel as an illustration of the ill-fated South; and will eventually consider the character's recovery after the turmoil. All these strands help highlight Roberts' art in her quest for dignity and harmony: endurance ultimately allows the heroine to overcome adversity.

Deconstructing the main character

The plot follows the downward spiral of Theodosia Bell, a privileged and carefree daughter of the South. Confident in her superiority and selfishness, she progressively loses all her landmarks—family, friends, convictions—and sinks into madness. At the end of the novel, the instinct of survival eventually saves her and favors the emergence of a new life.

As McDowell comments upon Theodosia:

[Theodosia's] journey from happiness to despair to regeneration, from spiritual confidence to spiritual humiliation to spiritual reconciliation, and from a relative

superficiality to unwonted suffering to a poised serenity, prescribes the arc and structural line of this searching novel (McDowell 108).

Theodosia is stripped of all surplus and inessentials as Earl Herbert Rovit explains: "Steady taking away until there is nothing left but the bare breath of the throat and the simplified spirit." (Rovit 26) The passing of time slowly but securely devastates both the setting and the characters in an uncontrollable spiral. In the first two chapters, some of Theodosia's close relatives die, her grandfather reprimands her for reading old family letters that reveal the presence of black blood in the family, and her father makes incestuous advances to her. In the following two chapters, she successively loses two suitors, her passion for music dwindles and she reunites with her "other" family. Her grandfather passes away and her father renews sexual advances to her which entails further alienation and disillusion. Infected with his touch, she becomes an instrument of evil and helps her half sister Lethe in her craving for revenge against the woman who took her lover. In chapter five, Theodosia loses her home, goes to her aunt, thinking she will find relief but she ends up suffering at the hands of her mean relative. Degradation, hunger and near dementia prevail. Theodosia is alienated from her fellowmen, she feels fragmented and devoid of love. Overcome by despair, she tries to drown herself but, unexpectedly, life rises in her, releasing the bleakness and aridity of her soul. At this stage, she knows she must flee from her aunt's home and reach more peaceful places, far away from her spiritual jail. In chapter six, she experiences rebirth when she joins a community in the valley. There, she finds work, love and happiness.

Contagion of the trauma is communicated to the reader through the narrator who often acts in the narrative process in a direct contact with the constitutive elements which make up Theodosia's life but without any prior expression of discomfort which might have equipped her for subsequent trauma; thence the effect produced onto the reader and represented in the dynamics of writing. For example, in chapter two, she feels her soul taking form from her rough encounter with her father: "She had identified her soul with a swift moment of concentrated loathing, cut it free with hate." (105)

In the narrative, the frequent repetition of words like "fear", "weary", "disgust", "loathing" and "distress" account for unremitting sufferings. Similarly, the somewhat uncoordinated alliance of expressions like "a curious joy" (46), "unpleasant sense of disaster"

(111), provide a feeling of awkwardness. Images of fracture, splitting and violence abound:² To accompany the frenzied gathering at Americý's home, Theodosia plays "soft demonic music, ill-flavored, crooked, sinister. She brought her playing to crashing discords, softly played, a disturbance working upward through half tones." (166)

Roberts plays on familiar tropes and narrative techniques in a paradoxical attempt to voice the unspeakable through a subtle use of images and metaphors. Metaphors abound in all their major classifications: concrete ones in "The cold cut her garments apart and entered her flesh, past her chilled blood." (225), animistic ones in "Her body was shaking in curious rhythms that built upward toward a climax and subsided only to arise again, a compound rhythm of quivering flesh" (198), anthropomorphic ones in "The picture of her going, a felt picture, spread downward through her limbs, that lay relaxed now, ready for the sudden spasm of movement" (255), and synesthetic ones in: "Her thought passed beyond fear and rested on pity, abhorrence, sickening, loathing." (110)

