

# Spiritualizing the Domestic Sphere: “Infinite Affirmation” in the Inward and Outward Journeys

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Keep Ithaka always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you are destined for.  
But do not hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you are old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.  
Without her you would not have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.

(C. P. Cavafy, “Ithaka”)

Elizabeth Madox Roberts (1881–1941) has not fared very well in the unpredictable turnings of the roller coaster of literary history. In her day she was a very popular writer. Her first novel, *The Time of Man* (1926), was an instant success with readers and reviewers alike. It was praised by notable writers like Sherwood Anderson, who called it, “A wonderful performance. I am humble before it” (in Campbell and

Foster 46).<sup>1</sup> Ford Madox Ford distinguished it as “the most beautiful individual piece of writing that has as yet come out of America” (in Slavick viii). The novel was chosen in October 1926 as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and later published in England and translated into Swedish, German, Norwegian, Danish, Spanish, and French. Yet the sales of Roberts’s books decreased dramatically after the early 1930s, and her popularity plummeted after the publication of *He Sent Forth a Raven* in 1935. In the 1950s Roberts’s popularity enjoyed a revival led by Edward Wagenknecht, who in his *Cavalcade of the American Novel* (1952) wrote that “her kind of poetic insight is the very thing that is needed to save the novel from its exhausted naturalism and sentimentalism” (396). Interesting re-evaluations of Roberts’s achievement include Harry Campbell and Ruel Foster’s *Elizabeth Madox Roberts: American Novelist* (1956),<sup>2</sup> containing valuable biographical information and extensive reference to the author’s journals and papers in the Library of Congress, and Earl H. Rovit’s *Herald to Chaos: The Novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts* (1960), which remains the most insightful study of Roberts’s major works. One of the factors that contributed to renewed interest in this Kentucky writer was the unprecedented fascination of readers and critics with modern Southern literature. Willard Thorp reviewed her work extensively in the chapter “Southern Renaissance” in *American Writing in the Twentieth Century* (1960) and placed *The Time of Man* and *The Great Meadow* (1930) “among the classics of our literature” (240). In his introduction to the 1982 University of Kentucky Press edition of *The Time of Man*, William Slavick added to the chorus of Roberts’s admirers by saying that this novel made her “the first major novelist of the Southern renaissance” (vii). Slavick expressed his confidence in its success due to renewed interest in femi-

<sup>1</sup>On reading the novel, Anderson wrote to Roberts: “My love of the book is beyond expression. . . . No one in America is doing such writing” (Slavick viii).

<sup>2</sup>Campbell and Foster enthusiastically predicted that “*The Time of Man* and *The Great Meadow* will almost certainly endure as major American novels” (xvi).

nism and Southern art. But so far none of these studies and predictions have either had a lasting impact or proven true.

It is indeed surprising that Roberts has attracted such scant attention from feminist critics, considering her analysis of the feminine consciousness, which is more intense than those of Kate Chopin, Ellen Glasgow, Carson McCullers, or Eudora Welty. The central characters of five Roberts novels are women, and she was convinced that in many respects women were spiritually superior to and deeper than men. The present relegation of Roberts to the margins of American literary history is even more surprising in light of the recent feminist enterprise of reclaiming and celebrating the regenerative and ritualistic dimensions of domesticity and traditional female culture, dimensions central to both *The Time of Man* and *The Great Meadow*, Roberts's most successful novels. In recent years, Kathryn Rabuzzi, Ann Romines, Helen Levy, Nina Baym, Kristina Groover, and Jeannette Cooperman have produced a substantial body of criticism that has shifted attention from the male quest pattern to the domestic realm, the appropriate expression of a complex and peculiarly female culture. At this point, in order to situate Roberts within this culture, I will survey the formulation of it offered by these critics.

#### SACRED CHORES

Rabuzzi was one of the first to redress the balance and claim that the domestic sphere, traditionally assigned to women, was as worthy of attention as the world of entrepreneurism and adventure, traditionally reserved to men.<sup>3</sup> She maintains that the sacrality within a home is comparable to that in a church, that “[l]ike a church, home provides refuge from the ‘outside’ world” (43). For this feminist theologian, home “is primarily a symbol of salvation” because for most of us “it automatically implies salvation in the sense of safety—safety from the ele-

<sup>3</sup>Rabuzzi laments that “[g]enerally more ‘lofty’ procedures (such as Hemingway’s endless details about how to bait a fishhook) have been deemed artistic, while women’s work has been considered too trivial for art” (93–94).

ments, from animals, from dangerous people, and from fearful encounters of any kind” (67). The presence of the goddess Hestia lies at the heart of the ritual patterns essential for the role of housewife, patterns that “women in traditional societies have enacted within their lives” (94). This performance can transform housekeeping tasks into rituals to the point that the housewife is no longer participating in profane historical time but “in mythic time, ritually returning as a priestess to the time of origins, the primordial time in which the gods and goddesses originally created order out of chaos” (97).

