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**Between Permeability and Peculiarity:
the Poetics of Gender in *Jingling in the Wind* by Elizabeth Madox Roberts**

If the spirit reaches within to always lengthening depths of being, the infinitudes of time and space in turn converge upon it from without, to be absorbed then in its recesses: “Acute moment of consciousness in which the entire universe, time, space – all gathered into self – myself. (Papers)¹

While we are familiar with Elizabeth Madox Roberts’ deep concern for humankind, her historical representation of the Kentucky country life, her quest for harmony and her heroines’ staunch determination to see the light amidst chaos and poverty, we are hardly prepared to have from her the story of a fantasy tale and a whimsical experiment placed in an imaginary setting. Thus, *Jingling in the Wind*, her third novel, published in 1928, is puzzling in many ways. For any uninformed reader, this fanciful tale seems disconnected from her first two books: a socio-historical best seller and a gloomy coming of age novel. However, it is the book she meant to write: fantastic, astute, delicate and funny, with subtle and conspicuous gender overtones. Roberts’ language is the language of her own mind, and everything in her novels is typical of her own character.

The novel opens on the road as Jeremy, a rainmaker, travels to a convention of rainmakers. He expects to see Tulip McAfee, a lovely rainmaker, but she disheartens him with her cynicism. When Jeremy is elected chief rainmaker at the convention, he knows that Tulip is worthy of a prize. Therefore, after he makes rain, he runs away from his peers and meditates in a remote park. Knowledge comes from a spider that comforts and advises him on how to win Tulip’s heart. Eventually, the couple decides to relinquish their jobs and live a simple and happy life according to nature’s rhythm.

The pivot is nature itself, that is to say the animal and organic worlds and the life cycle of plants within their multiple spatiotemporal transformations that any character with an open mind will grasp and observe while observing him- or herself. At the core of the rebirth experience, harmony is closely associated with women. The main character acknowledges the female power and his feminine part helps him feel the real significance of life.

Alan Nevins endeavors to explain the mixture of farce, fantasy and poetry that pervades the book:

It is a gentle clouded form of satire, sometimes rather wistful, and seldom more than reproachful. It is a mockery that shifts and changes in color and form from page to page, usually defying analysis. The poetry dances, disappears, and reappears. To enjoy the book, the reader must surrender himself to its capricious humor, its elfish alternation of tenderness and laughter, its opal combination of fire and vapour, its sudden ascents from rough homeliness to lyricism. (Nevins 22)

Yet, readers should not be mistaken. Though the plot may seem precious, cloying, and suitable for children, its philosophical and metaphysical concerns clearly set this fantasy apart. Through the phrases, sentences, figures of speech and the structure of the novel, Roberts appeals to a semiotic analysis that models a fictional work into a philosophical tale where gender concerns craftily define their traits and occasionally become blurred and permeable. The book can be read as a questioning of sexual difference and an exploration of the masculine. It is also the story of a quest for harmony in the chaos of the world, as is confirmed in the writer's notes: "In the midst of confusion, there is always a flow of harmony, a quiet water that is not troubled by the weathers which are those winds of the world that blow about the earth" (248). The sovereign self is the final reality in Roberts' philosophy where inmost consciousness is highly valued. For her, the artist will endeavor: "for those delvings into meanings and half meanings which we like to make in our effort to enlarge the capacity for experience and to revalue the human race" (qtd in Mc Dowell 155).

Such a psychological understanding will appear both in the treatment of the subject and in the characters' development. Although none of her seven novels engage in an open and asserted emancipation or activism framework, they all contain diffuse evocations which confirm the writer's interest in the topic of gender. Five of them portray a central female character endowed with fortitude and tenacity, and two others make the female lead a prevailing figure. *Jingling in the Wind* is one of them with a simple plot, pervaded with poetical and lyrical tones and transcended emotions. As she was deeply sensitive herself, Roberts valued the emotional predilections of the feminine nature: "There is 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 in feeling. A man's machinery is all outside himself. A woman's deeply and dangerously inside" (Papers). In this regard, the writer's statements on women's

brief lives, which derive from personal experience in her rural community, corroborate Margaret Jarman Hagood's studies. In *Mothers of the South*, the famous sociologist addresses the issue in those terms: "From truncated childhoods, with meager preparation, they [women] begin prematurely the triple role of mother, housekeeper, and field laborer. ... The burden of involuntary and overfrequent childbearing is great for these mothers and often endangers their health" (242-243). It is only natural, then, that an artist who regards herself as endowed with "an over acute realization of relations and things" (Papers), will create heroines marked by an almost neurotic sensibility as they react to the world outside and to the promptings of the spirit. Roberts feels that women can catch and define the extreme nuances of feeling and the most subtle tones of the truth. She also identifies with her characters: "I oscillate between an identity of myself with the actors and a condition of aesthetic detachment, the latter way prevailing more often – producing from an aesthetic sense of the tragedy or beauty of the scene" (Papers).