More often than not, the reader is given a detached perspective on Theodosia, witnessing her deeds from a distance: "her identifying mind went swiftly to the matter on which she would not dwell, sped over it, naming it, with a wordless withdrawal." (106) Theodosia ceases to offer resistance and behaves mechanically as if she were an agent rather than an actor in this drama: "she stirred slightly and was aware of herself as the residue of disaster, the leavings of tragedy, the nothing of the evil hereafter. A faint cry for pity hushed itself from her lips" (197-198). These two quotations illustrate Freud's "Unheimliche" or the feeling of the uncanny as the character becomes a stranger to herself. Besides, throughout the novel, sunlight and fresh air are almost absent, which reinforces the sombre atmosphere. The slightest breeze emits a nauseating smell that conveys the idea of being on the wane. Memories of Theodosia's childhood are associated to "... mouldy smell on rotting paper, a faint stench and a choking dust." (98) In the house, "there was a moulding smell of age putrefaction, close air, burning oil from the lamp. ... The air near her grandfather's bed was heavy with the sour odor." (103) She is overcome by "the stale odor of decayed paper and dust." (100) In chapter five, the decaying Singleton farmhouse mirrors the aristocratic decline. The once noble dwelling has "a leaking, sagging roof and dark, moldy, airless rooms; and

² For example, when her music teacher tells her that she does not have a fiddle hand, Theodosia experiences "a sensation as of a keen blade cutting a clod path down her back near her spine." (154) Such traumatic images shed a light on Roberts' narrative technique which is to instil in the reader's mind the same feelings of inner unclear doubts, ongoing insecurity and gradual despair as the ones experienced by the main character.

overpowering "thick vapors and gases" (233) emanate from the stinking dogs running wild inside. Like in Dante's *Inferno*, in "the Nether Hell," cold and starvation pervade the scene: "The sour odor of cold cleaving the air, rising from the window ledges and gathering at last to the bed ... all night the air would grow more and more dense with cold" (231). Near starvation makes her steal dog's food from her aunt's hounds. Physical and mental annihilation overwhelm her along with feelings of darkness and vacuity. She says in a moment of desperation: "O God, I believe and there's nothing to believe." (247)

As Gerald Preher observes, "Theodosia's existence has turned into a living death" (287). Love, poetry and mercy have alternately perished and only organic death is left:

As if bandage had been removed from a recent hurt or fracture, she spread painfully out through the hills and fields, through the ways to go. (201-202)

In her notes on *My Heart and My Flesh*, Roberts analyzes her method in writing the novel insightfully. She explains:

The method here was a steady taking away until there was nothing left but the bare breath of the throat and the simplified spirit. The work begins with a being who has been reared in plenty and security. She has the pride of Family, of Wealth (as such goes in the South of our country), a pride in being the honored and petted child of parents, a pride in personal charm and in popularity with friends and associates, and finally a pride in musical skill and in a boundless ambition to play the fiddle well. All these gentle conceits are gathered into the person of Theodosia. One by one these things are taken from her to the up-building of her understanding and the growth of tolerance and wisdom through suffering. Each of these is lost and more.... (McDowell 107-108)

The destructive wind disintegrates old moral values, material prosperity and Theodosia's beauty. Corruption is spreading; endurance has come to the end, and the downfall speeds up until the end of drama: lost illusions, deceived hopes, failure, surrender, and slow descent to the grave into the shades of death. Love, poetry and mercy have alternately perished and only organic death is left to come. Overburden prevails, there is no more shelter.

The main character is also aware of her own insignificance and has little left in life except the hopes that she has for happiness, and eventually a broken body and a broken mind leave her without these. The novel recalls the *Book of Job* when pondering the limits of human resistance to pain and despair when there is no hope. Her descent into a hellish existence is the only means to properly cleanse the dis-ease that plagues the Bells.