According to Ann Romines, the rituals performed in a house oppose the tendency of human-made shelters “to accede to nature and thus to decay and to change” (12). Romines argues convincingly that some of the best fiction by American women writers, such as *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) by Sarah Orne Jewett, *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) by Willa Cather, *Losing Battles* (1970) by Eudora Welty, and *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (1891) by Mary Wilkins Freeman, “is dominated and shaped by the rhythms and stresses of domestic ritual, by the complex of domestic-literary concerns [Romines calls] the home plot” (9). Most such studies of women and the home not only juxtapose the home place and the natural environment (positing a mutual enrichment of domestic artistry and nature’s abundance) but also associate domesticity with female creativity: “The home place offers a metaphorical explanation for individual female authorship as well, depicting a powerful example of ongoing womanly creativity and strength, which extends to all women” (Levy 7). When domestic ritual is not viewed as trivial and oppressive but as the source of “liberating capacities to generate play, invention, and art,” then housework “is not only the unspoken, unvalued routine by which a patriarchal regime is maintained[, i]t is also the center and vehicle of a culture invented by women, a complex and continuing process of female, domestic art” (Romines 13–14).

The inaccessibility of the wilderness quest motif for women, often tied by obligations to home, family, and community, is the subject of Nina Baym’s influential “Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors” (1981), a subject subsequently taken up by Kristina Groover in *The Wilderness Within* (1999).

Starting from the premise that in American literature “a spiritual quest tradition which mandates solitary flight from family and community is a tradition which pointedly excludes women” (3), Groover contends that in women’s culture the sacred is found in earthly and ordinary activity spiritualized as “positive transformative experience” (10). In women, the spiritual is achieved and expressed through engagement with ordinary everyday tasks, not through separation and flight from them. As Jeanette Cooperman claims, “it is precisely the physicality of domestic acts and objects that leads us toward pure spirit” (183). Since the word “sacred” can be traced back to its Latin root, the verb *sancire* (to confer validity and reality, to make something become real), it would seem that *real* experience and sacred experience are complementary. The housekeeper who sustains everyday life and restores simple order “builds a bridge between experience and its sacred meaning. As cook, cleaner, hostess and healer, she plays roles of mythic, even cosmic import” (Cooperman 183).

Like many Southern women writers, Elizabeth Madox Roberts emphasizes the concrete in the household environment as well as a sense of human limitation. However, this limitation is transcended through the strength of the human spirit, as in the case of Ellen Chesser in *The Time of Man*. To the vicissitudes of her harsh existence as an itinerant tenant farmer, Ellen responds with resilience and moral rectitude and thus exemplifies what the author referred to as “the strong, elemental, spiritual quality which I tried to symbolize with my story of Ellen.”<sup>4</sup> Roberts’s overall concern is the dramatic presentation of the interior psychic journey. Ultimate reality lies for her in the human spirit, and the outer physical world reflects and symbolizes the absolutes which originate in the human psyche. The events and the objects that confront the mind give concrete expression to the landscape of the soul, and the fusion of the inner and the outer realities Roberts called “poetic realism.”<sup>5</sup> When she had become interested in the novel

<sup>4</sup>Stated in a letter to her friend Miss Stella Simms at the time of the initial success of *The Time of Man* (in Campbell and Foster 48).

<sup>5</sup>The term appears in Roberts’s unpublished notes for *The Time of Man*

as a form, she explained her conviction in a letter to Janet L. Lewis, dated August 5, 1920:

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 at which they come together and we can never know the whole of reality until we know these two completely. (Campbell and Foster 33)

