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Blood Ties Exposed: Revelatory Letters in Elizabeth Madox Roberts' *My Heart and My Flesh*¹

What a trustful guardian of secrets fire is! What
should we do without Fire and Death?

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The American Notebooks*

[Wayne] had a tender sense of language as being
some essence from the roots of human life.

He Sent Forth a Raven 76.

Elizabeth Madox Roberts is remembered for her vivid depiction of rural Kentucky, of its ways and customs. In spite of J. Donald Adams' praise for her second novel², *My Heart and My Flesh* (MHMF), Roberts' *The Time of Man* (TM) and *The Great Meadow* (GM) are the only ones that remain in print nowadays³. The success of *The Time of Man* threw Roberts' second novel into oblivion though she wrote *My Heart and My Flesh* at approximately the same time. Early reviews of the novel such as Dorothy Graffe Van Doren's in the *Nation* did not find Roberts' second novel as gripping as her first: "In *The Time of Man*, Roberts wrote in her own particular way a magnificent symphony. Her second symphony is confused. The harmonies are sound and lovely; the theme itself is blurred." (608). And yet, as Grant C. Knight observed in an essay devoted to Kentucky fiction, "with the exception of Miss Roberts's *My Heart and My Flesh* no Kentucky novel has ventured boldly upon the tragedy of miscegenation or pictured the Negro as other than half melancholy, half jolly, altogether faithful Black Joe" (13). Roberts' novel made her stand out in the Kentucky literary production of her time. In addition, *My Heart and My Flesh* can be seen as a dark counterpoint to *The Time of Man*; Roberts herself does not seem to have much sympathy for Theodosia. In her notes she ponders on the young woman's failures as opposed to Ellen's successes:

Do I write about Theodosia less lovingly than I did of Ellen? If so, why is this?
Ellen is and was for me life itself. Have I less sympathy for Theodosia? Why? What is
she? How does she relate to life?
She is a wandering spirit, a lost thing.
Why is she lost more than Ellen is?

¹ I want to dedicate this paper to the two ladies who introduced me to Elizabeth Madox Roberts' works, Simone Vauthier and Gisèle Sigal, and I want to thank them for their encouragement and interest in my work. Also, this paper would probably not have been written without Brigitte Zaugg's support and invaluable friendship. Be these three muses thanked as they should for helping a poor boy find his way in the hills of Kentucky...

² See J. Donald Adams, "Elizabeth Madox Roberts," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 12.1 (January 1936): 80-90.

³ The full references to the editions used throughout this essay are indicated in the works cited.

She is lost through a partial consciousness which leads her to set up standards and anti-standards. Ellen is not lost because she belongs to the earth itself, to the swing of the tides... of the seasons (qtd. in Rovit 46).

True, Ellen is in osmosis with nature, but Roberts seems to have overlooked Theodosia's attraction to the earth. In chapter 4, when Theodosia becomes fully aware that the family house has been lost, "she looked (...) at her first memory of the earth and saw in it its enhanced qualities as they had come to her first-seeing" (*MHMF* 120). She imagines "her hand prodding into the earth to find out its way, her head bent low to see and to smell the crumpled soil" (*MHMF* 121). The loss of the house makes Theodosia's love for all it symbolizes more blatant than before. Therefore her feelings come to echo Ellen's impressions concerning her own house: "In her mind, the house touched something she almost knew (...) something settled and comforting in her mind, something like a drink of water after an hour of thirst, like a little bridge over a stream that ran out of a thicket, like cold steps going up into a shaded doorway" (*TM* 14-15). This is a perfect example Roberts' phrase "life comes from within": the house seems the ideal place for the mind to develop since confinement in space apparently helps open an imaginary landscape. In *My Heart and My Flesh*, Theodosia's curiosity is what leads to her discovery of her father's illegitimate offspring, and foreshadows her losses because it symbolically exposes the South's weaknesses and lack of coherence.

In her notes on *My Heart and My Flesh*, Roberts analyzes her method in writing the novel insightfully. She explains:

The method here was a steady taking away until there was nothing left but the bare breath of the throat and the simplified spirit. The work begins with a being who has been reared in plenty and security. She has the pride of Family, of Wealth (as such goes in the South of our country), a pride in being the honored and petted child of parents, a pride in personal charm and in popularity with friends and associates, and finally a pride in musical skill and in a boundless ambition to play the fiddle well. All these gentle conceits are gathered into the person of Theodosia.

