Comprehension, Composition, and Closure in Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *The Time of Man*

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Comprehension, Composition, and Closure in Elizabeth Madox Roberts’s *The Time of Man*

*Stephen Bernstein*

It is this quality of the novel, its built in need to return and repeat, that forms the physical basis of the novel’s chief glory, its resonant close.

*John Gardner, The Art of Fiction*

In my end is my beginning.

*T.S. Eliot, “East Coker”*

In the sixty-four years since Elizabeth Madox Roberts published *The Time of Man,* generally considered her masterpiece, the book’s popularity has blazed and faded. The same may be said of the critical treatment of Roberts’s work, which reached a high point from 1956 to 1963, during which time three (the only three) book-length studies were published on the writer. Before and since then several articles had and have appeared, but a thorough Roberts bibliography would probably still number less than 100 items.

Existing criticism has chiefly explored Roberts as a unique prose stylist writing of powerful universal themes. These are certainly accurate assessments, but research has not, for the most part, gone much farther. “A strange insistence in several quarters that she was a follower of Joyce had made me hope for her denial,” wrote an early interviewer of the author, previewing a turn away from analysis of Roberts as a formal innovator. While it is true that formal innovation does not leap to the fore upon an initial reading of her novel, discussions and trends in other literary criticism in the years since the novel’s publication have prepared readers to focus their attention on texts in more diverse ways, and have set the stage for new interpretation of Roberts’s work.
By considering *The Time of Man* as a work that thematizes (among other things) a concern with reading and writing in their broadest senses, with comprehension and composition, one may see patterns emerge in the work. Perhaps the foremost of these is a similarity among the closures of the novel’s ten chapters, a similarity which, when puzzled out, has strong implications for the work’s entire epistemological theme.

“They are deeply involved in the problem of knowledge, inveterately concerned with their personal mental processes,” Mark Van Doren wrote of Roberts’s characters in 1932, making clear the importance of learning (and understanding learning) in the author’s work. Roberts’s attention to closural organization underlines this interest in what is, in formal terms, a very carefully constructed text. By looking first at how Roberts organizes epistemology in her novel into composition and comprehension, we can move toward an understanding of how this thematic development is incorporated into chapter closure throughout the work.

Robert Penn Warren recognized the importance of “telling” in *The Time of Man* more than twenty years ago, when he wrote an article for *Saturday Review* which now appears as the introduction to the University Press of Kentucky reprint of the novel. "Telling,” Warren writes, “makes for the understanding of experience...." Rehearsal, in other words, begets knowledge. Warren also points out the major instances of “telling” in the book: Ellen’s plan to tell Tessie of the Chessers’ experience away from the group (11-12), Jonas’ “telling of his sin” (161-166), Henry’s life story (177-184), and Jasper’s autobiography (276-79). This catalog is not enough to explain the profound importance of these acts in the novel’s progress; they, and related incidents, must be examined more closely.

Ellen “watched for Artie Pinkston’s coming for the reward of a few words exchanged,” one is told early in the novel (43), and the centrality of “telling,” of conversation, is quickly established. Discourse is currency, both reward and tender of exchange. Language, then, is a gift, a way speakers please and benefit one another. But “telling” is also, as Warren points out, a way of ordering for oneself, and the structure of Roberts’s sentence might just as well refer to the reward Ellen gains from her own speaking.

This latter is the realm of composition, depicted several ways in the novel, but always in a case where someone presents some sort
of intelligible pattern: through "telling," singing, weaving, and so on. Earl Rovit has said of Roberts's characters that "[e]ach is an artist, highly sensitive to the marrow of experience, successfully composing an organic design within the medium of living." Life is art is life, then, and the beauty of the design, pattern, or order into which one can form experience is the measure of life's worth and one's own personal growth.

To return to the major "tellings" of the novel, one may see in them the repeated assertion of control (or the attempt toward it) over one's experience. On pages 11 and 12 Ellen's mental rehearsal of the tale she will relate to Tessie is notable in its attention to sensuous experience. In the passage Ellen smells ("You could smell the iron. . . ."); "The chimney . . . had smells a-comen outen it . . ."), touches ("we kept dry"), hears ("You could hear the rain all night . . ."), and sees (the whole narration). Significantly, the girl with the "thin, almost emaciated body" (11) does not relate any tasting here; any meal is glossed over in Ellen's story as it has been in the third-person narration of the story proper.