### HOME QUEST

As in Roberts's subsequent novels, *The Time of Man* concerns inner development through the search for identity. It opens, significantly, with the protagonist writing "her name in the air with her finger, *Ellen Chesser*" (9). As she explores different environments and attempts to impose a design upon the chaos of experience, Ellen is exploring and creating her self. The spaces that shape and are shaped by her are infused with the spirituality of ritual activity and of her attitude of "infinite affirmation" (176). As an itinerant tenant farmer excluded from middle and upper class privileges of domesticity and lacking a place to call her own, Ellen is forced constantly to change houses, actually combining the woman's traditional social environment and the male quest pattern, the two polarities of intimacy (home) and action (road). The journey, which is so important in her life, is not the masculine journey of setting out and leading but the feminine one of following and going along for the ride (Wesley xii). Yi-Fu Tuan notes the opposition between "home" and "journey" and claims that in order to live truly the individual has to take risks in alien places, that the journey (*travail*) defines "home," which has no meaning apart from that which takes one outside its precincts: "an argument in favor of travel is that it increases awareness, not of exotic places, but of home as a place" (235). Thus the journey motif on which the novel opens and closes is most appropriate to express Roberts's conception of the self as process, as an entity never fully discovered nor completed. In her jour-

nal, Roberts dates her discovery of the literary potential of the limited life of the Southern tenant farmer: "It was, I think, in the summer of 1919 that I began to think of the wandering tenant farmer of our region as offering a symbol for an Odyssey [sic] of Man as a wanderer buffeted about by the fates and weathers" (Rovit 9). Her intention was to infuse a twentieth-century realistic novel with the self-defining characteristics of the classical epic. Her protagonist is not a superhuman hero who fights godly or infernal forces, but the democratic "representative man" of Emerson, the ordinary individual in the democratic tradition of Howells and Whitman, who fights the eternal powers of nature and, in the case of Ellen Chesser, the limitations imposed by gender and class. Rovit observes that in order to achieve epic strength in *The Time of Man*, "Ellen Chesser must somehow incarnate the highest virtues of humanity while being, at the same time, a convincing representative of the 'poor white' Southern tenant-farmer class" (11).<sup>6</sup>

Roberts's counterpart of Homer's legendary hero is a poor woman who, unlike the king of Ithaca, never makes it to a protective, stable home. The structure of the long wandering journey—the novel covers a period of some twenty years in Ellen's life—is appropriate as a correlation of the psychic journey of a protagonist who shows an acute consciousness of the variety of spaces in the many houses—all of them tenant houses—in which she lives: three with her parents before her marriage to Jasper Kent, and another four as a wife and mother. This intense awareness of spaces—rooms, corners, stairways, kitchens, even external appearances of these houses—both expresses and nurtures Ellen's intensely responsive spirit (McBride 63) and provides moments of union be-

<sup>6</sup>Roberts also put *The Great Meadow* in a mythic context. Heroine Diony Hall's father salutes her departure for the West by reading from Virgil's *Aeneid*: "I sing of arms and the hero who, fate driven, first came from the shores of Troy to Italy and the Lavinian coast, he, *vi superum*, by the power of the gods, much tossed about, *multum jactatus*, much tossed about on land and sea . . ." (121). Through the allusion to the journey that led to the founding of an imperial nation, Roberts invests Diony's journey from Virginia to Kentucky in the years following the American Revolution with a similar significance.

tween the physical and the spiritual and between the self and the world. Although Ellen is only fourteen at the beginning of her odyssey, she sounds like a young adult who has learned the hard way and lost much of the capacity to dream of escaping the restrictive environment that also characterizes the female adolescents of Carson McCullers. Roberts's heroine starts out with an acute consciousness of severe confines that becomes a constant throughout the novel:

“The country all around got little and narrow and I says to myself, ‘The world’s little and you just set still in it and that’s all there is. There ain’t e’er ocean,’ I says, ‘nor e’er city nor e’er river nor e’er North Pole. There’s just the little edge of a wheat field and a little edge of a blacksmith shop with nails on the ground, and there’s a road a-goen off a little piece with puddles of water a-standen, and there’s mud,’ I says.” (11)

Troubled by “the strangeness” and “the smell of rats and soot” (10) of the family’s tenant cabin, Ellen intuitively reacts to the sight of Hep Bodine’s farmhouse as a sanctuary: “In her mind the house touched something she almost knew. . . . touched something settled and comforting in her mind, something like a drink of water after an hour of thirst, like a little bridge over a stream that ran out of a thicket, like cool steps going up into a shaded doorway” (14–15). She recognizes this house, which for those of her class will always remain unreachable, as a source of spiritual nourishment and regeneration, as a structure that shields the fragile self.