The novel is structured in five parts. The language is smooth, flowing and impressionistic. Lively songs and ballads are sprinkled throughout the narrative. The Chaucerian exchange of tales is conveyed in rhythmic prose; several modes of country speech appear. While the characters speak of contemporary ills, their idiosyncrasies are also revealed. The main character's point of view is used most often. Nevertheless, the omniscient author and other characters also provide information. The insects in the wet grass also assume a point of view. This lyrical touch recalls the exquisitely simple and sensuous imagery of the writer's early poetry. For example, we watch as a: "curled locust leaflet hung on a tall grass blade, but when the fall of water increased, it fell down to a cushion of matted grass. The leaves held out their form to the coming wet, all still now as a used prayer, taking the wet on their shield-shaped fronts. It was early morning" (1). Roberts is a poet. The first reality for her is the psyche which molds all that the senses and the conscious mind proffer. It is not a static entity acting within fixed dimensions, according to fixed principles. On the contrary, it leaps, stirs, expands and experiences life in its broader meaning. In an interview, the writer declared:

What I am driving at is the infusion of poetry, in a wide sense, into the art of fiction. I am not thinking of the so-called "poetic novel". What I have in mind is that illuminating flash by which the novelist, dealing with a given situation, contrives to transcend the immediate concerns of his characters and to give to their speech, their thoughts, their actions, a significance that adds something to our understanding of life. (Adams 82)

To understand the writer's sensibility and purpose in defining and molding her characters, the treatment of gender classifications becomes worthy of note in *Jingling in the Wind*. It is clear that the author envisions definite biological, emotional, and sociological differences between men and women; these features are patent but do not exclude transition, over-juxtaposition, and permeability. In the wake of gender studies, the aesthetic canon has progressively gained grounds for thought, entailing studies on the digressions and intricacies of gender stereotypes.

Distinctive male and female traits in the novel will first be accounted for before delving into the subversive aspect of role categorization. The last section will probe biographical components to appraise the writer's stand on gender matters.

Distinctive male and female traits.

The lead character is a young man, Jeremy Jessop of Jason County. He is conventionally handsome and is represented as perfectly adorable and impetuous in action. At the beginning of the book, he is also self sufficient, although relatively isolated from the profit-making world, both by choice and by temperament: "He was prone to search into the hows of things, the from-whiches and the to-whats, and this bent shut him off from many of the more rapid considerations of business and inoculated him from the profit-taking world, for, while he searched for the from-which or the toward-what, for a relation or a modality, the profit had always been taken by some more ready agent" (32-33). In chapter one, this "rogue hero" is on the road where he can observe what is going on in the world. Yet, unlike the modern hero, he is not dedicated to his career. He is romantic but not so virile and possesses: "seven deadly sins, seven cardinal virtues, twenty-two phantoms, and is sometimes beset by two witches, three nymphs and five fiends" (30). Roberts regards these as the properties of all men and makes fun of those elements from which women are guarded against. More significantly, "Pride was his chief enemy, and this one gave him many an under-thrust when he did not suspect his presence" (31). For the author, pride isolates men from harmony and from love. Subsequently, the plot action of the novel will send Jeremy on a romantic love-quest to open his spirit, subdue his pride, and fulfill his being.

