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Wade Hall
Bellarmine College

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Elizabeth Madox Roberts

Wade Hall

Picture this:

Joan went down the path to the henyard, her mother's voice still telling her to feed the brooding hen. Away from the voices of the house she entered into the mid-morning quiet of the farm. She stopped at the hen's nest and she ran her hand among the soft feathers of the brooding mother, her sense of the place spiced with the odors of sweet lime and the odors of feathers that lay decaying in the dry dust under foot.

Or this:

The path wound as feet had made it, swerving to the right or to the left. Infinities of rises, hillocks, low difficulties which the feet met, all feet, daily, and she was at the back door under the arbor where the old grapevines twined stiffly, her ear ready for the cry of the door when it should come at the end of the beating of her footsteps. She touched all these things without care, happy among them, feeling them with the senses and with memory.1

These passages are from the opening of "The Scarecrow," one of the seven stories in Elizabeth Madox Roberts's first collection of short fiction, The Haunted Mirror, published in 1932. They demonstrate Roberts's sure talent for establishing quickly a sense of place in her stories. It is a talent she exhibited in all her fiction—long and short—as well as in her poetry. It is a talent she shares with other writers, of course, particularly those from her native South.

Place is where things happen. In fiction it is not especially significant in itself. But when it informs, shapes, and reinforces what people do, then it becomes critically important. This is the kind of importance that place had to Roberts and to her work.
Her stories—what happens and to whom—are shaped by place, just as she was shaped by the circumstances of her birth in Perryville and her growing up in Springfield and Washington County, Kentucky. Her world is as ordinary and as extraordinary, as predictable and as unpredictable, as good and as evil, as the people and the land she well knew.

Roberts was so skilled in creating credible places that we believe her—at least we suspend our disbelief—when she introduces us to people and plots that may be beyond our usual experience. We will accept fantastic incidents, incredible characters, poetic folk speech. We even believe such a story as “Children of the Earth,” her Kentucky version of the medieval Second Shepherd’s Play. The world of that story is one where the attempt to pass off a bleating sheep as a crying child could happen. And in “Love by the Highway” she creates another world in which it is reasonable to expect people to talk like the lyrics of a folk song. Here a young wife works by the side of the road in a potato patch. As she waits for her elderly husband to die, she sings a ballad about a lover “who will come from the highway.” Indeed, he does. And when she asks who he is, he answers: “Sing a song of one in want of a lover and I came, is who I am.” He continues to speak in lines of ballad poetry, and we continue to read because in the world of this story, it could happen.

In Roberts’s short fiction, place can determine many things, and it can mean many things. It can determine and demonstrate tone, speech, folkways, history, psychological maturation. It can even lead to a mystical identification with the total universe.

Roberts published only a handful of stories, thirteen in all, in two collections. There are seven stories in The Haunted Mirror, published in 1932: “On the Mountainside,” “Sacrifice of the Maidens,” “Record at Oak Hill,” “The Scarecrow,” “Children of the Earth,” “Death at Bearwallow,” and “The Shepherd’s Interval.” Overall, this collection appears the stronger of the two. The second was published in March 1941, the month of her death in Orlando, Florida. It is entitled Not by Strange Gods and contains “The Haunted Palace,” “I Love My Bonny Bride,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” “Holy Warning,” “The Betrothed,” and “Love by the Highway.”

Does Roberts merit serious study as a writer of short fiction? Frederick McDowell judges that “Miss Roberts was . . . an accomplished but not an outstanding writer of short stories.”
even quotes Roberts, who wrote, in an undated letter to Marshall A. Best in the early 1930’s, “I do not think that the ‘short story’ is a satisfactory form or that anything very good can be done with it.”

Harry M. Campbell and Ruel Foster disagree. And so do I. They conclude that “Eleven of the thirteen stories in these two volumes are excellent, and even the two relative failures—‘Record at Oak Hill’ and ‘Love by the Highway’—reveal careful craftsmanship marred by effects that seem, in spite of their simplicity—too much contrived.” While a major reputation in short fiction cannot be based on thirteen stories, these thirteen can at least hold respectable standing in the company of the best stories written in the twentieth century. Many of them are long stories, even approaching the length of novellas. They are long enough, certainly, for Roberts to create large worlds and people who do significant things. There is also considerable range in the stories, in character types, subjects, tone, time, and—despite the fact that most of them are set in her Pigeon River country—even in setting.