Phenomenologists tend to consider houses, which really bring us inside and represent the need for being situated, as central to human existence (Norberg-Schulz 31). The house is where children learn to understand being in the world, the place from which individuals depart and to which they return. For Gaston Bachelard the house is especially important for confirming the individual’s basic notion of being: “I must show that the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of man-kind” (6). The house, without which the individual would be “a dispersed being,” is

“the human being’s first world. Before he is ‘cast into the world,’ . . . man is laid in the cradle of the house. And always, in our daydreams, the house is a large cradle” (7). Alone in her room in the tenant cabin on the Wakefield farm, and in spite of her recent rejection by a lover, Ellen can confirm that she is “still herself”: “‘I’m Ellen Chesser. And I’m here, in myself,’ she said” (228). No matter how impermanent her dwelling, she derives from it proof of the stability and centrality of her being. Existence becomes meaningful for Ellen not only because it is nurtured by the protective walls and surroundings of a building, but also because of her intense activities within the environs of these walls, activities performed with the solemn elaboration and formality of religious ceremony:

She would take the turkey bread in her hand and go, bonnetless, up the gentle hill across the pasture in the light of sundown, calling the hens as she went. She was keenly aware of the ceremony and aware of her figure rising out of the fluttering birds, of all moving together about her. She would hear the mules crunching their fodder as she went past the first barn, and she would hear the swish of falling hay, the thud of a mule hoof on a board, a man’s voice ordering or whistling a tune. . . . She would crumble down the bread for each brood near its coop and she would make the count and see to the drinking pans. Then she would go back through the gate, only a wire fence dividing her from the milking group, and walk down the pasture in the dusk. That was all; the office would be over. (94-95)<sup>7</sup>

This passage contains the repetitive language of ritual; the reiteration of the personal pronoun followed by the habitual past points to the three frequently cited requirements for ritual: formality, fixity, and repetition. Ellen experiences life as a set of activities which intensify the relationship of the self to its setting in nature, in the human community (the turkeys are not Ellen’s), and in time. The passage emphasizes Ellen’s

<sup>7</sup>Roberts here uses the word “office” (from Latin *officium*) in its double mean-

active perception and involvement as well as sense of reality and understanding of how to respond to it. Robert Penn Warren observes that such “ritual makes for the understanding of experience in relation to the community of the living and the dead” (xxviii), and Rabuzzi remarks that besides its strong aesthetic component, the ritual enactment of housekeeping “links its performer back in time to the company of female ancestors,” such linking to origins being “a frequent and important element of most religious ritual” (102). When she needs to recover from the desolation and paralyzing hate that tie her to a man who has rejected her love, Ellen resorts to the restorative potential of domestic rituals: “she would go after the turkeys and cut the wood and gather the beans and milk the cows. . . . [S]he would make her breath come quietly in and out, for she was still herself, Ellen Chesser” (228).

Bachelard maintains that when we remember houses from our past we again “participate in this original warmth, in this well-tempered matter of the material paradise” (7). In times of personal crisis the resurfacing of childhood memories confirms our being and identity. For example, on two occasions when her being is assaulted by frightening events, Ellen finds reassurance in the memories of the comfort and security of an earlier childhood home. When she moves with her parents into the Wakefield farm, the unfamiliar tenant house provokes a reassuring memory of events and objects from a past house: “She had been six years old then and she had lived in a house under some nut trees. . . . She could remember the strange smell that hung about the nut trees” (82–83). When she is in deep despair after Jonas Prather jilts her to marry Sally Lou Brown, Ellen returns to early memories in more detail in search of warmth and security: “She turned her mind upon some happenings of her infancy. She had lived in a house under nut trees. The rinds of the nuts broke off in beautiful smooth segments and inside was the pale yellow hickory nut to be laid away to dry for the winter” (229). Bachelard corroborates that “[a]n entire past comes to dwell in a new house,” that “[t]hrough dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days. And after we are in the new house,

when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all Immemorial things are. We live fixations, fixations of happiness. We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection” (5-6). This nurturing and life-giving aspect of dwelling places is emphasized in several descriptions of Ellen’s rooms, like her loft in the cabin at Hep Bodine’s and her room with its locked trunk at Wake-fields’. To Linda Tate both spaces are “literally womblike, underscoring the connection between woman’s body, identity and domestic space” (14), which is suggested by the description of Ellen in the house at the Orkeys’ place:

During the first rains of her stay there Ellen felt the snugness of the night, the dark outside, the falling wet, the dry security of the indoors, so that in her room, shut away from the elements, she felt the security to be within herself as if she were detached by the prison-like whiteness of the dry walls from her own memories, to begin her being anew . . . Ellen found a delight in the snug dry room into which the rain could not come. She would go through the door with a keen rush of sense and, closing the door behind her, she would look about at the enclosing walls while a quiver of content would sweep over her nerves and gather deep in her mind. (240-41)