One by one these things are taken from her to the up-building of her understanding and the growth of tolerance and wisdom through suffering. Each of these is lost and more (qtd. in McDowell 107-8).

Theodosia certainly loses a lot in the course of the narrative but she also discovers the ties that bind her to the colored people who live around her. *My Heart and My Flesh* is known as "the story of a woman who went to hell and returned to walk among you" (EMR papers qtd. in McDowell 107), a remark that is all the more accurate when we consider Theodosia's discovery as an ultimate encounter with the Gothic Other. In their study of Roberts' oeuvre, Campbell and Foster even note that when Roberts reworked the novel for publication, she deleted "the story of the Negro Uncle Wilse, one of the finest individual studies she ever penned" (162). Her concern with race then allows for a re-reading of the title as Theodosia's

coming to terms with her family's ramifications, for as Simone Vauthier has it, "the blood tie transgresses and denies the order of a world conveniently segregated by the boundaries of 'race' and 'normalcy'" (Vauthier, "The Other Half of the Family" 38) J. Donald Adams describes *My Heart and My Flesh* as "a novel which has at times an almost terrifying power; dealing with a somewhat Faulknerian theme, it reduces Faulkner to melodramatic claptrap" (Adams 86). Indeed, Roberts perfectly handles the subject of miscegenation⁴ and its impact on Theodosia through what Adams calls her "infusion of poetry into the art of fiction" (Adams 83). As McDowell observes, "Her journey from happiness to despair to regeneration, from spiritual confidence to spiritual reconciliation, and from a relative superficiality to unwonted suffering to a poised serenity, prescribes the arc and structural line of this searching novel" (McDowell 108).

The aim of this paper is to explore Theodosia's reactions to her discovery, her growing curiosity towards her colored kin and the importance of the letters as an efficient means to unveil the painful truth. The focus will first be laid on the metaphoric importance of the attic where Theodosia finds the letters. Then I shall focus on Roberts' use of letters to disclose the information, and I will eventually analyze the way Theodosia's mind slowly plunges into the dark abysses of madness.

1. From Dust to Life, From the Attic to the Basement

Although the place where Theodosia finds the letters revealing her being kin to colored people is not defined as 'the attic', it is referred to as a "back upper room" (*MHMF* 65) thus implying that it could be assimilated to an attic. The place becomes symbolically metaphoric because it is above the main rooms in the house and because it foreshadows Theodosia's discovery if we consider that knowledge of any kind has to come from above, otherwise no transcendence is possible. What brings Theodosia into that room is her interest in the past and her desire to find out about the house: she "found that she had determined to search among the papers in the back upper room to try to find the truth about their house, that she would take upon herself the necessity which awaited her as her grandfather visibly failed" (*MHMF* 65). The choice of words and expressions such as "determined", "take upon herself" and "necessity" makes it clear that Theodosia will not let anything prevent her from finding what

⁴ If miscegenation is one of the outstanding themes in *My Heart and My Flesh*, Roberts also includes mulattoes in *He Sent Forth a Raven*: "There were three small mulatto children in one of the cabins back in the farm, and these would toss and catch the little jack-ball with her on the floor of the west porch" (45). A study of *He Sent Forth a Raven* in this light would be interesting to undertake but it would take me away from the primary focus of this essay.

she is looking for. Moreover, her fortitude comes from her desire to perform what the patriarch has failed to do. Her search presents her as a strong-willed young woman who is not afraid to carry out manly duties.

Interestingly, Theodosia does not study the papers in the upper room; instead, “she took a mass of papers and letters from the old desk and carried them to her room to examine them before the fire. Many of the letters had been tied into bundles and these she examined first because they offered a modicum of order in the chaos of the mass” (*MHMF* 65). These sentences are loaded with symbols: Theodosia takes the letters to her room as if she meant to translate their messages into her world, her reality, and she reads them by “the fire”, which announces the burning issues she is on the verge of reading about. Also, she sees the bundled letters as the only form of order in the chaotic mass. The reference to chaos is another forewarning device in the narrative since the order of life as she knows it will be questioned by the very nature of the letters. The words employed to describe the letters already suggest that Theodosia will come to the same conclusion as Diony at the end of *The Great Meadow*, when “she felt that the end of an age had come to the world, a new order dawning out of the chaos that beat through the house during the early part of the night. Her thought strove to put all in order before she lay down to sleep. She felt the power of reason over the wild life of the earth” (*GM* 197).