Much of the excellence of her stories, however, can be attributed to their sense of place, a concern that derives from Roberts’s life in Springfield, Covington, and rural Kentucky; her sensitivity to it; her close observation of it; and her desire to interpret and record it. As Annie Steger Harrison points out in her M.A. thesis at Vanderbilt, Roberts’s country is a three or four county section of central Kentucky, centered in Washington County. It is a section called Pigeon River, the older name for Salt River. In his dissertation at the University of Kentucky, Woodridge Spears is even more specific about her use of Washington County locales, particularly in her novel The Time of Man:

The land about Springfield, Valley Hill, Cartwright Creek, and the Maud-Mooresville-Litsey neighborhood provided a convenient map for the artist describing the Chessers on their journey. James Still has recalled that when he rode with Miss Roberts near Springfield, several years after the publication of The Time of Man, she would point out along the way the places she had associated with—details of physical scenery—carried over to the use in some cases of the actual names, Cornishville, for example.
Her use of this region in the short stories, as well as of actual Kentucky place names, is just as obvious. In fact, in "Death at Bearwallow," she uses the real name of St. Rose. A man is plowing in the fields. "The bell ringing at St. Rose came faintly across many hills and was dispersed among the stony rises and bushy hollows, shallow and thin. Hearing the bell he remembered the mission that would begin at St. Rose in two weeks, and a vague excitement surged in his breast and in his throat, for the mission would be someplace to go every night."  

This story—as well as several others—is a reminder of the Catholic presence in this part of Kentucky, a state that is otherwise predominantly Protestant, especially in the rural areas. Names like Dominic and Piety are common in her stories. In "Death at Bearwallow" the Catholic presence is seen in the candles burning around the body of a dead girl, the crucifix on the mantel of the room, the prayers read for the repose of the dead, and the prayers prayed from the circle of the rosary. "Sacrifice of the Maidens" is the story in which a young girl takes her first vows as a Dominican nun. It is set in the old chapel at St. Catharine College, near Springfield.

An interesting vantage point from which to view her primary country is provided by her only story set in the Kentucky mountains, "On the Mountainside." These lines describe the home country of Lester Hunter, a teacher who has come to the mountains, and they show the way a mountain boy envisions the lower country:

Lester had come from one of the low counties of the rolling plain where the curving creeks of the Pigeon River spread slowly, winding broadly to gather up many little rills. Newt had learned somewhere, in his own blood, to hate the lower country for its pleasantness. There the fields rolled out smoothly and the soil was deep. The grass of any roadside was bluegrass mingled, perhaps, with rich weeds. Fat cattle, fine beasts, ate in the mythical pastures. Smooth roads ran between the farms.

The mountain youth's vision suggests an orderly world beyond the mountains, and indeed it is—at least it is in Roberts's fiction, where roads lead somewhere, fields are carefully marked off, and boundary lines are clear.
Annie Steger Harrison includes in her thesis a letter from Celina M. Bosley, a pianist and music teacher who lived next door to the Roberts home in Springfield in 1910. Mrs. Bosley reports that she encouraged Elizabeth Roberts to go to college at the University of Chicago. As the letter continues, Mrs. Bosley relates that upon learning Elizabeth Madox Roberts was writing a novel, she in jest told the author to be sure to include her neighbor. After the Springfield keyboard teacher had read *The Time of Man*, Roberts asked her if she had recognized herself. Indeed, her home, the one behind the elms, where Ellen had heard a piano and rung the bell, was her own. The description of the street, records Mrs. Bosley, was a very accurate one. Harrison's perceptive thesis focuses on the novels, but her conclusions regarding their record as social history are equally valid for the short fiction.

