

The Time of Man



ELIZABETH
MADDOX
ROBERTS

WOOD ENGRAVINGS BY Clare Leighton

ELIZABETH MADOX ROBERTS:
LIFE IS FROM WITHIN

by Robert Penn Warren

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

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

Elizabeth Madox Roberts was born on October 30, 1881, in the village of Perryville, Kentucky, where one of the

* There have been, in late years, several academic studies of the work of Elizabeth Madox Roberts, one of them quite good, but they have made little impact.

crucial and most bloody battles of the Civil War had been fought, and where her own father, as a raw volunteer of sixteen, had received his baptism of Federal fire. Both the father and mother were of old Kentucky families, now living, in the backwash of war, in what would euphemistically be called reduced circumstances but was, in brutal fact, poverty. Both the father and mother had been teachers, and were lovers of books and carriers of legend. The legends they carried reached back beyond the Civil War—and the grim tale of the cold-blooded murder, by Unionists, of the father's father because he would not join the National Guard—into the time of Boone and the Indian ambush and the opening of the settlements; and the imagination of the daughter Elizabeth was nourished on the long sweep of time from which the individual rises for his moment of effort and testing.

But to the sense of time was added a sense of place. Perryville and the little town of Springfield, to which the family removed when Elizabeth was three, lie in a fertile, well-watered country on the edge of the rich Blue Grass. It was then a quiet country of mixed farming and cattle-breeding, in sight of the Knobs, with the old ways of action, thought, and speech to be found up any lane off the Louisville pike, and sometimes on the pike. There were, too, the local gentry, whose ways were old, though different; and there were the colored people of the alleys and farms, whose ways were old and, again, different. In childhood, in young ladyhood, and later, as a lonely teacher in back-country schools, Elizabeth Madox Roberts learned those old ways. She knew the poetry of this pastoral quietness, but she knew, too, the violence and suffering beneath the quiet-

ness. Her stories grew out of the life of the place, and are told in a language firmly rooted in that place.

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

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

To return to the life of Elizabeth Madox Roberts, she was thirty-six years old when, after the apparently aimless years of schoolteaching in Springfield and the country

around, she took the decisive step that put her on her way, and registered at the University of Chicago. Or perhaps, somewhere in her secret being, during those apparently aimless years, she had already won her victory, and the going to Chicago was only the first fruits of it. In any case, a freshman old enough to be the mother of her classmates, she now found herself moving into the literary life of the university, associating before long with such young writers of talent as Glenway Wescott, Yvor Winters, Janet Lewis, and Monroe Wheeler. She had escaped from Springfield. But she had brought Springfield with her. And after her graduation she went back to Springfield.

She was forty years old. On the surface she had little enough to show for what Springfield must have regarded as her eccentric adventure, only a Phi Beta Kappa key and a handful of little poems; but beneath the surface she carried the confirmed faith in her vocation. In 1922, the year when the handful of poems was published as a volume called *Under the Tree*, she began work on *The Time of Man*. In it are the sweep of time, the depth and richness of place, and the echo of her own struggle to find identity and a way. These things were the gifts her experience had given. What she brought to the book was the deep awareness of the worth of these gifts, an awareness that, because it dramatizes the elements and fuses them in their inwardness, amounts to the moment of genius.

As she put it in her journal, Elizabeth Madox Roberts had originally thought of "the wandering tenant farmer of our region as offering a symbol for an Odyssey [*sic*] of man as a wanderer, buffeted about by the fates and weathers." But by the time she began to write, the main character was Ellen Chesser, the daughter of such a man, and we see her,

in the opening sentence of the novel, aged fourteen, sitting in the broken-down wagon of their wanderings, writing her name on the empty air with her finger. This "Odyssy" is, essentially, a spiritual journey, the journey of the self toward the deep awareness of identity which means peace. As for the stages of the journey, again we may turn to the journal:

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

The numbering here refers not to chapters, but to the stages of the basic movements of the story; and the movements might, as I have earlier suggested, be taken as the form of the characteristic story in the other novels, a story which the author took to be, to adapt the phrasing of one of the reviewers, an emblem of the common lot, of the time of man. Rather, what is common to all men is the basic problem from which this story springs; the solution of the problem, as we find it here, gives the story only of those who have the strength to survive the shocks of the world and have the fortitude to take the inner journey by which one may learn to convert the wound into wisdom.