What Ellen knows well is ordered, however, and even embellished to the extent that she is truly composing, turning her one-day's experience into a microcosm, a simulacrum of global realities. As she says to herself,

The world's little and you just set still in it and that's all there is. There ain't e'er ocean . . . 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. . . . (11)

This is a lot for a fourteen-year-old to grasp; the bleak futility evoked in such a landscape makes it reminiscent of one of Beckett's. But for Ellen landscape will increasingly be the only education she knows, a point hammered home by Roberts's projected six-part form for the novel, excerpted below:

I. A Genesis. She comes into the land, but the land rejects her . . .
II. She grows into the land, takes soil or root . . .
III. Expands with all the land.
IV. The first blooming.
V. Withdrawal—and sinking back into the earth.
VI. Flowering out of stone.

Here the earth is clearly neither negative nor positive but, as sometimes in Hardy, amoral. Ellen will touch back to it frequently, though, as in the early "telling," it is her ordering of it that will be important.

The autobiographical segments devoted to Jonas, Henry, and Jasper are of similar importance. Jonas's is a seemingly sincere attempt to make some sense of his transgressions, Henry's a fumbling coming to grips with what has been important in his life, and Jasper's the construction of honest ground on which a marriage can be built. In each case the man tries to develop priorities and to come closer to a goal. Though any sense of a goal in Henry's narrative is a bit obscure, the story does dramatize his assertion that "[a] body takes a heap of risks in a lifetime, from first to last. . . ." (183) The possibility of organizing experience around such a thesis is recognized and to some extent accomplished. Victor Kramer has noted this well; in Henry's narrative, he writes, one sees "how important language is for the formation of consciousness and the development of self. Henry's life, in the telling, becomes clearer for him and Ellen. . . ." 8

The importance of "telling," composing an artifact to control experience, is perhaps most emphatically shown in its development at the novel's close. As Ellen and Jasper discuss their departure, "[t]he plan lost its strangeness as they talked of it, mellowed it, and presently it became inevitable" (392). Rehearsal is again the basis for the meaningfulness of experience; life gains form and determined meaning only when mentally organized.

The other side of these acts of "telling," or composition, is in acts of reading, or comprehension. In any bildungsroman such scenes are essential. In Roberts's novel they are especially so, as so many things must be read: not only the printed word and the conversation of others, but the entire semiotic decoding project imposed upon the tenant farmers by the natural world surrounding them. In Jasper's life story, for example, he comes to work for a man "that knew a heap about signs and farmed by tokens," and "learned a heap from him about tokens" (278). Jasper's talk has earlier been "of cures and signs . . ." (266), and one of his earliest conversations with Henry concerns the assertion that "if you plant potatoes in the dark moon of March you get a better crop . . ." (255)
Jasper is not alone in this kind of reading. During Jonas's courtship of Ellen he stays late, "sitting up with her, tarrying. It was a token" (187). The meaning behind action must be read, determined through its token, for the comprehension of the experience. Luke Wimble, scientifically ahead of the farmers through his knowledge of fruit taxonomy and breeding, can state to Jasper, "I wouldn't set any great store by the moon to tell me when to plant. The moon has got some properties, that I'd say, but I never set out by the moon" (372). There are steps in reading ability, some of them concerning just what is and isn't worthy of being read in the first place. Different levels of discernment will be appropriate to different consciousnesses and ways of life, but common to all is the necessity of making sense (frequently beginning with visual contact) of the phenomena of life.

Apparent in Roberts's work, then, are two chief ways of making sense of the world; corresponding to writing and reading, they are composition and comprehension. On the surface this epistemological organization might hardly seem worthy of notice: countless bildungsroman heroes and heroines, from Dickens's Pip to Alice Walker's Celie, learn to grasp life and to grow through a similar acquaintance with linguistically oriented behavior, an orientation both literal and metaphorical. In The Time of Man, however, this approach is not only central, but more pointedly relevant to the organization of the novel itself than in many other examples of the genre.