Such a process is also closely linked to the rhythms of the narrative—there are suspended moments and sudden increases in speed. Voices abruptly appear in the narrative without proper reference or connection to any speaker, thus adding to the chaos and confusion:

“You asked him for bread and he gave you a serpent”. 2nd Voice: "What was she out to kill"?; 4th voice: "She helped Lethe kill Ross". 2nd Voice: "She wanted to kill, kill, kill. Why didn't she kill a hog?"; Theodosia: "Where was I? Oh Yes." (236)

The narrative explodes from the pressure of accumulation of the verb: "kill." The vacillating utterance - illustrated by spaces between each voice - produces an unfamiliar effect and a referential insufficiency conducive to the feeling of the uncanny in a terrifying venture. There is no room for a summary or an ellipsis. The time of the narrative gives the feeling it coincides to a dislocated or deviant time, just like in *Hamlet*, thus producing a feeling of chaos.

The inner confrontation leads to vertigo and spiritual death to face the unbearable truth. The narrative unites in compact aggregates and then becomes atomized through simple elements, oscillating between blasts or jumble. Feelings, thoughts and speech are not differentiated. There is neither criterion of selection nor specific hierarchy, everything is incorporated, the necessary information as well as the needless. The content of the mind is communicated with all the confused profusion of clear or blurred images and thoughts. The general feeling is one of absolute uncertainty and unpredictability. Fragments, redundancies and inarticulate and deconstructed sentences account for rhetoric of inner conflicts through language.

Roberts' vision is empowering vivid: although most issues displease, she communicates them so intensely and entirely that her Kentucky fills the horizon. Writing in a review in 1936, J. Donald Adams praises *My Heart and My Flesh* as being superior to Faulkner's early work:

It is a novel which has at times an almost terrifying power; dealing with a somewhat Faulknerian theme, it reduces Faulkner to melodramatic claptrap. If America has produced a novel approaching Dostoevsky in psychological intensity, *My Heart and My Flesh* is that novel. (Adams 87)

The original hollowness that precipitates trauma is both impossible and vital to name. Indeed, the hole that leads to the abyss stems from a shock or an etymological hurt, as the word trauma derives from Greek *τραῦμα* which means wound or damage (French related word: "trouée"). In this regard, the writer's narrative method becomes a structuring principle of a psychic and textual operating mode which resonates with other southern fiction.

Backdrop of an ill-fated South

In the novel, the whole tormented history of the South pours out with amazing lucidity: pitiful humankind unfolds with sordid passions, deceitful hatred, inordinate pride, distorted chivalry, racial issues, miscegenation and inbred anger. "Yet," as Simone Vauthier puts it, "the soul's descent into hell is projected against the economic, social and moral decline of an old southern family, and linked to the exploration of a socio cultural tradition" (49). Everything is combined to express erosion and trivia: the old wealthy neighborhood now decaying, the gardens now fallow, the decomposition of an outdated social class, and the death of a trifling civilization for a vain cause. Although the spirit of defeat is only vaguely mentioned in the novel, it also contributes to a feeling of stagnation and decay.

Such an oppressive calamity spawns a sacred curse upon the South if we combine the historical inclination with a theological one (man doomed to sin and to death since The Fall). Nevertheless, a meticulous process of purification is canvassed so as to wash sins away or transcend spiritual weaknesses and could be interpreted as a yearning for the time period before The Fall. Although this pattern is recurrent in other southern writings, the concern is to determine to what degree Roberts' overall picture reflects a historical situation and is convincing.

The historical skimming reveals a striking contrast between the old order and the structure of past history – a continuous succession and social rise through which the Bell family epitomizes the fate of the southern people - and the present state of collective turmoil.

The social world that pervades the prologue seems orderly with blacks and whites living in their "proper" worlds. Past events are staged through fragments that the reader can only get snatches of. To assert the early opulence of the Bell family - which makes up an

"American Order" similar to the Old World's one - the heroine's grandfather insists on their ancestry:

"This," her grandfather said to her, "is the family tree of the Montfords and the Trotters. There's a collection of family traditions written into the blank book on the second shelf. My mother was a Montford, and don't you forget that, Miss." (61)

The high standards of the Bell family are evidence that the people of central Kentucky were not all either sharecroppers or aristocrats. As Thomas D. Clark writes in his book *Agrarian Kentucky*:

Much of Kentucky was rural to an extent that gave intense emphasis to the American term "country." Most of the state was isolated by land and forest barriers, and the local population was made up largely of yeoman farmers who tenaciously held on to the old ways in family relationships, economies, religion, recreation, and attitudes toward natural resources. (Clark 44)

Within each novel, Roberts carefully indicates the various social strata from which her characters come. At the beginning of the novel, Theodosia is a socially prominent, educated, sophisticated, proud and egocentric city girl. She has known neither love nor hate, only aloofness and contempt. As a child, she once visits Aunt Deesie, a servant's cabin and feels: "curious" about "the little Negroes," "[...] But her pleasure was in her own sense of superiority and loathing, in a delicate nausea experienced when she knelt near the baby's quilt." (38-39) She has little interest in the blacks around her. Siver, her man-servant, is portrayed in the following manner:

He was nothing to her, Siver, but serving hands. He was but serving hands, unsensed, unrealized. He was a command given and accomplished. If he became momentarily real, he was intently loathed and quickly transferred to serving hands again. (82-83)

In common with other Southern writers, notably Faulkner, Roberts exposes a world ravaged by the effects of an obscure and merciless curse which automatically relates to the crime against humanity: the slave system. Although the social condition depicted by Roberts concerns the turn of the twentieth century, the feeling of White supremacy pervades the setting through suffused traces of scorn, disgust or hatred. With minimal education most Blacks remained farmhands, which was painfully reminiscent of slavery. As Marion B. Lucas puts it in her book entitled *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*:

...those who migrated to the cities frequently found jobs scarce, competition keen and unemployment widespread. ... In the countryside where most blacks lived, the situation was equally bleak. Farmhands preferred to move away from their old «Masters” but most continued to work in agriculture. Common or day laborers occupied the lowest rung of the economic ladder, frequently working in unhealthy and unsanitary conditions. At the bottom of the wage scale, they toiled. (268, 278)

Maintaining ignorance and putting the veil onto the issue of slavery and miscegenation were easy ways, as Williamson shows: "The basic response of the white world to brown America was simply to maintain as much ignorance about it as possible". (134) Obstinate blindness is symptomatic of the failure to recognize kin. Yet, transgression of the social taboo is known: "His [Stiggins's] mother was Dolly Brown, a half-witted Negress who lived in the alley behind the jail, and his father had been some white man". (13)

Later on, Theodosia discovers in old letters that the man referred to as "some white man" is actually her own dad. When trying to speak to her dying grandfather about what she learnt from the family papers, the old man:

... burst(s) into a torrent of anger, oaths chocking back his words: "Never let me hear you mention it. Not whilst I live. The worse piece of impudence that I ever saw in my life. Enough virtue in a Bell, in a Montford, to carry along a little excess weight. Never let me hear a sign of this again. Get about your business." (107)

Asserting his male power, he disdainfully sends his granddaughter away. In disclosing the family secrets Theodosia does not react like a southern belle but rather like a new woman or a suffragette questioning male power, and such a bold attitude is unacceptable in male chauvinist conventional Southern families. This above scene is also reminiscent of other miscegenation novels, where the white father refuses to acknowledge his mulatto offspring, like Sutpen in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*.

In an essay devoted to Kentucky fiction ("Bluegrass and Laurel: The Varieties of Kentucky Fiction"), Grant C. Knight sheds an interesting light on the novel: "with the exception of Miss Roberts's *My Heart and My Flesh* no Kentucky novel has ventured boldly upon the tragedy of miscegenation or pictured the Negro as other than half melancholy, half jolly, altogether faithful Black Joe." (Knight 13)

Additionally, the South's weaknesses and lack of coherence are symbolically exposed in the main character's losses which derive from her curiosity to know more about her family paper. When she discovers that her father has illegitimate offspring, Theodosia sets her mind on visiting them but immediately feels condescendence and disdain for Lethe, Americy and Stiggins, her mulatto sisters and half brother:

"All right, then, my sisters," she said. A great weariness assailed her and she was aware of fear. There was more to comprehend and the exercises grew irksome, difficult. Her thought passed beyond fear and rested on pity, abhorrence, sickening loathing.