One of the most apparent ways in which place affects Roberts's short fiction is the speech of her characters. Her people are good talkers, even the semi-literate ones. In "Children of the Earth" Dovie Green berates her "cockroach" husband, as she calls him, for being a sorry provider. And he responds, mostly in Anglo-Saxon monosyllables, reminding her that he has covered up her stealing before:

> I have already lied enough for you, Dovie Green, to go to perdition three times over. I even lied in court the day Jake McNab lost the gilt, swore in the magistrate's house with my hand in the air, 'S'elp me God' we never seen a sign of hit, and hit salted down in our cellar hole under the house then, and your insides full of tripe and hog-heart hash that very minute. If the court had 'a' given you a vomit right then, it would 'a' seen a sight, would 'a' seen Jake McNab's hogmeat run outen your mouth.

A slightly vulgar episode also occurs in "Death at Bearwallow" when a man accuses another of slobbering in the water bucket. He says: "You threw back your slobbers inside the water bucket. You can just go to the spring and get more water now." And the other says: "I'll not do it. I never threw back my slobbers. I didn't have no slobbers left. I drank it up to the bottom of the dipper." Harrison, incidentally, quotes from Woodridge Spears's dissertation a letter Roberts wrote to Harriet Monroe, in which she said: "My people here are close to the soil and their talk is talk..."
out of the clods." In addition, Campbell and Foster report that Roberts collected archaic expressions while she was teaching in Washington County rural schools.

Indeed, the speech of her characters is sprinkled with such archaic words as *lief*. In "The Scarecrow" a man says, "Which buzzards do you like best?" The answer is: "As lief one kind as the other." A man jailed in "The Shepherd's Interval" uses the word *ruction* when he speaks of a man who "got killed in a ruction with his uncle over whether a man can have double pneumonia twice." "On the Mountainside" is filled with unusual words like *bodacious* and *swivet* and *broguen*. A mother says of the imminent departure of the schoolteacher: "My little tad, the least one, Becky, is plumb bereft over 'im." Others ask the teacher: "Did you come up the gorge to borrow fire you're in such a swivet to get on?" Another says: "There's a big meeten over to Kitty's branch next light moon. Why don't you stay? No harm in you to be broguen about a small spell." 

At other times her characters speak a ceremonial folk speech, a country speech in high gear that, as already noted, is sometimes akin to the wording and rhythms of folk music. In "On the Mountainside" a boy approaches a strange cabin chanting these words as if they were a charm to bring good luck and welcome from an unfamiliar place:

Right hands across and howdy-do,
Left and back and how are you.

Oh, call up yo' dog, oh, call up yo' dog,
Ring twang a-whoddle lanky day.

And in "The Scarecrow" a father keeps calling his daughter in words that begin to sound like the refrain of a folk song: "Joan, Joan, where's Joan? Come, come! The crows are in the new corn!" In many instances place dictates the wording and rhythm of the narrative language. Here are two examples from "On the Mountainside": "While he [Newt Reddix] listened, the knowledge that Lester Hunter [the schoolteacher] would soon go out of the country . . . brought a loneliness to his thought." And later in the story: "The schoolteacher was stepping about in the dance . . . and the fiddle was scraping the top of a tune."
Another feature of placeness in Roberts's work has to do with the creative relationship between character and place. There is frequently the sense that her characters create places as they pass through space; that is, their perception of place gives it quickened reality. "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," for instance, opens with these lines: "A young woman driving a roan nag hitched to a shining new phaeton came swiftly down the street... With the coming of this belle the afternoon life of the town began to stir." Shortly we discover, however, that it is "merely Kitty Jones showing off her new buggy."21 The sense that a landscape is real only if it is filtered through the consciousness of a character is seen also in the opening of "Children of the Earth." Here the good-for-nothing farmer Eli Green has been to town to beg and is returning home: "He passed farm after farm, each one owned: Bancroft, Blackburn, McNab, his mind being aware of each change of ownership as he passed from one to the next."22

But sometimes a person loses hold on a landscape, even one that is familiar. In "Death at Bearwallow" a young boy goes to see his grandmother in the country. He starts home as the sun is going down and the darkness remakes familiar places into places of terror: "The thorn bushes at the roadside were familiar, known in all their contours and sensed in all their power, known too well. The hills beyond the running line of the fence and the field sank into the dark of the sky, cool and even, a terror, going to the night too easily, joining the dark."23