Indeed, as she reads one letter after another, Theodosia gets to know her background a little better. One letter in particular catches her attention: “An imperfect chronicle arose out of the stench and this chronicle built the present into a new structure. She sat staring at the embers or she turned again to the documents, for they had hints of more to disclose” (*MHMF* 67). As ‘imperfect’ as it might seem, the account she has just read changes Theodosia’s present, and though she tries to reject what she cannot change “the papers (...) had begun to reveal a hard story, hard to know and realize” (*MHMF* 67-68). The repetition of the adjective ‘hard’ gives the sentence a binary rhythm that implies a gradual awakening in Theodosia’s mind reinforced by the choice of the verb ‘begin’, which suggests that the past is just starting to unfold, revealing the family’s darker secrets. The story takes on olfactory qualities when the narrator describes it as “a mouldy smell on the rotting paper, a faint stench and a choking dust” (*MHMF* 67) hence mirroring Theodosia’s sensations when she comes close to her grandfather and recognizes the “mouldy smell of age putrefaction” (*MHMF* 70). The manifestation of Theodosia’s dismay is physical; she is still shocked by what she read in the papers, and the narrative itself expresses her desire to have the whole truth disclosed: when she inquires about the accuracy of the facts depicted in the letters, the narrator plainly states

that “she told him of what she had learned from the papers” (*MHMF* 72). The whole exchange does not include any reference to what is written in the letters as if it were simply unspeakable and beyond any possible utterance.

It is not surprising that Theodosia should turn to her grandfather, because she is convinced that “he must know some eternal, some truths, some ways unknown to her, and she would yearn with an inner sob of longing that he might impart this thing to her, whatever it might be” (*MHMF* 33). In other words she sees him as having a kind of aura and is therefore ready to hear whatever knowledge he has to impart to her; however he is not willing to share and confess his shameful family past. Anthony’s reaction tells a lot about the implications of Theodosia’s discovery. Like the narrator, he does not repeat the facts but instead starts accusing his granddaughter of interfering with family affairs that are out of her reach: “‘Never let me hear you mention it. Not whilst I live. The worst piece of impudence that ever I saw in life. Enough virtue in a Bell, in a Monfort, to carry along a little excess weight. Never let me hear a sign of this again. Get about your business’” (*MHMF* 72). It is once again through the repetition of a similar structure, ‘Never let me hear’, that Roberts gets her point across: revelations can be made but they should not be uttered. Moreover, Theodosia is a young woman: she should behave like a Southern Belle and not look into men’s business. As Simone Vauthier explains, “Anthony asserts his male power to define what can and what cannot be said, or rather impose the definition of the speakable which the socio-cultural order endows him with the authority to transmit” (Vauthier 37)⁵. In a way, Anthony is successful in turning the tables on Theodosia for he makes her feel that she is the one who is guilty of transgressing the southern code of conduct. However, his overreaction is also enough for Theodosia to understand that what she read was true. The relationship between the ego and the ‘id’ as presented by Freud is thus exposed in Anthony’s behavior: “The ego is not sharply separated from the id; its lower portion merges into it. (...) But the repressed merges into the id as well, and is merely a part of it. The repressed is only cut off sharply from the ego by the resistances of repression; it can communicate with the ego through the id.” (Freud 24). By not naming the repressed and using such words as ‘it’ or ‘this’ to designate miscegenation, Anthony makes his denial even more obvious and paves the way for Theodosia’s new outlook on life. Just as the night before “she felt liberated, inwardly cool free to *love and hate*” (*MHMF* 71, my emphasis) her father, her grandfather’s response to her query confuses her feelings for him. Earlier, she could find “some beauty in his putrefaction, some flower in his decay” (*MHMF*

⁵ Simone Vauthier analyzes the scene in detail and points out Roberts’ use of techniques germane to miscegenation literature (See Vauthier 37).