The abstract pattern given in the journal is, in the novel

* The references to the journal are drawn from *Herald to Chaos*, by Earl H. Rovit.

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

What does come true in the end—after the betrayal by her first love, after the struggle against the impulse to violence and suicide, after love and childbearing, after unremitting work and the sight of reward tantalizingly just out of reach, after betrayal by the husband and reconciliation over the body of a dead child, after the whipping of her husband, by night riders, as a suspected barn-burner—is the discovery of the strength to deal with life. "I'll go somewhere far out of hearken of this place," her husband says, nursing his stripes. "I've done little that's amiss here, but still I'd have to go. . . . I aim to go far, so far that word from this place can't come there or not likely. . . ." And she says: "I'd go where you go and live where you live, all my enduren life." So they take to the road again: "They went a long way while the moon was still high above the trees, stopping only at some creek to water the beasts. They asked no questions of the way but took their own turnings."

Thus the abstract pattern is fleshed out with the story of

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

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

She would take the turkey bread in her hand and go, bonnetless, up the gentle hill across the pasture in the light of sundown, calling the hens as she went. She was keenly aware of the ceremony and aware of her figure rising out of the fluttering birds, of all moving together about her. She would hear the mules crunching their fodder

as she went past the first barn, and she would hear the swish of the falling hay, the thud of a mule hoof on a board, a man's voice ordering or whistling a tune. . . . She would crumble down the bread for each brood near its coop and she would make the count and see to the drinking pans. Then she would go back through the gate, only a wire fence dividing her from the milking group, and walk down the pasture in the dusk. That was all; the office would be over.

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

The novel is not Ellen's own "telling," but it is a shadow of her telling. The language, that is, is an index of her consciousness, and as such is the primary exposition of her character and sensibility. But it is also the language of her people, of her place and class, with all the weight of history and experience in it. We can isolate turns and phrases that belong to this world: "She let him take all she's got and when he's gone she pukes up a pile of hard words after him for a spell." Or: ". . . if he comes again and takes off the

property he'll maybe have trouble and a lavish of it too." Or: "I got no call to be a-carryen water for big healthy trollops. Have you had bad luck with your sweethearten?" But it is not the color of the isolated turn that counts most. It is, rather, the rhythm and tone of the whole; and not merely in dialogue, but in the subtle way the language of the outer world is absorbed into the shadowy paraphrase of Ellen's awareness, and discreetly informs the general style. For instance, as she sits late by the fire with her first love, Jonas, with her father snoring away in the bed across the room:

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

It is, all in all, a dangerous game to play. In a hundred novels for a hundred years we have seen it go sour, either by condescension or by the strain to exhibit quaint and colorful locutions—which is, in fact, a symptom of condescension. But in *The Time of Man* it is different. For one thing, the writer's ear is true, as true as, for example, that of Eudora Welty, Caroline Gordon, Andrew Lytle, Erskine Caldwell (at times), William Faulkner, or George W. Harris, the creator of Sut Lovingood. Like all these writers, who differ so much among themselves, Elizabeth Madox Roberts is able to relate, selectively, the special language to her own special vision. For another thing, the language

is not a façade over nothingness, like the false front of a nonexistent second story of the general store on the main street of a country town. It is, rather, the language of a person, and a society, which is realized in the novel with a sober actuality.

If *The Time of Man*—or *My Heart and My Flesh* for that matter—is as good as I think it is, how did it happen to disappear so soon, almost without a bubble to mark the spot? We may remember, however, that this is not the first good book, or writer, to go underground. There is, for one thing, what we may call the natural history of literary reputation. When a writer dies we find, immediately after the respectful obsequies, the ritual of “reassessment”—which is another word for “cutting-down-to-size.” In the case of Elizabeth Madox Roberts the ordinary situation was aggravated by the fact that her later work had declined in critical and popular esteem. The firm grip on social and individual actualities which undergirded the poetry of sensibility in the first two novels had, in the later work, been progressively relaxed. More and more we find a dependence on allegory and arbitrary symbolism; and with the natural base cut away, the poetry degenerates into prettification and preciosity.