Joyce organized A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man around a pattern of rising and falling expectations which coincide with chapter ends and beginnings. Roberts, in no vacuum during the period of high modernist formal innovation, adopted a similar method of chapter closure in her novel. This is not to suggest some long overlooked Joycean influence on the Kentucky novelist's work, but to show an attention to formal concerns common to many writers of her time, an attention not previously remarked with depth in Roberts criticism. The closure of the ten chapters in The Time of Man is consistently organized around acts of composition and comprehension, and all involve Ellen Chesser. Roberts thus creates a motific accretion which not only results in emphasizing the importance of these epistemological methods, but also functions as a way of ordering the macro-narrative of the novel in line with the characters' acts of composition and comprehension on the micro-
narrative level of the chapters. Each chapter, then, and finally the novel as a whole, can stand in the way that Ellen perceives the “quick image of a year,” as “a design, all finished and set apart” (259). Roberts wrote in her papers, in a frequently quoted passage, that

[s]omewhere 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 the 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.11

This attempt at union, or at least at comprehending its nature, is not only Ellen Chesser’s project throughout The Time of Man, but also the author’s, in a novel where form carefully mirrors (and, indeed, becomes) content.

Of the many acts of comprehension in which Ellen takes part or which she initiates in the novel, five (possibly six) fall significantly at the ends of chapters. These are particularly important moments in Ellen’s growth, and a close look at each will not be amiss. After such examination the importance of the pattern can be discerned.

The close of Chapter II finds Ellen in a country graveyard, having wandered off in search of a missing flock of turkeys. It is here that she reads the tombstone of James Bartholomew Gowan, “[a]n honored citizen, a faithful husband, a loving father, a true Christian. . . . Five times elected judge of the County Court.” Ellen’s development, her discernment of the values of being and not-being. Where in Chapter I she had recognized the stark reality of death (“You breathe and breathe, on and on, and then you do not breathe anymore. For you forever. Forever. It goes out, everything goes, and you are nothing,” [35]), she now sees clearly the privileges she enjoys by not being dead. “He’s Judge Gowan in court, a-sitten big, but I’m better’n he is. I’m a-liven and he’s dead. I’m better,” Ellen rejoices (102), full of the recognition of her priority over inanimate matter by virtue of her being in the world.

The inescapable point to be made about this incident is that it is linguistically inspired, created by the comprehension of the carved words. Only pages before this Ellen has recognized her mistake at interpreting the word “saw” in a song as “sawed,” aware of the tricks language can play and the importance of proper
interpretation. "I’m a fool for sure," she chides herself (99), but the foolishness is actually in the past; her awareness delineates an individual who is, in the present, both perceptive and intelligent. Her realization has occurred "just now when [she] studied about it" (99), the verb a governing metaphor for the entire cluster of experiences making up the remainder of the chapter. Study, reading with comprehension, is here the operant epistemological method.

If the close of Chapter II is a successful and enriching act of comprehension and study, however, that of Chapter IV is not so clearly assessed. It is at this point that Jonas has told Ellen of his involvement with Jule Nestor, his past as "a sinful man... low-down" (162). After Ellen takes in the story she responds with the admission that "[n]o matter how much I study it over I can’t see e’er thing to do" (168). At this juncture of revealed portrayal, then, comprehension fails: fails, at least, in providing any impetus for action. This is the dark side of the studying process observed in Chapter II: there is no clear enrichment to be gained from this "study" aside from its harsh lesson in worldly realities. "There was nothing they could do, they decided, and they would wait," one reads (169), the paralyzing nature of this type of experience coming to the fore. Ellen reads Jonas’s "telling," but a suitable response is not readily perceived.

The closure of Chapters V and VI are also both clearly linked to reading/comprehension experiences for Ellen. In the former Ellen receives a letter from the itinerant Jonas, at this point "working for old Mr. Bee Cornish" (198). The letter is strong testimony of love ("I will kiss the letters of your name") but also, in its vagueness, hints sadly at the future of this relationship ("I will be back sometime"). Ellen submits the text to her full powers of exegesis: "she read [it] many times, following each phrase to its last degree of meaning and searching out each connoted thought" (198). This in turn gives rise to an act of composition ("Ellen wrote a reply..." [198]) which will be discussed below. For the moment, however, the importance of this closure is in the fact that Ellen's gift of comprehension, her ability to decode a semiotic document, is again demonstrated at peak effectiveness. Although she is not dealing at this point with an issue of quite such weight as life and death, her relationship with Jonas is without question the most important part of her life; thus it is a testament to her growth that she has overcome the opacity she experienced with her
text in Chapter IV. Reading is again an act which can be performed with meaning and effect, just as it was in the graveyard of Chapter II.