Theodosia experiences an intense repulsion and hatred feeling toward her father which are exacerbated after she escapes from his lewd touches and kisses:

... He caught her into his arms. "Kiss your father good-night", he said. "I don't want to". ... "I want to kiss a pretty girl before I go to bed and by God, you're a pretty one. Kiss me good-night". "I don't want to", she was saying. He had already kissed her many times and was trying to force her to return the expression. She pulled herself from his arms and went quickly to her room, which she set in order. She prepared for bed quickly, for the room was cold. ...She was freed to hate Horace Bell. His touch on her arms and on her breast had been obscene. (105)

His lasciviousness also intensifies her revulsion toward him. A grotesque and gruesome dream of: "a naked man, in a lewd pose", with marks on his body then shaped like small teats on his lower abdomen that "became more alive, rigid with life, and pointed forward towards the women." (179) adds up more confusion in the reader's mind and is a foreboding of near madness to come.

Not surprisingly, most male characters are depicted as deceitful, wicked or cheaters in the novel. Albert Stiles - Theodosia's first suitor - leaves Theodosia for another woman and Conway Brooke - her second lover - dies in an accident before she learns he had an affair with another woman and fathered a child. Later on, her half-brother Stiggins has an inappropriate incestuous affair with Americy in a dreadful setting, and while Theodosia is at her aunt's home, she endures near rape by neighbor Frank Railey.

The absence of reference points and a feeling of general collapse and loss make dark feelings come out and are systematic of other southern novels of the twenties and thirties like *Tobacco Road* by Erskine Caldwell, *In the Land of Cotton* by Dorothy Scarborough, or *This*

Body the Earth by Paul Green to name but a few. Most novels of the time give as grim and hopeless a picture as Roberts' but none goes so far as to show the ultimate state of destitution and despair to which their main characters are driven. Like in a Sophocles tragedy, an unkind fate leads to murder and revenge that results in human loss and disaster. When Lethe and Theodosia recount to each other in contrapuntal disharmonies their betrayals and vengeance, they gradually become caught up in a mad frenzy. In Lethe, "Hate was apotheosized, a hungry god, ravenous, beside an altar waiting for food." (191-192) Theodosia "was shut into a complete stillness and she was mingled with Lethe's anger and hate" (193-104). Eventually, the two motifs merge into a single blaring and murderous whole. Back in her room, Theodosia imagines what Lethe will do to Lou who has stolen her man. Once again, she merges with Lethe's act:

... She would plunge the knife into hated flesh, her hand would feel the dull resistance of human bone and it would rain up and down, stabbing deeper with each blow, letting out the blood tearing through flesh until her hate had eased itself. (197)

An immediate visual representation of attitudes and actions gives strength and directness to the above extract with few clear explanations for the sake of dramatic composition. Such a downward spiral made up of cruelty, madness, and ferocity recalls works by Flannery O' Connor where, in a similar vein, wild minds are eaten away by madness and bear the seal of human alienation and degeneration.

Thence, confusion, alienation, bestiality, cruelty and sexuality make up central strands in *My Heart and My Flesh*. They are also deeply entrenched in Southern literature and bear the mark of trauma in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, *Sanctuary*, *Sartoris* and *As I Lay Dying*, in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, or in Caldwell's *God's Little Acre* to name a few. Additionally, in his reference book: *Ecrits en souffrance, figures du trauma dans la littérature nord-américaine*, Marc Amfreville brilliantly emphasizes the indefinite nature of suffering chiselled in the flesh of words.