Furthermore, this situation—which, we may hazard, had some relation to the writer’s gradual withdrawal into illness—was in a setting which would, in any case, have made for the rejection of even her earlier work. It was the period when a critic as informed as David Daiches could reject Conrad because, at least as Daiches believed, he “does not concern himself at all with the economic and social background underlying human relationships.” Or when Herbert Muller could reject Flaubert as irrelevant to the age. Or

when Maxwell Geismar could reject Faulkner as a "dissipated talent" and the victim of a "cultural psychosis," explaining that in him "the heritage of American negation reaches its final emphasis." So we can see why *The Time of Man* fell out of fashion: the novel presents Ellen Chesser, not in active protest against the deprivation and alienation of the life of the sharecropper, but in the process of coming to terms, in a personal sense, with the tragic aspect of life.

The agenda of the 1930s carried many items bearing on the urgent need to change the social and economic environment but none bearing on the need to explore the soul's relation to fate. Any literary work that was concerned with an inward victory was, in certain influential quarters, taken as subtle propaganda against any effort directed toward outward victory. It was as though one had to choose between the "inner" and the "outer."

What was true in the world of literature was more vindictively true in the world of actuality. There, even when the awareness of the desperate need for changing the economic and social arrangements was coupled with an awareness of the worth of the individual who was a victim of the existing order, the tendency was to accept the graph, the statistic, the report of a commission, the mystique of "collectivism," as the final reality. The result was that, in that then fashionable form of either-or thinking, the inner world of individual experience was as brutally ignored as by an overseer on a Delta cotton farm.

It is now possible that we are growing out of this vicious either-or thinking. We may now see that we do not need to choose, and that if we do choose, in anything more than a provisional, limited sense, we are denying reality and are

quite literally verging toward lunacy. And verging, in fact, toward a repetition of the bloodiest crimes of this century.

Elizabeth Madox Roberts says that "Life is from within," and her typical story is, to repeat, the story of an inner victory. In dealing with the dispossessed of the South she has, like Eudora Welty or Faulkner or Katherine Anne Porter or James Agee (to refer to a document of the 1930s, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*), recognized the dignity of the lowliest creature. But she knew that to recognize fully the dignity of any creature demands that we recognize the anguish of the collision with actuality. So in the story of Ellen Chesser we find no scanting of the grimness of fact, of the pinch of hunger, of the contempt in the eyes met on the road, of the pain of the lash laid on the bare back.

She was aiming, she wrote in her journal, at a fusion of the inner and the outer, at what she called "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.

This is as good a description as any of what, in *The Time of Man*, Elizabeth Madox Roberts was trying to make of Ellen Chesser's story, a story of the moments of contact between the self and the world. The novel is, in a sense, a pastoral, but only a false reading would attribute to it the condescension, the ambiguous humility on the part of writer and reader, and the sentimentally melancholy acceptance of the *status quo*, which often characterize the pastoral. No, it is

the inner reality of Ellen and of her people in the contact with the world that, in the end, makes social protest significant, makes social justice "just."

Perhaps now, after the distortions of the 1930s and the sicknesses of the 1940s and '50s, we can recover *The Time of Man*. Perhaps we can even find in it some small medicine against the special sickness and dehumanizing distortions of the 1960s. Perhaps we can profit from the fact that Elizabeth Madox Roberts came, to adapt the lines by Yeats on John Synge,

*Towards nightfall upon a race
Passionate and simple like her heart.*

The Time of Man

A Novel by

ELIZABETH MADOX ROBERTS

Introduction by Robert Penn Warren



With Wood Engravings by Clare Leighton

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To

J. L. L. *and* A. Y. W.