Ellen writes her letter in response with difficulty, a difficulty partially given rise to by reading. "[P]ore over the words as she would . . . she could not find the adequate sayings," the narrator states (198). It must be emphasized here that what is failing is the composing—and not the comprehending—process; if anything it is the strength and perceptiveness of Ellen's comprehension which halts her ability to write.

The close of Chapter VI again presents Ellen in a reading situation, this time while traveling with her parents after Jonas's final and worst mistreatment of her. "'Beyond St. Lucy' had been the legend by which she had walked all day through the roads and lanes" (238), the word "by" operative here in the senses both of "past" and "under the guidance of." This may seem a rather minor example of an act of reading, but it should be noted that even in the bleak desperation with which the scene is depicted ("She would live . . . somewhere down within that rugged stretch of land . . . scrubby hills, stones and gullies, closed around them"), mirroring the bleak desperation of her life at present, Ellen's faculties are sharp. She recognizes the tower of St. Lucy abbey because of her reading of the "legend;" her ability to match signifier and signified into sign is still active and productive.

These four acts of comprehension which occur on a basically linguistic level prepare for the two final comprehension-oriented chapter closures which take the act of reading onto a more metaphoric plane. The final page of Chapter VII finds Ellen, anxiously and uncertainly awaiting Jasper's return,

searching in the water, peering down into it, hole after hole, walking away and returning to look again . . . half knowing as she searched in the pools that her fear to see some water-soaked body lying among the stones was ill devised (297).

Like the end of Chapter IV, where Ellen played a similar waiting game with Jonas, this closure shows her engaged in a curious mixture of not wholly successful comprehension and composition. Ellen is attempting (albeit against her wishes) to "read" Jasper's death among the pools, thus composing, writing, the explanation of his long, silent absence. Neither act is
successful, again demonstrating Ellen's total involvement in a love relationship to the extent that it adversely affects her ability to engage in her usual epistemology. In this case that inability is a good thing, of course; the confirmation of Jasper's death at this point (though arguably better than no explanation at all of his whereabouts) would be a catastrophic experience.

Chapter IX's closure continues this use of comprehension at the non-linguistic level. This is the scene of Chick's death and the hysterical reconciliation between Jasper and Ellen over the child's body. Jasper's earlier insinuations of adultery (356) are recanted through the mutual recognition he and Ellen have while looking at Chick's face. "See, he looks like you, Jasper, like you, more and more," Ellen states, to Jasper's reply that "God Almighty! He does!" (356). This is reading in its most crucial and vital form, an act which saves the most important, and most damaged, relationship in Ellen's life. It is thus also reading at its most mature. The dual comprehension, revelation almost, that the parents experience at this point is a necessary culmination to the series of chapter-final reading experiences that has come before. It is also important in that it looks forward to the novel's final chapter and to the significant relation that the tested and strengthened marriage has to the conclusion of the narrative.

In the comprehension-oriented chapter closures a progression is observed, then, one which starts with the demonstration of Ellen's possession of this epistemological tool in adolescence. The progression of Ellen's comprehending, or reading, ability is one dependent on the topography of her life experiences; it blazes and flickers in correspondence with her treatment by the world, by those with whom she is involved in her relationships. It is finally a talent she possesses, and which she utilizes expertly, a quality which not only increases her understanding, but betters the lives she, Jasper, and their children will lead.

The other side of comprehension is in the closure of composition. They are roughly as frequent as the first type, and function as a similar guide in Ellen's growth. In some ways, though composition helps the speaker or writer order the universe, it is the more "mature" of the two acts (as practiced by Ellen, at any rate) in that it can follow, and in some ways show evidence of, the initial comprehending act. Whether growth and knowledge are gained through composition or are evidenced by it is not as important, however, as gauging the frequency and the more
general importance of closural acts of composition in the novel.