The ill-fated South is also encapsulated in the onomastic code through scattered references to the Bible. The name "Stiggins" is reminiscent of the stigma of a doomed society. A partial anagram of America, "amity" and "mercy" make Theodosia's half-sister's name "Americy" refer to the whole continent in its complexity and diversity. As for Lethe, her name

has a lethargic dimension since the original sin of miscegenation is voluntarily forgotten from the social discourse. It also conjures up weariness and indolence:

The first to be born as far as is known at present was Lethe. River of forgetfulness. Her name shall be Lethe, saying, I forgot myself. A careless brown wench in a love mood and I forgot myself. Third voice: Then Americy. A whole continent to name an incontinent hour. (243)

Altogether, the meanders of the writing activity, the wounds, the memory-based rhyming process, the metaphorical recurrences and the narrative intertwining elements help understand the way Roberts participates in the psyche's poetic knowledge. However, Theodosia is also a victim of ignorance and of society - with its unfair economic system - which make her helpless. In these troubled times, Roberts alludes to the Tobacco War when the American Tobacco Company exercised a monopoly on the market and prevented competitive bidding through the warehouse auction system. Night-rider activists burnt barns and killed farmers who sold tobacco directly. In the novel, confusion leads to incredulity when, for example, Albert, a young tobacco manager believes the tobacco pool is assured:

The farmers were discontented with the tobacco sales. The speculators were busy passing the crop from hand to hand, playing a game to outdo one another. Sometimes a farmer saw his crop selling for twice the sum he had been paid less than a week earlier. "Too many dead-heads function between the grower and the manufacturer", Albert said. (154)

The description of such situations is in no way a distortion of reality since they were fairly common according to the reports of many observers. Inflation, over-speculation, mechanization, debt and depression followed.

The financial crash of 1929 is a year of drought in Kentucky and encourages moon-shining and bootlegging. Yet, Kentuckians remain agrarian on the whole and resist industrialism as Clark points out in *A History of Kentucky*: "The people who had come to Kentucky as agrarians have remained close to the soil." (Clark, 390) That peculiar sense of continuity and the compelling force of the land are two major strands in Roberts' novels as well as in many other southern works where people are rooted in their traditions and mindsets and are not willing to change. Even though nothing will halt the downfall of the main

character, a pleasant outcome is predictable with the very name "Theodosia" with its Greek meaning: "the gift of God."

Recovery after the turmoil

Roberts probes into the complexities of the human soul and denounces the ones unable to find meaning in their lives. Despair will plunge the self in darkness and will make it react to get away from obscurity. Cowards will not be allowed to do so. Such a feeling becomes a stimulus for energy for it gives the necessary impetus for life. Consequently, despair becomes a liberating agent and an instrument. Hence, the book is in keeping with the romantic tradition of the time where the main characters triumph over their woes and misfortunes.

Theodosia's ability to endure like Faulkner's Compsons or the Burdens in *As I Lay Dying*, is crucial to overcome the progressive and systematic loss of everything around and within her:

At once a vivid appearance entered her mind, so brilliant and powerful that her consciousness was abashed. Larger than the world, more spacious than the universe, the new apparition spread through her members and tightened her hands so that they knotted suddenly together ..., her body spread widely and expanded to its former reach, and the earth came back, herself acutely aware of it. A pleasure that she still lived to participate in this recognition caught her throat with a deep sob. ... "I'm still alive," she sang under her breath, "I'm alive, I'm alive!" (255-256)

Accepting such sufferings exerts a purifying effect in that *bildungsroman*. Theodosia loses a lot in the course of the narrative but she also discovers the ties that bind her to the colored people who live around her—sisterhood, mainly, as Americus and Lethe are somehow part of her flesh and are later fully integrated in her heart.