71), but her thoughts also divulged her mixed feelings toward the patriarch: “Somewhere there was a soul within her, within her grandfather likewise, she thought” (MHMF 71). The addition of ‘she thought’ in the previous statement leaves things open, yet to be clarified, and her talk with Anthony completely ostracizes her: ““Get about your business. Get on. Get outen here. Away”” (MHMF 73). The page break that follows these words materializes the gap that is widening between Theodosia and her family. It also illustrates Gisèle Sigal’s comments:

Theodosia Bell stands for an Eve after the Fall, which makes the reconquest of the lost spiritual ground all the more inaccessible. She tries to recover the joyous picture of a beneficial natural paradise for Man and bears the initial break within her heart. She finds it in her surroundings, in her fellow-creatures, and her quest for integrity becomes a clash between the world and men. Her function is to re-establish order and justice and to re-evaluate human relationships.⁶

Anthony symbolically throws Theodosia out of her flimsy paradise and the page break comes to stand for the void that Theodosia will have to fill up with new experiences. By bringing her discovery from the upper room to her own room and then to her grandfather, Theodosia metaphorically hastens her downfall. The use of letters implies that miscegenation in the South was not something to be openly discussed, a fact that already appeared in Kate Chopin’s 1893 “*Désirée’s Baby*” and would later feature in Faulkner’s 1936 *Absalom, Absalom!*.⁷

2. The Truth Encapsulated in the Written Word

The use of letters or of papers to reveal blood ties takes dramatic proportions in Kate Chopin’s story. It exposes the injustice *Desirée* fell victim to and it unveils the Aubigny family secret. A parallel can be established between the final scene in Chopin’s story and Theodosia’s reaction when the truth dawns on her. That Chopin should close her story with words from the letter makes her story more gripping than Roberts’, who chooses to have the letters’ message rephrased by Theodosia before she actually quotes from them. Roberts shows

⁶ My translation of:

Theodosia Bell représente l'Eve après la Chute ce qui rend la reconquête de la terre spirituelle perdue d'autant plus inaccessible. Elle tente de retrouver cette image bienheureuse d'un paradis naturel bénéfique pour l'homme et porte en elle la marque de la brisure initiale. Elle la découvre autour d'elle chez ses semblables et sa quête d'intégrité devient affrontement avec le monde et les hommes. Sa fonction consiste alors à rétablir l'ordre et la justice et à revaloriser la relation humaine.

Gisèle Sigal, « Comment fuir le chaos, ou la représentation de l'ordre chez E.M. Roberts, » paper presented at the « La représentation de l'ordre » Forum in Amiens, France on 2-3 March 2006, 13.

⁷ Simone Vauthier has analyzed this instance at length in her « *Absalom, Absalom*, Un dilemme américain, » *Bulletin de la Faculté des Lettres de Strasbourg* (mai-juin 1960) : 381-397. For lack of space, I solely refer to Vauthier’s essay for a study of Faulkner’s novel.

Theodosia's growing curiosity for the past while Chopin bluntly presents the reader with Armand's discovery:

The last thing to go was a tiny bundle of letters; innocent little scribblings that Désirée had sent to him during the days of their espousal. There was the remnant of one back in the drawer from which he took them. But it was not Désirée's; it was part of an old letter from his mother to his father. He read it. She was thanking God for the blessing of her husband's love:—

"But above all," she wrote, "night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery" (Chopin 244-245).

As in *My Heart and My Flesh*, the letters are tied in a bundle and the most important one is isolated from the rest. The choice of both writers to isolate the truth is telling, for the secret that they hold is one that is concerned with otherness, which makes the two narratives akin to Gothic fiction. Ruth Bienstock Anolik explains that "the Gothic is marked by an anxious encounter with otherness, with the dark and mysterious unknown" (1). In both "Désirée's Baby" and *My Heart and My Flesh* the reader witnesses such an encounter, though, just like the characters, s/he has not been prepared for it. Roberts is more subtle than Chopin in the means she chooses to convey the information. When Theodosia finds out about 'the imperfect chronicle' (*MHMF* 67), she keeps on searching to find more reasons to hate her father:

She had brought other papers from the cupboard in the back room, and she sat busy with these all of a day and half a night. She was weary now of the stale odors of decayed paper and dust, weary of the truth which was now established. Her father was father also to three mulattoes. Letters from her mother's relatives touched the matter as if it were beyond dispute, reiterated it as if it were a knowledge well premised and antedating the discussions of funds and settlements. She laid all the letters relating to this subject in a pile together and studied them in order. They were letters from her mother's father, now dead (*MHMF* 68).