Perhaps the most important image in the early part of Roberts's novel is that which brackets Chapter I, the presentation of Ellen writing her name, first on air and then on paper. In this way the chapter begins memorably on an act of self-identification (a fact well-remarked in the criticism), and ends on one as well. But the closing scene is not just one of self-identification. "Through language the patterns of life are made clearer," Kramer has written of Ellen's awareness in the novel, an assertion well borne out by the chapter's end, where Ellen copies down her name (and address too by this time) to be given to Tessie West if she is encountered.

This is an act with two results, though neither of them is exactly what Ellen has envisioned as she writes. The writing first of all locates Ellen in the world, makes clearer "the patterns of life," part of which, by writing, she becomes. "Ellen Chesser/Rushfield, Ky./Mr. Hep Bodine's mail box," she writes, circumscribing carefully and completely the limits of her place, her site in reality. But contrary to this sort of limitation, the note also serves to carry Ellen out of her isolation and into the world. This parallels the long, overnight foot journey she has taken, so that when

[it]he paper was in the pocket of the waist . . . in beside a little dull pocketbook and a piece of orange peel and a bit of bright rag . . . gone now, down the long alley past the men and the horses,

it is a continued expression of some of Ellen's self into a world of experience much greater in magnitude than the little niche of "Mr. Hep Bodine's mail box" (62).

Composition recurs in the closure of Chapter III, where Ellen walks home with friends after a party. Here again there is a close parallel between the chapter's end and what has come shortly before. At the party Ellen has sung a song about which one listener says appreciatively that "[h]it's like a book to read" (122). She has broken into this social circle with a narrative act, and reasserts this penetration at the end of the chapter in a more symbolic way. On the way home from the party,

Five shapes were thumping the dry road with their feet,
stumbling a little, five abreast now and now drifting into forms like those the stars made in the sky. It was here that she felt them become six, herself making part of the forms, herself merged richly with the design (128-129).

This is composition on perhaps the most physical level possible; the patterns Ellen went out into by virtue of her name on a sheet of paper in Chapter I are now available to her on an immediate and real plane. This involvement with the world of other people through an act of her own initiation is vital to Ellen's growth, the first opportunity she will have for extended, friendly contact and the possibility of romantic love. It is also essential to Roberts's conception of Ellen as heroine, someone who would reveal the author's "sense of the intimate connections existing between the material world and the mental." Material and mental reality collapse together as pattern perceived and pattern experienced in this episode, strengthening its importance in the delineation of character and consciousness.

Chapters V and VII end with the situations discussed above where composition is exercised with little benefit (198, 297). Writing, literally and symbolically, fails in both cases, though the failures are arguably for the better. They portray an Ellen separated from Jonas and Jasper respectively, and thus effectively reconvoy the importance of outer and inner life in the novel. The outer affects the inner just as the inner (displayed through the letter Ellen writes or her attempt to see a dead body) will in turn affect the outer. These endings thematize the torment Ellen frequently experiences during the last two-thirds of the novel, and stress that torment as it is shown impinging upon what has already been displayed as one of Ellen's skills.

Chapter VIII closes, like Chapter III, with Ellen using her compositional abilities to fit into a pre-established social set. Here it is at church, where the local women make self-congratulatory claims about their thrift in the face of their husbands' insistence on spending for new shoes and clothing. "Then Ellen spoke, murmuring like the rest. She had never made so long a speech before," the closing paragraph begins (334), introducing a speech like the other women's which dramatizes Ellen's cautiousness versus Jasper's disregard for saving.

This speech continues the depiction of Ellen as being not quite at the peak of her powers. She murmurs, is forced to seek
entrance into a social group hardly shown as desirable, and it is not clear whether her boast that Jasper wants her to buy a new dress is even true. This is clearly a picture of constraint; as Ellen's mind cannot expand, neither may her enunciations be fully voiced. The Kents are living at the Goddard place, Jasper working for a farmer who (he tells Ellen) has "got no time for you. . . . He'd ride right over you Ellie, and never see" (328). It is a caged life, and the results of the caging are prominent in Ellen's discourse.