In "The Shepherd's Interval," it seems as if creation were following in the footsteps of Flynn Thompson, as he walks home to his farm from a four-month jail sentence for making and selling moonshine. As he walks joyously through the countryside, it becomes real. He passes through a hamlet, with five or six scattered houses, and by a blacksmith's shop. Finally, he sees his own place: "The red and gold spread halfway across the heavens by the time the remembered hills and knolls of his own ridge came to him where familiar trees stood above familiar patches of briars and stiff cliffs of dark stone. In the hollows were running streams." As he comes "in sight of his own land," he sees "his own pasture, dotted with scrubby trees, rolling unevenly backward toward a bluff and tilting evenly forward with the running of the road."24 Then he sees his sheds and shelters, a white barn to the right, his cattle and the swine at the trough. Soon he is on the flagstones that lead straight to the door of his house. And he is at
home, in time for the shearing of his sheep and the wedding of his daughter.

But place is more than physical. In “I Love My Bonny Bride,” it becomes psychological. It is a child, Lena, who reaches out to know the world, its possible places and experiences, including a place called Covington, where she is to go to see her aunt married. As she waits for her aunt Patty to arrive for a visit, she thinks the place she came from into existence: “Lena sat here to wait for the stage, and she thought across the miles to the other house, where Patty lived. The other house became very vivid on an instant because Patty had come out of it that morning.” Throughout the story Lena makes places out of space, creating people, things, rooms, houses from her memory and imagination.

In Roberts’s short fiction time is also place. The setting for “Record at Oak Hill” is an antebellum mansion house, and behind it is the log cabin in which the present owner’s ancestors had first lived. For a while it was used as a kitchen and workroom, then for storage only. The owner is Morna Trigg, who rents the land to her great-nephew Richard Dorsey. One day at dinner, as he listens to his elderly relative talk, “Richard’s thought leaped about among many objects, trailing among such old things that had never been concealed, that had merely been dropped away into forgotten corners and out-of-the-way places, to be found a long while afterward.” One day Richard is feeding the hounds in the log cabin, and, as he takes his coat from a peg beside the fireplace, he pricks his fingers on something sticking through the plaster chinked between the logs. Later, Morna tells of her father, Richard’s great-grandfather, who came home from service in the Confederate army with twenty men remaining of the more than fifty who had left in his company. They wanted peace, the old woman says, but times were hard, especially for men who had worn the gray, and “some were mad with victory and anger.”

One man who cruelly exploited the times was named Buchman, her father’s enemy. Then Buchman was found dead in his own garden.

Following the threshing of the grain, Richard returns to the cabin, and pries what turns out to be a twelve-inch, three-sided dagger from the plaster—a dagger with his great-grandfather’s name on it, the dagger which killed the man named Buchman. The year is 1932, and times are bad again. Will Neal, Richard’s brother-in-law who has lost his farm, remarks sarcastically that at
least in those days there was "something firm to stick a sword into . . . something to kill."28 Now, he laments, there is only "high-priced machinery" and "low-priced wheat and tobacco" and no visible enemy to kill to right the balance.29

Another aspect of place in Roberts's fiction is that place tends to be that part of the world that you know, possess, control, and truly live in. It is the true landscape of one's life, as "The Haunted Palace" illustrates. In this story a poor farmer's family moves into a wing of the old Wickley place, Wickwood, once a grand and prosperous plantation now in partial ruins. "What manner of place is this?," asks the young wife Jess. "She had no names for all the buildings that lay about her. She was frightened of the things for which she had no use. . . ."30 She wants to destroy them. Then, after a lambing session in the vast unoccupied central section of the mansion, and after Jess has attacked an apparition coming at her through a large mirror, 'the place is hers. 'It was near midnight. Jess felt accustomed to the place now and more at ease there, she and Hubert being in possession of it."31 They have carved out now their own place within what was an alien world.