A long series of humiliations and hardships is necessary for Theodosia to learn that life's fullness does not derive from external circumstances but that beauty in life is to be designed from within. The most deprived and the poorest may also experience the feeling of inner joy poured out by little things. At the height of confusion and despair, Theodosia remembers the healing power of nature: "I perceive the earth, myself imbedded into it, attached to it at all points, sinking at each moment into it" (186); and her doctor lately prescribes good food and country air. (200)

Personal virtues are also emphasized: good triumphs over evil, sincerity over deceit, honesty over deception. In the final chapter, Theodosia finds peace in the natural world with the community. Symbolically, her spirit merges with the Eternal Spirit through nature. Her renewal is associated with the people of the valley: "They were new with the beginning of the earth, beyond the reach of truism, fresh and uncertain, the dew of new-birth on every saying. They were of the world and the world was new." (265)

For Roberts, flesh and spirit "are in truth different only as two aspects of one unified reality." (Campbell and Foster, 103-104) The value that the writer confers to both love and spirit –or the soul – is implied in the title which comes from Psalm 84, verse 2 "My heart and my flesh crieth for the living God" with sin expiation overtones.

Although the title could denote a clear division between *My Heart* on one side, and *My Flesh* on the other - which would add up more fracture to the chaos - it could also be interpreted as a unifying process towards a whole. At the end, appeasement prevails and *My Flesh* has come to terms with *My Heart*; or *My Heart* has soothed *My Flesh*.

As Isabel Lockwood Hawley points out: "Heart and flesh encompass both the physical and the spiritual component of the individual" (309-10). The name of Spring Run Valley along with the food Theodosia receives from the Valley community recalls biblical sharing with Jesus sharing bread. (259-260) Giving and receiving embody holy spiritual union and peace. Humbleness now prevails: Theodosia becomes a teacher and communicates the new knowledge of life. Earth, pastoral and Eden are part of the cyclic wheel of life after death and rebirth. The now poetic discourse and lengthy sentences have the unified voice and consistent style of poetry. A Biblical and pastoral scene permeates the final pages of the novel. Theodosia finds fulfilment in personal love with Caleb Burns who brings new peace to her and true feelings. As a cattle grower, he is well respected and is the embodiment of the life force of the valley. As he tells Theodosia, "Man looks forward to a city ... but looks backward to a garden, Eden." (291). Spiritual harmony stimulates rebirth in heart and flesh along with the soothing power of the land.

Lyrical qualities infuse the last scene when Theodosia's ancestry is recalled again by Caleb Burns; he highlights her lineage: "with Anneville, named for a woman, Anne Montford ... your great grandmother, mother to Theodosia Montford, grandmother to Anthony Bell." (292) As Simone Vauthier observes:

This genealogy places Theodosia in the safety of a lineage but displaces the patriarchal emphasis: matrilineal descent insists on the mother's value and not on the father's "virtue." Women **are** inheritors, although they do not usually count in androcentric pattern of genealogical transmission. In many ways, the clear-cut categories of the patriarchal discourse, founded on the difference of race and gender, are called into question. (48)

In Roberts' work, each novel has a happy ending, showing that everything comes to the one who waits. The writer is also made of the same moral fiber as her main character. She communicates her admiration for the courageous women who brave hardships and natural elements to overcome their fate—the main characters' personality makes them worthy of love. In the final pages, Theodosia's quest is complete, hell is harrowed and death is averted.

Conclusion

Grasping the whole world in an act of God, restoring it from its lethargy and conveying mercy and amity could also bring the pieces of the puzzle together in a hidden message that Roberts, as a deep thinker, could impart. Isolated and eccentric, the writer used to spend most of her time alone and would solve many of her problems mentally.

Like her heroine, Roberts searches for unity and harmony in life. The story seems to be a counterpart of her life in many ways: the writer strive for artistry inasmuch as Theodosia longed for excellence in music. She is also made of the same moral fiber as her main characters. She looks like them with her aversion for smallness, her condemnation of imposture, and her intransigent faith in humankind. True revelations entail the in-extremis conversion of the souls. In theological terms, the conversion could be interpreted as the expression of God's blessing. Roberts seems to urge the reader to do so despite her known disinterest for religious matters.

Constructing one's experience in a world of pain so as to find the ability to individuate underlies her work. She perpetuates the prophetic tradition of those opposing mediocre compromise in their passionate demand for the absolute, even though secular humanism - which prevails in her works - is not pervaded with light and happiness but with a vague anxiety of man struggling against himself, a recurrent motive in southern literature.

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