What is striking in this description is Theodosia's attempt to put the papers in order, as if she meant to reorganize the events of her family history to better understand them. Nevertheless, Theodosia is tired, 'weary', and it is once again through odors that her inner turmoil is conveyed to the reader. In addition, Roberts resorts to repetitions ('weary') and alliterations (/w/ and /d/) to emphasize Theodosia's distress. Of quintessential importance is the origin of the letters ('They were letters from her mother's father, now dead'), since they come from her mother's side and since they were written by someone who is now deceased. Theodosia's decision to ask her paternal grandfather seems to be a logical choice, for his age designates him as the last wise man in the family. What Theodosia does not realize is that her grandfathers do not play the same role: her maternal grandfather sounds more accusing than compromising. In this respect, the letter she quotes from is particularly eloquent: "'This is the last of your share from your mother's estate. Make it go as far as it will. You knew when you married Horace Bell that he was the father of two blacks'" (*MHMF* 69). As in Chopin's story,

reading these words and acknowledging their existence by having them included in the narrative and not paraphrased is voicing the unacceptable. Like Armand, Theodosia sees these words as evil and she too will “[drop the letters] into the fire in a fury of anger” (*MHMF* 69).

Miscegenation is the taboo issue in the South and, in choosing to tackle it, Roberts confirms Carlos Fuentes’ comments that “the singularity of the novelist’s role is that s/he can give voice to what has yet no voice, a name to what is still anonymous” (qtd. in Vauthier, 45). Therefore *My Heart and My Flesh* can be considered a revelatory letter itself. In her notes, Roberts wrote that “Not for a thousand years or ten thousand would the blend be actual and until that consummation it would bring sorrow and be illicit, illegitimate, unyielding” (qtd. in Campbell & Foster 165). Theodosia’s reaction (and Armand’s in “*Désirée’s Baby*”) reflects the South’s rejection of miscegenation because it calls the whole system into question. As Gary M. Cuiba explains, “Miscegenation became the ultimate terror in such a destabilized society because it dissolved the prime distinction upon which white culture was based” (30). The letters make the invisible visible.

In the prologue of the novel, Luce describes Stiggins and implies that he is an invisible man: “Stiggins was not, in fact, a name; some of the men had given it to him one day when he was leaping to escape the whip. (...) He was a half-wit; he could never learn; he was not real. (...) He was not real, was scarcely there at all, was not a being...” (*MHMF* 14-15). This quotation justifies Alexander M. Buchan’s comments on Roberts that “whenever an emphasis is needed, Miss Roberts is not afraid to give it by the most obvious method of repetition, and in addition to making her action or description clear, and adding the local flavour that repetition imparts, she gives her prose a touch of the effect that ballads receive from their refrain” (Buchan 468). The narrator completely negates Stiggins’ existence, first by depriving him of his name, and then by presenting him as a retarded boy and reducing him to nothingness. The use of ternary rhythms first broken by semi-colon and then by commas add to the feeling of irreversibility that the narrator wants to infuse in the text. The repetition of ‘he was not real’ seems meant to impress Luce’s feelings for Stiggins on the reader and make way for Theodosia’s “pleasure (...) in her own sense of superiority and loathing” (*MHMF* 30). There is little doubt that before she read the letters Theodosia shared Luce’s feelings toward Stiggins.⁸

⁸ On Stiggins, also see Roberts’ letter to B. W. Huebsch dated August 21, 1927:

In this idiot, man sinks toward his lowest level both mentally and physically. But the whole chain is no stronger than the weakest link. In the face of idiots – mental incompetents of any sort – every system of philosophy and religion goes down. This speech is the outcry of one who realizes this. Stig is human and he is alive. But he belongs to the discarded, the cast out.

After throwing the letters into the fire, Theodosia goes through a metamorphosis: “Her outer vision dulled by the fire and by weariness, her inner vision heightened, and she began to divide her being, searching for some soul or spirit” (*MHMF* 69). The revelation has completely altered Theodosia’s identity: after the death of her sister Annie (*MHMF* 42), she was the only child in the house, the center of all attentions; now that she knows she has siblings, though darker than she is, her heart calls for a new soul.⁹ The division within her heart is further exposed when after understanding that she has lost the man she loved, “Fear and pain mounted in her mind and she wandered over the house or sat stiffly in a chair. Fear that had been allayed arose and multiplied, meeting other curious hurts and shames, meeting pride in a vortex of confusion” (*MHMF* 87). The use of alliterations (/m/, /s/) creates a cacophony which mirrors Theodosia’s confusion, and it is once again through a ternary structure that Roberts introduces the character’s gradual entry into madness. Interestingly, Theodosia rushes to her colored kin after this fit of panic, thus revealing that her “hurts and shames” have to do with her discovery.