If this caging metaphor is held in mind, then it is clear that the egress upon which Chapter X (and the novel) closes is a victory. It is also a compositional scene, but as with the close of Chapter III, whose starlit sky it obviously echoes, the composition takes place more on a physical than a linguistic plane. Here the family leaves "the Powers country" after the night attack on Jasper. It is yet another going out into the world, as in the end of Chapter I, and like the beginning of that chapter it involves an inscription upon nature. Where on page 9 Ellen was found writing "her name in the air with her finger," the description here of the family's departure shows their sign upon the land: "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" (395).

"[T]heir own turnings" are writings on the land, the story of their travel engraved on the soil of their country.14 And in contrast to "the road [that] would take her there without any turnings" of Ellen's first night journey (52), travel now echoes the digressions and complexities of life with turnings that become the travelers' own and are, in a sense both real and metaphoric, made by them. This is unchained composition, composition in a sense abstract yet absolute. It is not just a breaking into a world separate from one, but a leaving on that world one's own mark. It is a significant triumph, even in the face of the persecution and ignorance by which it was necessitated.

Like comprehension, then, composition has a major role in the novel, one that is frequently stressed at the point of chapter closure. Rovit claims that Roberts's basic theme is "the imposition of order on chaos",15 a goal that also seems to be the point of the many and diverse acts of composition in the novel. Like comprehension, too, composition is a valuable epistemological tool, though dependent to an even greater extent on the quality of one's life and the viability of one's hopes. It is simultaneously one
of the most personal, and one of the most public, of acts. Although comprehension and composition can thus be recognized in their full importance in Roberts's novel, the problem of determining their relation to chapter closure still remains. This is a consideration to which I would like to offer a few suggestions.

Maurice Leseman, a friend of Roberts from the University of Chicago, remembered her attention to chapter division:

Her note-taking was helter skelter. To avoid chaos she formed the habit of keeping a separate envelope for each chapter and slipping the notes into the proper envelopes . . . . If, while she wrote chapter four, some vivid detail or bit of dialogue for chapter eight sprang into her mind, she would not suppress or ignore it but quickly and gratefully put a note in the appropriate envelope.¹⁶

If the author's attention to narrative division was this thorough, then it is no surprise to find the chapter closures as significant as they appear to be. Kenneth Burke remarked something like this in 1929 when he wrote that "the heroine's monologues, as they rise out of a narrative episode to end a chapter in zealous philosophizing, seem to be a personal discovery of the author."¹⁷

A prime importance of Roberts's "personal discovery" is, of course, the emphasis placed on an episode or event by its coincidence with closure. "The reader expects that the individual chapters in novels . . . will seem to offer minor secondary conclusions," Philip Stevick writes,¹⁸ pointing out the importance of chapters for "the reader's pattern-making faculty."¹⁹ By ending not one but all ten chapters on scenes of Ellen engaged in some act of mental growth, Roberts thematizes that growth if only by catering to readerly expectation. Roberts once remarked to an interviewer that "[t]he labor of writing is not in the phrase, but in the management of wholes . . . to make all yield a satisfying form."²⁰ The statement shows her keenly aware of the necessity of formal precision, a necessity dictated not only by one's private aesthetic but also by conventions with which readers are likely to be familiar.

But it is too easy merely to assert that the chapter closures are some sort of mnemonic device for readers. The use of closure as an aid to narrative, to the extent that Roberts has exploited it, designates a concern with the thematic material overriding the
immediate concern of helping readers along. The formal pattern governing the closure of *The Time of Man* as a whole is what Marianna Torgovnick, in her *Closure in the Novel*, refers to as "parallelism," a situation where the ending "refers not just to the beginning of the work, but to a series of points in the text. . . ." 21

It has been shown that the moonlit journey at the novel's close refers back not just to Ellen's night trek in Chapter I, but also to the after-party walk of Chapter III; as an act of composition it recalls both the end of Chapter I and the beginning of the entire work. Through this governing theme/image pattern (composition/night journeys) Roberts is able to "make lights go on" on close analysis of the text. Stevick discusses the usage of what he terms "cosmic cadence," closures which move between realistic action and the sky.