The connection between intimate space and individual identity becomes explicit when Ellen feels “the security to be within herself,” which brings “a quiver of content” to her heart and mind. As in other rooms of other houses, Ellen goes “deep in her mind,” makes sense of her experiences and, connecting these to her inner realm, nurtures and enriches her interior substance. Both in the above passage and in the novel as a whole, however, we find the coexistence of conflicting discourses—the walls of Ellen’s room provide “security” and protection but are also “prison-like” and “enclosing.” If on the one hand they contribute to enlarging Ellen’s experience and provide possibilities for rebirth and the opportunity “to begin her life anew” after being jilted by Jonas Prather,<sup>8</sup> on the other hand they speak of the dangers of con-

finement. Implicit in the return-to-the-womb motif is alienation from engagement with a world conceived as chaotic both inside and outside. It is what Cynthia Wolff calls “the regression, back beyond childhood, back into time eternal” (258).<sup>9</sup> Because of the danger of excessive dependence on protective nurturing spaces, Bachelard deems as “salutary” the call of psychoanalysis on the individual to live outside the unconscious, “to enter into life’s adventures, to come out of himself,” and warns of the need to “give an exterior destiny to the interior being” (10–11).

However, Ellen never really runs the risk of staying too long on the cradle end of the polarity because of her rich, creative imagination and tendency to explore the surroundings of the various farms she lives in. The leaking roof of the house at the Wakefield farm allows the water to run down the papered walls of Ellen’s room, and the stains change and assume different outlines with each rainfall. At first they were “monsters depicted in shadows and running lines of brown and clouds of amber. They became demons impaled on trees, on walls, crucified on bars of black and dying lewdly . . . . After the next rain a woman in a long shawl came walking through the crosses and a slim hand held up a flower” (89–90). Each new rainfall brings new material for Ellen’s rich imagination to shape. Her daydreams, which spring from surrounding objects, nourish her development and self-individuation. Bachelard says that “the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (6). Ellen frequently fantasizes about ideal houses which convey material, spiritual, and artistic aspirations always beyond her reach. Bachelard observes that sometimes the house of the future is “better built, lighter and larger than all the houses of the past, so that the image of the

<sup>8</sup>In chapter VII, from which this quotation is taken, there is a tendency in Ellen to withdraw from human contact, although she needs to withdraw into the inner resources of being for being in order to resume this contact.

<sup>9</sup>Wolff is commenting on the protagonist’s suicidal swim at the end of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), in which Edna Pontellier feels “like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never

*dream house* is opposed to that of the childhood home.” He is persuaded that perhaps it is good for us to keep dreaming of a house that we shall never inhabit, for “[a] daydream of elsewhere should be left open therefore, at all times” (62). An ideal that is fixed will lead to thoughts but not to dreams, and “[i]t is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality” (61). Since her condition is emphatically impermanent, Ellen dreams constantly. She remembers her friend Tessie’s geography book with places like the Plaza in Mexico City, where “[y]ou could see yourself a-liven in the brown house, a-walken up big stairs and a-looken out that-there tower window” (46).<sup>10</sup> Just turned fifteen, she feels womanhood coming on and fantasizes about her room in the cabin being “pink and blue, herself reading a book by the window. Things to put in drawers and drawers to put things in, she would like, and people to say things to” (47). To be a mature human being, Ellen needs the spiritual order for memories symbolized by what Bachelard calls “a wardrobe” (79): drawers, chests and trunks which offer “the secret security of the inside” (247) for her dreams and plans. She needs this as much as she needs “people to say things to” and thus develop the relational side of her personality. Even when her ideals become more realistic, she retains her creative ability to dream. Sitting with Jasper Kent, her husband-to-be, she imagines a house in a pretty country with “smooth pastures,” a house with the shutters mended and with no leaks in the roof, with “[a] parlor to sit back in cool when the busy season is done. Stairs to go up and down maybe” (285).

As indicated earlier, Ellen’s search and aspirations are not only expressed through closed and protective domestic spaces. Although her surroundings are usually meager and poor, Ellen takes lively interest in the many country roads and paths she constantly walks, and in cultivating gardens and tending domestic animals. She plants her first of many

<sup>10</sup>Even more adventurous than Ellen, Diony Hall is eager to leave the paternal home and make her mark on the world in *The Great Meadow*: “Her whole body swayed toward the wilderness, toward some further part of the world which was not yet known or sensed in any human mind . . .” (93-94).