When in chapter two, his friend Josephus tells Jeremy of his adventures in the metropolis, we learn that "the psychologists had destroyed friendship" (39), and that "the world had dwindled" (39). Compulsive trading and confusing businesses have led to human turmoil. In a whirl of unbridled ebullition of words, Roberts gives a picture of a world which has turned chaotic and uncontrolled. Josephus tells his friend of the people in the capital who

form endless committees to probe science, religion, politics, business and philosophy. Excessive investigations, psychoanalysis, theological argument, linguistic analysis and metaphysical debates are also objects of ridicule. In the tale, the character named John Breed is so greedy that he proposes to sell human beings at an auction. Additionally, hillbilly music floats through the novel, but it is produced by radio, not by wandering singers, and the local churches engage in a piety that is sensational and worldly, not humble and hidden. The ludicrousness of modern life is suggested not only by the advertising which fills the sky, but also by an absence of artistic talent: “The billboards where merchandise was announced were quick with life, outing forth new growth daily, and at night, the sky-signs metamorphosed from admonition to admonition. Salesmen offered properties at continually mounting prices, and this crescendo was in itself a wave in the flood” (41).

Against the backdrop of a society corrupted by men, a sharp criticism reveals the writer’s views on male pretence and misleading ways. Yet, Roberts is not angry at some established institution, tradition or socially-held set of beliefs. She just disparages them in an unconventional way. Jeremy’s friend, Josephus, recounts the activities of the metropolis:

There was a great preparation going forward in the world, an event being prepared. The world was making ready for some great disclosure Metaphysicians weighed delicate hairs of thought and subtracted faint essences of meanings, pushing gently and more inwardly upon words, trying to find the whereabouts of a substance which, Josephus ... could designate only as the what-is-it. There was a group whose concern was to relieve thought of language, but ever against these labored a group whose struggle it was to relieve language of thought. (38-40)

Jeremy also learns that worldly fame is empty. In chapter four he reaches the metropolis to attend the rainmakers’ convention and realizes that the ceremony does not promote harmony among its participants: “Traffic passed back and forth between the hall of the rainmen and the hall of the congress, men passing, the eloquence of one place vying with that of the other. Votes were taken in the assembly and disaster seemed at hand, power being put upon to quash the science of rain” (178). Roberts presents conventions as emblems incarcerating ideologies of both class and gender. In the tale, the art of rainmaking is crucial and is identified with the characteristics of dominant masculinity. Not only do men have the political, social and cultural power, but they also have power over the elements. The patriarchal tradition in use is clearly exposed. More than greed, power or money, futility prevails over other concerns. Man has caused his own Fall and Eden has been lost. The outer world is in the power of males,

who have a monopoly over it, entailing the loss of connection with nature and with love. Recovering that connection is what Jeremy (or Adam) needs to work on.

For the writer, love does not dwell outside, in the complex, scientifically advanced world, or where urban man's spirit is bent by emotional and psychological travail. Only when one is simply, humbly open to love can love come. Restoring peace and harmony will take Jeremy on a redemptory trail. The tale then embarks on a picaresque journey where the love quest is beset with various difficulties.

Jingling in the Wind is not specifically a satire. A satire attacks established institutions, tradition, or a socially held set of beliefs. In fact, Roberts is not wholly committed to a belief in the objective reality of the external world. Social institutions have an existence, but not the kind of overpowering existence they possess in other novels. For Roberts, her subjective mode of narration requires an introspective mind as hero and we have seen that the focus of her action is never on the external goings-on but on inner transformation. So her satirical approach differs radically from what we regard as traditional satire. In this way, criticism is malign but never vindictive.

Realizing that the job of rainmaking prevents him from making any connection with nature and is itself unnatural, Jeremy suffers. Ultimately, this absurdly empty existence drives him to seek peace in the park, where he is reunited with nature and resolves to rescue Tulip. He worries that the once lovely girl "will sit invisible in some elegant salon" (225). Thrilling her with his rebellion, power and chivalrous qualities, Jeremy appeals to her reforming energies. His masculine qualities of strength and determination eventually win Tulip's heart insofar as they are coupled with a rejection of classic male complacency. Against a pastoral background, Jeremy declares that: "A better time has come to the world, harmony and content and the good life. Womankind is beautiful and good, gracious and wise. Delusion is past. Three elements have been restored to the world, charity, womanly graciousness, and masculine dignity" (246-247). Love develops between them after he decides to establish: "a Masculine Renaissance from this moment forth a man of action and my ideal is in my mind" (236).