In all of Roberts's stories there is the sense of definite, immediate places—places close-by and up-close. There is also a tendency in these stories for places to open up and out into a grander landscape. There is the feeling that the world beyond the immediate setting is full and complete. There is the sense that the world continues even beyond the borders of the story. This continuity is seen everywhere in her short fiction. From "Death at Bearwallow," for example, there is this casual line: "The beasts dragged at the heavy plow over the hill's rim, and the earth lay away, hill following hill, each interlocking with another."32 "The Haunted Palace" opens with this sentence: "The house stood at the head of a valley where the hollow melted away into the rolling uplands."33 Indeed, many of her stories open with vista-like descriptions. "I Love My Bonny Bride" begins this way: "Four children were at a window looking out upon a village street."34 And this is the way "Love by the Highway" starts: "A young woman, Perry Lancer, was digging potatoes in a small field in a mid-morning. Beside the field a highway lifted gently and rounded for the beginning of a slight curve that took it toward the left and out of view."35

In one of Roberts's best stories, "Sacrifice of the Maidens," Felix Barbour sits in a convent chapel awaiting the ceremony that will
make his sister a Dominican nun. The setting is the old chapel at St. Catharine, a very definite place, "the organ in the loft at the rear of the chapel," the postulants dressed as brides, the priest at the altar "rapidly intoning: Hail Mary, full of grace . . .," the congregation responding "in a rushing chant," and finally the sister who was Anne Barbour is now Sister Magdalen. And yet inside the chapel, inside this timeless, placeless place that could as easily be a village in France or Germany, the places outside intrude upon the consciousness of Felix Barbour. As most critics have pointed out, the story's tension is between the Christian demands of the spirit and the pagan demands of the flesh. As his sister renounces the world of flesh, the brother remembers: "Summer and winter and Anne, they were running down the channel of the year. The year spread widely then, as if it flowed abroad to fill a wide field with corn. There was sweetness in the high blades of the corn and abundance in the full shucks as he tore each ear from the ripe stem." And he sees Anne "playing with the dog in the yard, saw her running after a chicken to drive it into a coop, saw her making herself a dress to wear to the convent school." Further: "He heard Anne running down the yard at their farm to drive a hen away from the little turkeys while they had their food under the lilac bush, and he heard her shout in the wind and heard her laugh when the old hen flew wildly over a fence to escape her clamor." Time and places outside intrude even here.

As improbable as it may seem, Roberts's most direct and eloquent tribute to place is perhaps her one story set in the Kentucky mountains, "On the Mountainside." It is the story of a young mountain boy, Newt Reddix, who has received a taste of education and wants more. He decides to leave his home in the mountains and go to the "settlements." After two weeks of walking towards the lowlands, he stops at a cabin to spend the night. There he meets an old man who is finally going home to the mountains after a lifetime spent in the alien settlements of the low country. Like some Old Testament prophet he warns the boy against leaving. These are his words, his sermon:

I was a plumb traitor to my God when I left the mountains and come to the settlements. Many is the day I'd study about that-there and many is the night I lay awake to study about the way back over Coster Ridge, on past Bear Mountain, past Hog Run, past Little Pine Tree, up and on past Louse.
Run, up, then on over Long Ridge and up into Laurel, into Grady Creek and on up the branch, past the Flat Rock, past the saw-mill, past the grove of he-balsams, and then the smoke a-comen outen the chimney and the door open and old Nomie's pup a-comen down the road to meet me . . . then I'd come to myself and there I'd be, a month's travel from as much as a sight of the Flat Rock, and I'd groan and shake and turn over again. I was a traitor to my God.40

When the boy tells the old man that he drank from a familiar spring a few days before, the man is overjoyed:

To think you been there! You are a-setten right now in hearen of my voice and yet a Tuesday 'twas a week ago you was in the spot I call home . . . and to think you tasted them waters Tuesday 'twas a week ago!41

The old man is about to go to sleep before the fire, but suddenly he alerts himself and says, "with kindling eyes, his hand uplifted":

You come . . . from the place I hope to see if God Almighty sees fitten to bless me afore I lay me down and die. You walked, I reckon, right over the spot I pined to see a many is the year, God knows, and it was nothing to you.42

Indeed, home is the ultimate good place for Roberts's characters. And she describes kitchens, dining rooms, halls with attention and love. Even outbuildings are consecrated. In "Holy Morning" the good place is a barn, where on Christmas Eve an injured ewe gives birth to a lamb. Before that event, however, with its symbolic implications, a girl goes out to the barn to check on the animals:

She looked to the safety of their two ewes and the old ram, and she found them huddled together near the inner wall that divided the cow's shed from the place where the wagon was kept. When the cow had eaten the last of her hay she went slowly to the place where the sheep were and stood against the inner wall as if she found warmth for herself in the brown boards.43
She sees the hens, the cock, the horse, and, overhead, pigeons. "All together," she writes, "the beasts made a gentle warmth... of their bodies." It is just such a scene that will make you believe the legend that the girls have been discussing—that on Christmas Eve the animals will kneel in obeisance to the Christchild.