gardens at the beginning of the novel and is fascinated by her corn and tomato garden at Hep Bodine's, which both creates and defines her internal development: "She ran to the garden eagerly each day to watch for the changes, and her pleasure in the growth of the corn was very real" (31). Through her gardens, which (as extensions of her house) she wants to be "marvell[s] of neatness and economy," Ellen completes her role as nurturer and "trie[s] to give each [family member] the vegetable he liked best in ample profusion" (345). The garden nurtures Ellen's spirit, as seen in one episode when she shakes off depression by gathering herbs for dinner (91), and it functions as a barometer of her moods.<sup>11</sup> One of her first chores when she moves to a new tenant house is to cultivate the soil, very much like Alice Walker's mother, who "turned into a garden" "whatever rocky soil she landed on" (*In Search* 241). Ellen's gardens become larger and more fertile, and by the end of the novel she is growing onions, peas, beets, cabbages, sweet potatoes, cherries, raspberries, and grapes, as well as tending cows and chickens. Traditionally associated with female activity, the garden is a *temenos*, a sacred and circumscribed space guarded as a spiritual entity. The cultivated landscape mediates between the untamed wilderness of the male hero and the domestic realm and allows the gardener a self-expression that is both spiritual and artistic. Hers is a transfigurative power because the garden connects the domestic, the natural, and the spiritual worlds.

#### STRUGGLING ARTIST

Roberts shared with her protagonist the intense search for design, the desire to bring order and form to chaos in both the physical and the spiritual realms. In the cabin at the Wakefield farm, "Ellen brought a branch of thorn blossom into the house and put it in a glass jar on the shelf above the fireplace" (134). Like the speaker of Wallace Stevens's poem "Anecdote of the Jar," Ellen seems to be trying to tame and control the

<sup>11</sup>When her husband is unfaithful, "[t]he weeds grew fast after the midsummer rains, but Ellen cared less to work at the garden, grown listless and weary" (355).

wilderness by satisfying her own sense of form and proportion. Her attempt to bring order and proportion to the chaos of physical reality parallels her persistent struggle to derive an orderly pattern out of her emotional vicissitudes. Roberts describes this process as “the apprehension of form by the mind, the comprehension of pure form, the mind demanding that things, lines, masses of matter be placed in certain relations to give satisfaction or pleasure.” She claims that “the great value of sacred writing is . . . in [its] aesthetic and comforting design, [its] approach to pure form.”<sup>12</sup> About her own literary endeavors, Roberts observes that “[t]he difficulty is to choose material from the chaos about me and the apparent chaos that is myself . . . [;] if I cannot trust the fibers of my being to make the pattern, to write it in its delicate traceries, there *will be no pattern*” (qtd. in Campbell and Foster 37). Her definition of art reflects the expanding component of such patterning:

It is the function of art to enlarge one’s experience, to add to man more tolerance, more forgiveness, to increase one’s hold on all the out-lying spaces which are little realized in the come and go of everyday. (Qtd. in Rovit 8)

In Ellen Chesser, Roberts created an artist protagonist who develops as an individual through the imaginative ordering of her surroundings through actions, daydreams, and memories. Tending to her gardens is for Ellen an adequate means of exploring and enriching her mind, and Roberts equates Ellen’s penetration of the soil with the mind’s penetration of existence:

Breaking the soil her mind would penetrate the crumbling clod with a question that searched each new-turned lump of earth and pushed always more and more inwardly upon the ground, a lasting question that gathered around some unspoken word such as “why” or “how.” Thus until her act of breaking open the clay was

itself a search, as if she were digging carefully to find some buried morsel, some reply. (364)

Through the routine of homemaking—preparing meals, sewing garments,<sup>13</sup> planting a garden, nurturing children, singing songs, tending animals—Ellen gains an ever increasing awareness of herself as both woman and creator, an awareness that both connects her to others and reveals her limitations. Her intense maternal experience—she has five surviving children—crowns her creativity and is her main link to past and future life: “Out of me,” Ellen says, “come people forever, forever” (333). When her daughter Nannie reaches the age Ellen had been when the novel began, Ellen feels mystically part of Nannie’s life and, at the same time, through nurturing and housekeeping, her life seems to merge with that of her mother, Nellie:

Going about the rough barnlot of the farm above Rock Creek, calling in the hens, breaking them corn, Ellen would merge with Nellie in the long memory she had of her from the time when she had called from the fence with so much prettiness, through the numberless places she had lived or stayed and the pain she had known, until her mother’s life merged into her own and she could scarcely divide the one from the other, both flowing continuously and mounting. (383)

Lives “both flowing continuously and mounting” suggest the eternal creative and nurturing powers shared by women and blurring individuality. Carl Jung addresses interpenetration of female identity by mothers and daughters, noting that it produces temporal uncertainty