Taking his male features back, he is ready to establish new power structures based on a new order. He overcomes evil in the shape of the anti-rain evangelism led by James Ahab Crouch, a leading figure in his time who: "oppose[d] rain control as a device of the devil, blasphemous or pagan" (Fleming 40). Even though the writer defines the tale as a crucible for transformation and experimentation, the ending remains traditional for a fairy tale with its

conventional features of love and happiness; Jeremy and Tulip are born again, free and creative citizens and designers.

According to the above mentioned conventions, female characters are often confined to submission or silence; they sometimes reflect the feats of male heroes, in the manner of Homer's Penelope or the myth of Echo. In the novel, Tulip McAfee is independent, intelligent and beautiful. She is courted by the lead character and both embark on a quest for harmony and love in life. Early in the novel, she is described as "the very flower of the dawn" (45). Her beauty derives from her proximity to nature: "Gentleness and a fine faith in the earth, in the air, in the sun – these made her hand steady and her feet light" (49). She is also sensitive but will eventually succumb to that modern loss of belief in man which Joseph Wood Krutch lamented in *The Modern Temper* (1929). Her disillusion in love comes from the understanding of "a non-existent personality" (162) that would have awaited her if she had married her suitor. She adds: "My suffering was very great for it was now my task to rid my mind of this delusion, this mirage, this phantasmagoria, this ex-nihilo nihil fit, this falsus in unum falsus in omnibus" (164). The accumulative elements recall a Latin prayer where a painful memory pours out. Such feelings of despair and delusion echo the traditional representation of female lament. Tulip has grown hard of heart in a modern world which has lost sight of man's humanity. While waiting for the omnibus to be repaired passengers recount their lives and a woman addresses Tulip in these terms: "I fear that the poetry of life had been denied you, or rather erased from your experience. You are indeed what is sometimes described as a hard woman, a hard-boiled virgin" (165). In those times, unmarried women were not devoid of such sarcastic traits which affected them and added to their fragility. In the book, the account of Zelda Tookington and her innumerable progeny is ridiculed but the picture does not obliterate the underlying portrait of subdued and submissive women plagued by multiple pregnancies and exhausted after raising too many children.

The heroine, who as a female participates closely in the natural rhythms of the earth, also suffers from the wiles of modern civilization, and the profession she has adopted is intrinsically antithetical to natural processes. When Jeremy is awarded the title of best rain-maker at the rain-making convention, Tulip is disappointed and runs away. Both know she should have won the prize, which may hint at the traditional common understanding that the work, concerns and accomplishments of women are unrelentingly dismissed as meaningless and unimportant. Dissatisfaction, suffering and fickleness are now her lot until she recovers harmony in life in the last chapter.

Harmony is restored when they both decide to relinquish their occupation and live a happy and loving life. In the concluding pages of the book, the lead character reasserts a classic feminine trait which is to be beautiful, both inside and outside: “The beauty of a woman comes from a man’s admiration, but the strength of man’s brawn comes from a woman’s loveliness” (248-249). Man’s strength is his weakness and woman’s tenderness is her strength. Under the surface of words, and beyond the seemingly distinct labor distribution, the role categorization implied by the following remarks shows that if man is the ruler, woman is the creator: “Woman is to be gracious and beautiful, the giver of gifts, co-equal with man but different in office. The woman is going to know again the glory of submitting. Man is to be the ruler in the house” (247). Hence, the classical and biblical mythology dominating western thinking and defining women in a variety of patriarchal encoded roles is questioned.

The subversive aspect of role categorization.

The heroine is a goddess: one might expect her to function as a savior since she also bears classic masculine attributes of strength and power. In Roberts’ works, the transgression of gender boundaries or permeability in gender classifications eventually entails women’s prevalence. Oscillating between male and female traits, Tulip rebels at not being elected the best rainmaker and disregards the event. Drawing on the myth of Eden, she disobeys the rules like Eve who disobeys the laws, but disobedience will eventually lead to knowledge. At the rainmakers’ convention, Jeremy knows she is better. Indeed, rain or water is a feminine element not masculine. It is the source of all life. Water is the deep and organic symbol of the liquid a woman bears, since her body is the repository and focal point of blood, milk, and amniotic fluid. In *Sexual/textual Politics*, literary critic Tori Moi associates water with the feminine and asserts that “Water is the feminine element par excellence” (117). Rain or water epitomizes the feminizing seat of discovery and of learning, of the harrowing plunge into troubled waters: it stands for the vital fluid of life and fills our image with purity. Likewise, in *Water and Dreams*, phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard compares the poetic imagination to the maternal component, and thus to water: “Everything which is reflected in water has feminine traits” (34). He claims that water in all forms and ways is charged with spirit. Connecting to it stirs “the deep” in our souls, and men become mermaids that swim in the water of life.