In "The Betrothed" a young couple anticipate making a place of their own, setting off their place from the world. The young man promises his intended:

I'm a-goen to rent a piece of the Cooksey land next year... Rhody, you and me, we'll live in the little red house on the branch. We'll have a whole mess of chickens and a pa'sel of hogs and cows. And I'll raise corn and 'backer till I fair split my sides. I'll do hit. And next year or year after I'll fair buy a piece of land, and you and me, we'll be fixed for life.44

In such a passage, place is the essence of human realization.

Finally, in at least one story, home has eschatological dimensions. At the end of "Children of the Earth," when the stolen lamb has been freed and the surprise party is over at Eli Green's cabin, the people all go outside and look up at the clear sky.

The stars were a myriad of small sparks over the great roof of the sky, receding and multiplying if the eye tried to fathom or count the number. The fields on every side were lost in blackness.45

The people look up at the sky and begin to talk of the stars, about stars falling, and where they go, and whether people live up there.

Eli looked upward with the guests, standing in the middle of the throng. Some of the points of light were so bright that they seemed vocal, as if they were speaking or singing together. The sounds of the speaking people were blended with his sight of the stars so that he could scarcely tell whether the star or the person had spoken.46

Then someone plucks the fiddle, and the people begin to sing, mostly hymns which they all know: "Shall We Gather at the
River," "When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder," and especially "Beulah Land": "Oh, Beulah Land, sweet Beulah land, / As on a higher mount I stand, / I look away across the sea / Where mansions are prepared for me. . . ." And they sing a new song the fiddler half makes up about "the faraway home of the soul." The rescued lamb is lying "down in the cool grass at the roadside" and the people sing of "eternity and jasper walls," the people "looking from one to another with pleasure, assuming his talent to themselves, and they sang standing near together, filled with wonder and delight, feeling themselves to be a part of the great body of the stars and the world without end." And they sing at the story's conclusion, their songs adding sounds to the music of the spheres.

And so place is a vital element in the short fiction of Elizabeth Madox Roberts. It has a bearing on who her characters are, how they talk and behave, what happens in the stories—even how the stories are structured and written. The literal places of her stories are as familiar as a field of Kentucky tobacco, as concrete as the old chapel still standing on the campus of St. Catharine College, as historical as a pioneer cabin, as ordinary as a shed where a setting hen broods, and as grand as the Milky Way on a clear night in Washington County.

NOTES

4Elizabeth Madox Roberts, 36.
6Annie Pierce Steger Harrison, "Kentucky History in the Novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts" (M.A. thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1957).
8"Death at Bearwallow," in Haunted Mirror, 170.
10Harrison, "Kentucky History in the Novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts," 162-63.
11"Children of the Earth," in Haunted Mirror, 133.
12"Death at Bearwallow," in Haunted Mirror, 164-65.

14“The Scarecrow,” in Haunted Mirror, 104.

15“The Shepherd’s Interval,” in Haunted Mirror, 192.


22“Children of the Earth,” in Haunted Mirror, 126.

23“Death at Bearwallow,” in Haunted Mirror, 159-60.


26“Record at Oak Hill,” in Haunted Mirror, 61.

27“Record at Oak Hill,” in Haunted Mirror, 68.

28“Record at Oak Hill,” in Haunted Mirror, 91.

29“Record at Oak Hill,” in Haunted Mirror, 53.


37“Sacrifice of the Maidens,” in Haunted Mirror, 35.

38“Sacrifice of the Maidens,” in Haunted Mirror, 37.

39“Sacrifice of the Maidens,” in Haunted Mirror, 43.


45“Children of the Earth,” in Haunted Mirror, 151-52.

46“Children of the Earth,” in Haunted Mirror, 152.

47“Children of the Earth,” in Haunted Mirror, 153-56.