<sup>13</sup>Like Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, Ellen experiences when sewing a mystical participation in the divine force which gives unity and form: “Life and herself, one, comprehensible and entire, without flaw, with beginning and end, and on the instant she herself was imaged in the lucid thought. A sense of happiness . . . engulfed her thinking until she floated in a tide of sense and could not divide herself from the flood and could not now restore the memory of the

as well as a feeling of transcendence across generations:

We could therefore say that every mother contains her daughter within herself, and every daughter her mother. . . . Every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter. This participation and intermingling gives rise to that peculiar uncertainty as regards *time*: a woman lives earlier as a mother, later as a daughter. The conscious experience of these ties produces the feeling that her life is spread out over generations . . . . (162)

Adrienne Rich asserts that mothers and daughters share “a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other” (220).<sup>14</sup> Yet while Ellen Chesser finds self-realization as well as transcendence in the nurturing sphere that connects her to other generations, she does not unequivocally accept and celebrate either the domestic role or her role as mother and wife. There is in Ellen a coexistence of submission to and rebellion against patriarchy, against a life severely restricted by biology and poverty. While Ellen’s cry, “Here I am! . . . I’m Ellen Chesser! I’m here” (89), has delighted the ears of many Southern women writers and critics who have rejoiced in this expression of female empowerment, Ellen’s moods of affirmation are often counteracted by those of despondency caused by an infernal circle of poverty, hard work, and isolation:

“Oh, why am I here and what is it all for anyway? . . . I’m a-fallen through the world and there’s no end to the top and no end to the bottom. Mammy a-getten up and a-cooken and a-goen to bed and Pappy works all day, and we have to eat and we have to wear and we have to have fire, and there’s no end to anything.” (96)

Ellen sometimes fears and is repelled by the painful aspects of female life patterns. She feels a secret disgust at carrying and giving birth to

<sup>14</sup>Woolf maintains in *A Room of One’s Own* that “we think back through our mothers if we are women” (76).

children, and “[m]emory play[s] up a monstrous picture in her mind” when she remembers “Eva Stikes in labor with Esther”(43),<sup>15</sup> and she anticipates her own inevitable discomfort when she overhears the older women’s litany of married life:

“When they say, ‘Come see the bride,’ I always say, ‘I’d rather see her in ten year.’ . . . [After a time a married woman will look] like a buzzard. Up by sunup to cook for Tom and up till midnight with the youngones . . . .” (156-57)

Ellen Chesser is one of a legion of poor Southern women who find themselves immersed in the traditional pattern of wifedom and motherhood, trapped in the unending struggle of the traditional family. These poor “mules of the world”<sup>16</sup> conceive and give birth to numerous children only to see them struggle and suffer, “hollow-eyed and thin, their beings waiting upon the hazards of the seasons” (Roberts 331). In spite of their constant deprivation and hardship, these women continue to stand by their hardworking husbands, work to protect them in spite of failure and betrayal, and follow them along wherever the male quest takes them. Ellen has always had “[a] hard country, not gentle like you’d want” (395),<sup>17</sup> and she always longs to improve the life of her family, longs for “the people who moved and lived just beyond her knowledge and acquaintance” (114). At the end of the novel, again moving to an unknown destination, she continues to dream and to long for “[s]ome better country. Our own place maybe” (396). When her son Dick voices his intention to read the books that contain “the wisdom of the world,” Ellen feels “her own being, in Dick, pushed outward against the great over-lying barrier, the enveloping dark. His want startled her

<sup>15</sup>This echoes Edna Pontellier’s disgust at the biological trap of being possessed by children in Chopin’s *The Awakening*.

<sup>16</sup>Alice Walker applies this label to the poor black women of the post-Reconstruction South (232).

<sup>17</sup>Roberts sees people like Ellen in universal terms as symbols of “Man . . . beset by all the menaces lying within and without, but indestructible finally in

with its determination and its reach, coming upon her as something she knew already, had always known, now enhanced and magnified, unappeared" (389). Roberts was convinced that "the sovereign part of man is his mind" (in Rovit 61), and in *The Great Meadow* she crowns Diony Hall's vision of a new society emerging out of the chaos of the forest with "[a] dream of knowledge, of wisdom brought under beautiful or awful sayings and remembered, kept stored among written pages and brought together then as books." In those books that contain all the riches and the wisdom of civilization one can "search the terrible pages looking for beauty, looking for some final true way of life" (212). But *The Time of Man* provides no indication that this "want" will ever be satisfied, that Ellen is ever going to break through "the great over-lying barrier," penetrate the "enveloping dark," or break out of a world that "was hard and impenetrable" (171). Everything seems to indicate that instead of moving "outward," Ellen, her husband, and her children will continue to move in the unending cycle of poverty and deprivation of the Southern tenant farmer. Ellen's experience is thus different from that of the mythological male hero Odysseus, who after a series of exciting adventures arrived at the comfort and protection of home in Ithaca. Unlike Odysseus' journey, Ellen's is never completed and is last seen on the road headed for an unknown destination, the stressing of the passage. The journey in *The Time of Man* fits the nomadic paradigm, with women, men, and children traveling together along the migratory path that gives rise to the structure and cohesion of the group (Leed 116).