Another variation in role categorization is typified when Tulip, an intellectually independent, thoughtful and responsible young lady, is nonetheless less realistic than Jeremy.

He later discovers that her “sweet and tender influence” (76) is absent. Her stiff heart and loss of sensibility is due to an unhappy love affair. Although at that time, female characters are traditionally perceived as endowed with a sweet and unassuming personality, Tulip differs from that common feminine representation. She once realizes that she “had yielded to a non-existent personality” (162) due to love, and that “[her] suffering ... was very great, for it was [her] task to rid her mind of this delusion, this mirage, this phantasmagoria” (164). She later adds: “I found consolation in my profession” (164). Incidentally, such reflections could possibly shed a distinctive light on the writer’s thoughts on the matter.

On the other hand, Jeremy legitimizes his feminine features. In moments of sharpened perception which verge on ecstasy, he is fascinated as his tingling senses send currents of feeling into ever receding depths of his spirit: “The outer tentacles ... funneled wide” (5). Even the hero is in the habit of watching his mind: “As he sang, he ruminated; it was often his custom and his very great pleasure to arrange his thoughts, or some of them, in decent and orderly periods” (12). His inner life is rich and fruitful like the female psyche. In the novel, women do not have a monopoly on the emotional nature or on the passions which are the elements of life. Although a mutual respect binds both characters together, the hero nonetheless immerses himself in a feminine experience and Tulip becomes an extension of himself.

Roberts’ writing filters through the consciousness and endeavors to create a surrealistic inner space and world. Within that self-centered challenge of words, unexpected semantic and syntax structures emerge and influence the sensuality of elements. The clear-cut use of metaphors reveals the irrepressible function of the artistic drive – the spurting artistic bubble – as well as unifying constituents that bind speech and body. Within that “ordered chaos,” governed by an inner drive for the quest for harmony in life, lexical overload becomes appropriate. Accumulative effects, alliteration, musical tones and echo patterns combine in a lyrical mode where language becomes sheer delight:

A hen beyond the wire fence then made a soft pretty singing in two tones, four syllables, a song that named her by her own name, “Pertelote,” and put an end to the rain, and indeed it was done. The drops stood now on the leaves like fixed crystals, or one slid down a grass leaf and fell into the earth. Pertelote continued her purring song, her name brought into musical discourse and made to argue for the good of moist earth and the general boon of small beetles and soft lush caterpillars that crawl after a shower. A red ant came then out of the tangled grass and ran over a rooted leaf. A little gray hopper sprang across from some sheltered place. (5)

Time and space indicators are absent. The only temporal element worthy of interest is the core mental one where time stands still. Such a feminine sensitivity allows Jeremy to be in tune with nature and merge with it towards the end of the novel. He later wonders how to restore “fountains and the ways of fountains back into her heart” (171). Ultimately, it is only at Jeremy’s urging that Tulip is reunited with nature. Jeremy sees that man is a “poor creature . . . slave to his moments” (173). His worries represent contemporary man’s great problems – the ability to remain human in an increasingly non-human world, and the ability to retain societal cohesiveness in an increasingly diffuse society. In this milieu, he sighs: “Oh, what a world It is a disgrace to grow old The world will be fixed, and no new combination will appear, and we will continue forever without hope” (109).

Playing on satire, on the signifiers’ multiple meanings, on the various narrative voices and on the focalization process, Roberts’ writings implement new aesthetic methods that pervert the notion of a set female identity within a patriarchal mode of representation. The concept of gender wears off in the complexities of the narrative. Sexual identity becomes vague and blurred: “[Jeremy’s] unthought wish was still for Tulip, for her presence, for her happiness, for their two happinesses as joined or contiguous if not identical” (189).

For the writer, thwarting language codes is a way to denounce the standardization process of “the other” where the female concept is locked by logos within a defined social order hierarchy. Nature’s abundance, combined with a lively musical rhythm and sensuous symbols, contributes in recalling Eve in Paradise, except that Eve becomes Jeremy or Tulip’s double. Intertwined voices also show the male/female symbiosis. But going beyond transgression does not favor a male dream of return to the motherly place. On the contrary, it leads to the completion of an everlasting truth brought about by an insect.