To introduce cosmic imagery into a prose fiction is to frame the characters, to place them in some philosophical relation. To place the characters in relation to forces larger than the ordinary personal and social forces that govern their daily lives is to introduce a permanence into the narrative that contrasts with the transience of ordinary subject matter. It is to introduce an order of reality which transcends the realism of the narrative at large. 22

Though Stevick is not writing of Roberts's book, he very well might be. What he describes is exactly what Roberts accomplishes with this closure which strikes resounding echoes through her text. If, at the end of Chapter I, Ellen went out into the world on a slip of paper, the end of Chapter X shows her and the rest of the Kent family going out into the universe. Earl Rovit claims that Ellen is, like other Roberts characters, "just one of the 'children of the earth,' infinite in number, alike in general pattern: working, loving, wanting, and always, in the end, dying." 23 This is so, and the fact of Rovit's conclusion, the inevitable transience of life, is rarely a pleasant one. But the insistence on the cosmic with which Roberts punctuates her text transcends this mundane necessity.

Though toward the novel's close Ellen ages rapidly, and though the closing journey out of the Powers country is a very uncertain one, the infusion of the scene with the glowing night sky and inscription of the Kents' "turnings" on the countryside guarantees their niche in the cosmos. At the end of Chapter I Ellen defines
her niche as a mailbox; at the novel's close it is as a moving, living part of the universe.

All this gets rather far afield of the anatomizing of the ten separate chapter closures, but it should at least be clear that all the closures together dramatize and thematize a process of growth which culminates on the novel's final page and then resounds back through several earlier closural episodes. There is no neat package in which to place all the chapter closures to demonstrate some strong systematic organization. It is obvious, however, that Roberts, in writing a novel which has as a chief concern the value of ordering and patterning external life into sympathy with one's internal reality, took this philosophy to heart in her own act of composition. *The Time of Man* can thus be seen as a carefully wrought formal structure which plainly mirrors its themes, a fact which Roberts criticism has not yet adequately begun to address.

**NOTES**


5Warren, "Life is From Within," xxviii.


9In fact, as Earl Rovit relates ("Elizabeth Madox Roberts," 305), Roberts was an avid reader of *Poetry* during Ezra Pound's tenure as foreign editor; his "trenchant articles led her to Henry James as well as to the grand swirl of European experimentalism which was to culminate for her in the works of Joyce and Proust." In 1925 Roberts hailed *Ulysses* as the "new form" that "prose had been moving toward... for ten years or more..." (as quoted in William H. Slavick, "Taken With a Long-Handled Spoon: The Roberts Papers and Letters," *Southern Review* 20 [1984]: 770).
Though Anne K. McBride comments that Roberts "struggled to select and place certain images and events in a pleasing artistic arrangement that would convey her sense of the importance of any individual's development through an imaginative ordering of his or her surroundings," McBride's evaluation does not pursue the novel's formal organization to any great degree. See Anne K. McBride, "The Poetry of Space in Elizabeth Madox Roberts's The Time of Man," Southern Literary Journal 18 (1985): 69. Similarly, Linda Tate, while insisting that The Time of Man demands "a close and detailed reading which uncovers Ellen's working through linguistic stimuli to a point of seeing herself as a separate and unique identity," is more interested in cataloguing linguistic foregrounding in the novel than pointing to its formal importance. See Linda Tate, "Against the Chaos of the World: Language and Consciousness in Elizabeth Madox Roberts's The Time of Man," Mississippi Quarterly 40 (1987): 98. I hope to show that these approaches can be meaningfully synthesized.


Frederick P. McDowell, Elizabeth Madox Roberts (New York: Twayne, 1963), 43.

The similarity of Roberts's closing lines to those of John Milton's Paradise Lost may be coincidental:

The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

XII: 646-49

Nevertheless, it is in harmony with Rovit's assertion that Roberts "sought to infuse the modern realistic novel with the themes and grandeur of the classical epic" (Herald, 160), and Roberts's own claims that the novel was an epic (as quoted in William H. Slavick, "Ellen Chesser: A Journey of the Mind," in Roberts, The Time of Man, xii), and the life of the tenant farmer "an Odyssey [sic]" (as quoted in Warren, "Elizabeth Madox Roberts," xxiv).


Stevick, 15.

22Stevick, 88.
23Rovit, Herald, 12.