In spite of Roberts's affirmation of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit, there runs through her novel a strong deterministic vein, a conception of human life in which the rhythms and processes of nature have taken on the role played by fate in classical epic and tragedy.<sup>18</sup> At the end, the plan to take to the road once again becomes an "inevitable" one (394), as Jasper's past as a convicted barnburner haunts him. There is not the faintest ray of hope for Ellen Chesser ever to break free from the constraints of her underprivileged social circle, and

<sup>18</sup>The name Chesser might point to the naturalistic conception of the indi-

it is questionable whether this novel can be classified as social protest or exposure of lamentable conditions. Roberts said that “[i]t could never be an analysis of society or of a social stratum because it keeps starkly within one consciousness, and that one being not an analytical or a ‘conscious’ consciousness” (in Rovit 24–25). Taking this lead from the author, critics, like Rovit, influenced by the New Criticism have denied the novel any “documentary” contents or attempt at social protest. However, even where unintended, social criticism as well as protest can be implicit in the deprivation of the individual consciousness shaped by such a society and conformed to such a system. It is impossible not to detect in Ellen a whispered protest against a system that severely constricts her as a member of the lower classes and as a woman placed in a situation in which “[y]ou could never see any end to anything and it goes on and on” (97).

Even though her material situation remains practically unchanged during a journey that combines forward and circular motion, Ellen’s spiritual evolution is impressive and meant to be a feminist statement. Despite being poor and invisible to the upper classes of Southern society, Ellen is a strong, courageous woman with an intense and challenging internal life and a remarkable ability to be in harmony with nature. She reflects the conviction about the inner potential of women that Roberts expressed in her notes:

There is so much more to a woman than there is to a man. More complication. A woman is more closely identified with the earth, more real because deeper gifted with pain, danger, and a briefer life. More intense, richer in memory and feeling.

A man’s machinery is all outside himself. A woman’s deeply and dangerously inside. Amen. (In Slavick xvi)

Convinced of this superiority, Roberts conceived Ellen to celebrate the crucial role of women in the progress and triumph of culture over nature, thus breaking apart the false dichotomy of women as nature and men as culture. In *The Great Meadow*, Diony realizes with some resentment, while suckling her baby boy, the role of women in the civilizing

project: men experiment with law, from revenge expeditions to the formation of courts, “but the women gave their thoughts to other things and followed a hidden law” (229). Women like Ellen and Diony partake of the civilizing spirit, and with their inner strength complement the male thrust:

Together, men and women, they went slowly forward, the men to the fore, the man’s strength being in the thrust, the drive, in action, the woman’s lateral, in the plane, enduring, inactive but constant. They marched forward, taking a new world for themselves, possessing themselves of it by the power of their courage, their order, and their endurance. (*Meadow* 168)

*The Time of Man*’s final sentence, “They asked no questions of the way but took their own turnings,” seems to combine a sense of loss and uncertainty with an attitude of active resistance. Thus the novel does not end in the unequivocal triumph that Rovit contends it does (16); rather, the product of Roberts’s creativity eludes either/or logic and achieves a complex fusion of opposites—triumph/defeat, hope/despair, self-determination/fate—in consonance with the protagonist’s fluctuations between affirmation and despondency. Ellen Chesser always offers resistance to the fates that buffet her and shows resilience and hope in the face of severe constrictions of gender and class. In-deed, her Sisyphean affirmation has always been around “in the time of man.” Limited in material resources but plentiful in spiritual ones, Ellen Chesser has ritualized domestic activities and turned homemaking into the religion of art. She will never have “the house set and fixed in timbers and pinned together with fine strong wedges of trimmed hard wood” (308), those foundations she identified with the metaphorical words of the priest who married her; but spiritually she has “somehow become her own house—a separate, independent, and sound structure” (McBride 71). And the house of Ellen’s soul will continue to offer resistance to the unending battering of the winds of poverty, privation, and infirmity.

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