In the park, Jeremy receives advice from a lowly spider that symbolically holds in her web of life “the whole of culture” (230). She brings knowledge and Roberts is aware of those facets of culture and custom, of the intellectual, political and societal web, in which each person is enmeshed. Those essentials of life which the spider designates as sacred are the love and commitment which human beings can feel for each other. Wherever the spider comes from – his own imagination or a fortuitous happening – it appears to Jeremy with its acumen and wisdom, as if a part of himself or showing rules to abide by:

“I have all here in my hands,” she was saying, moving forward in an arc, catching the thread, a pause, a movement forward, a whirr of drawn silk. “I have it all here, the whole of culture. I draw it all out of myself with my long supple fingers, I pattern it on the air. I make it as I go, but it is made already within

me, spinning. I knot a thread, thus, with the thrust of my abdomen, spinning, and I knot another, going ahead, making. This segment here is a science, and this a renaissance A dark age is followed by an age of enlightenment Votes for women A rise and a decline I make a knot and I am back again. (230-231)

The spider episode, which concludes the story, recalls Emily Dickinson's craft discussed in *The Mad Woman in the Attic* by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. For Dickinson, the spider symbolizes women who spin or are spinsters. She portrays metaphysical spinners of the world, or crafts(wo)men, who are also virgins free from male attachments: "The spinster/spider was also, for Dickinson, a crucial if 'neglected' emblem of art, and of the artist as the most triumphant secret self" (Gilbert and Gubar 633). For Roberts too, the artist secretly weaves a substantial web of life and she considers herself an artist-spider who spans the past, the present and the future in a visionary experience.

Hence the story becomes a special cradle where the quest for harmony is concentrated in perfect form, thus shunning the trials and tribulations of life; a new day is dawning like a rebirth experience. The young lovers have escaped from the evils of the industrialized world and remain attentive to the spider's advice on love and on happiness:

Then that most exquisite spider that crouches at the hub of the web that is the mind stirred, feeling a tremor pass over the web, as if some coil of it were shaken by a visitation from without. Life is from within and thus the noise outside is a wind blowing in a mirror. But love is a royal visitor which that proud ghost, the human spirit, settles in elegant chambers and serves with the best. (256)

Autobiographical tones.

The above quotation embodies Roberts' motto and purpose in life and the novel meets the kaleidoscopic nature of her thought. The strain to reach the exact expression, to capture the last delicate shade of feeling or thought, represents a form of aspiration for the artist and sometimes for the Roberts' hero and heroine as they may epitomize the latent strivings common to all men. The never ending quest for just expression is at once the greatest challenge and the greatest source of satisfaction for a person of deep sensibility:

Roberts' main characters possess sensitivity and depth, exquisite sensibility and strength of response to the forces which react upon them from without and from within. They are romantics in the force of their aspiration, in their drive toward fulfilment at any cost; and they are notable for the tenacity which with they hold their values. In common with later southern writers, Roberts charted voyages

of spiritual discovery for her protagonists. The result of the journey for the main character is an increase in awareness, often resulting in a conversion or a rebirth (Mc Dowell 159)

Roberts' cohesive language is rendered in sensorial substance of flesh and word; it blends an idiosyncratic mix of fictional and autobiographical narrative with a multitude of philosophical and poetic reflections. New ways of conceptualizing criticism, relationships, identity, and the self are shown: "But [Jeremy] could scarcely think forcefully or make a decision, for no sooner had he presented his fears in orderly procession than came flesh and more richly scented messages in saffron and sandalwood, tokens which heated his blood with hatelust and called upon his tongue for more spiced epithets of denial" (189). Shaped with a mix of feminine and masculine qualities, Jeremy is also the writer's double with her doubts and fears. Inner strength and outer frailty characterizes Roberts who always felt different from her peers.

Sitting on the...dark stairs, with the door closed, alone, shaking with a misery, not fear of any physical thing but a feeling of the utter uselessness of everything I was akin to no one. People were nothing, relations were nothing. I did not know what was the matter. I only knew that I was alone in a spaceless, thing-less universe. These fits of feeling often overtook me when I was very young Sometimes they came as the result of misfortune and fear or calamity, but ... more often they were not related to anything specific as far as I could see. (Papers)

Frequent migraines and a lonesome nature progressively pushed her away from the company of others. Throughout her career, she upheld marriage and the rearing of a family as ultimately the most fulfilling of human experiences. She herself never married, yet the joys and sorrows of a simple but rewarding marital union were precious to her. Devoting her entire life to the art of writing helped her repress her physical pain and shed her mental disconnection from the outer world. In a way, the writer evaded confrontation with her own painful femaleness through a form of androgyny where a strong mental condition strove to compensate for her physical weakness. She was free to develop both sides of her nature, both male and female, and to create the appropriate kind of novel for the expression of her androgynous vision. The concept of true androgyny – full balance and command of an emotional range that includes both male and female elements – is attractive and is patent in her other novels which clearly encompass that dual insight.

Universal in human nature, the passion for order and stability becomes, in its most intense form a quest for spiritual certitude and the deep awareness of a transcendent power increases. Roberts claims a new vision where Eden is rejuvenated through the power of love.

Yet, for all its gaiety and fanciful lightness, *Jingling in the Wind* is concerned with social issues that always preoccupied the writer. Loss of values, over-mechanization, greed and superficiality are people's woes that damage happiness. Though Roberts' vision in this novel is neither bitter nor pessimistic, there is an abundance of allegorical indictments of the stupid conventions of modern life which exploit people and tend to deprive one of individuation. An ethical need to rescue life from daily mediocrity remains a constant pattern in Roberts' works, but few understood her meaning and the political, sociological or cultural impact of the novel in the representation of the society/gender interface. Her adoption of a female aesthetic ultimately proved inadequate to her time and stifling to her development beyond the tragedy of her personal life.

Writing cannot exist independently of the mind. Roberts blurs the boundaries between writing and life, treating life as writing and writing as life with the mind assuming a position of mastery over signification. Here again, permeability becomes a merger of some kind. In *Coming to Writing*, the following statement by Helene Cixous echoes the writer's beliefs in her personal struggle for self definition:

I don't 'begin' by 'writing': I don't write. Life becomes text starting out from my body. I am already text. History, love, violence, time, work, desire inscribe it in my body, I go where the 'fundamental language' is spoken, the body language into which all the tongues of things, acts and beings translate themselves, in my own breast, the whole of reality worked upon my flesh ... recomposed into a book ("Writing" 52)

Being a deeply feeling – not merely sensitive – individual entails suffering and bewilderment: mental and physical pain for the writer and confusion for the reader. Roberts was aware of that natural tendency and the book was subject of adverse criticism. The vast majority of critics found the novel alienated from their concern and intricate, with obscure philosophical meanderings. "It is one of the dullest novels written by a first-rank American novelist", once wrote a famous literary critic (Auchincloss 130). Similarly, Kenneth Burke found nothing to eulogize in the novel: "*Jingling in the Wind* remains a book of no great moment despite its distinguished antecedents" (563). Admittedly some passages relieve tremendous affective energies; others solicit reduced attention, and others leave sensations of total indifference. Additionally, the general deprecation of the novel may have stemmed from another cause: artistic subjects have long remained patriarchal. In such a context, women's writings have long been denigrated, ignored and discarded. For many readers, *Jingling in the Wind* was disorganized, its fantasy clouded and the fantastic elements unreal. Still, the fluidity of the

mind sometimes allows for reaction to various stimuli. Each main character encompasses a dual polarity: male and female, permeability and peculiarity, discord and harmony. Then, all her novels become metaphors for erosion and reconstruction, like the moments of dismay or literary rapture experienced by the author. Through the prism of gender roles, the book sheds a light which is unusual but noteworthy on her multifaceted craft steeped in humanity.

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¹ Papers: reference to The Elizabeth Madox Roberts Papers, Washington DC: Library of Congress, Bureau of Manuscripts. These documents include letters, paper clippings manuscripts and scrap notes written by Roberts and gathered in fifteen different boxes. They were bequeathed in 1943 and in 1945 by Mr Yvor Roberts, Elizabeth Madox Roberts' brother and Executor of her belongings. As it is impossible to locate the exact location of these sources and references, it will therefore be admitted that all quotations by the writer which are not clearly recognized or identified elsewhere will appear in this collection.