When she is face to face with Americy, Theodosia is more than ever color-conscious. She touches Americy’s guitar that “felt greasy in her hands and it smelt of the brown girl’s fingers” (*MHMF* 88), and she notices “The dark splotches on [Americy’s] face were much less prominent than Theodosia had remembered” (*MHMF* 88). These observations on Americy’s physical features make the division that happened in Theodosia obvious. She first smells the odor of the Other and she suddenly becomes aware that Americy is not as black as she thought, as if the secret, now exposed, made her white blood more prominent to the eye. Likewise, in a later episode also involving Americy, the split that Theodosia has undergone comes to the fore in her preoccupations with her dark sisters:

Once when Theodosia saw her own face in the dim glass above Americy’s bureau she searched it there, in this strange place. “Lethe hates me,” she thought on the instant, seeing her thin curving lips. It seemed to her that she lived with only a part of her being, that only a small edge of her person lifted up into the light of the day. “What am I to her?” she would question, searching into the relation of flesh to flesh (*MHMF* 96).

This scene provides a good example of what Claire Kahane describes in “The Gothic Mirror” when she explains that “the female child, who shares the female body and its symbolic place in our culture, remains locked in a more tenuous and fundamentally ambivalent struggle for a

What is the good of trying to be ‘nice,’ of trying to nurture a ‘soul’ in the face of this thing which negates everything? Why do we throw away anything? Why be nice? It was an ugly speech. I did not mind that. I wanted ugliness here (qtd. in McDowell 112).

⁹ The contrast between the outer world and the inner world is a constant in Roberts’ fiction which has often been described as the embodiment of “her great conviction that through the power of spirit man conquers all” (Campbell & Foster 153).

separate identity. This ongoing battle with a mirror image who is both self and other is what I find at the center of the Gothic structure” (Kahane 337). Theodosia’s feelings that ‘she lived with only a part of her being, that only a small edge of her person lifted up into the light’ attest to the fact that she imagines her newly discovered blood ties have darkened her blood. As Simone Vauthier explains, “superimposed on her image in the mirror, she sees Lethe, the dark self which embodies possibilities Theodosia has not acknowledged in herself; Lethe opens her half sister’s eyes to the existence within herself, too, of a nocturnal part, or we might say, of the unconscious” (Vauthier 41). Theodosia feels the need to belong, like Frankie Addams in Carson McCullers’ *The Member of the Wedding*, and she needs to have her kinship to her colored siblings acknowledged to recreate a family. Ironically, the revelation comes with another loss for Lethe kills Ross and is sent to jail, an event which plunges Theodosia in melancholia.

3. From Melancholy to Madness: Theodosia’s Experience with the Dark Other

In *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva writes that melancholia is essential, for without a ‘bent’ of it “there is no psyche, only a transition to action or play.” For her, “there is meaning only in despair (...) there is no imagination that is not, overtly or secretly, melancholy” (4, 6). These comments certainly shed light on Roberts’ novel and on her characterization of Theodosia. In her notes, she writes that everything Theodosia goes through is “not altogether disaster, but a richness of living” (qtd. in McDowell 111), which goes in the same direction as Kristeva’s analyses. After her grandfather’s funeral, Theodosia rejoices in the knowledge that spring symbolizes “the beginning, a new beginning” (*MHMF* 121). She is convinced that “it is the beginning of the beginning (...) the first of the first, the before that stands before itself, the quiver of a closed eyelid” (*MHMF* 121). The structure of the sentence also bears apocalyptic undertones, however, for just like spring in Theodosia’s mind, the Apocalypse refers to an ending that is also a beginning. Spring symbolizes Theodosia’s newly acquired freedom as she can now say what her grandfather prevented her from saying. When she tells her kin about what she read in her maternal grandfather’s letters, each of them seems to be both taken unawares and yet confirmed in their feelings that a bond has always linked them:

“Don’t you know what Stig is? Stig’s your brother. Wake up and know what I say. Your brother.”

“I’m your sister,” Americy mumbled as if she were asleep. “I always knowed I was your sister.”

“And Stig’s our brother. Our brother.”

Their replies were not articulated. Stig’s response became a low, monstrous laughter, falling rhythmically, like the bleat of some great animal, pleading laughter, crying to be appeased. Americy had fallen into a semi-sleep. Theodosia stood over them, trying to

awaken Americy, calling to her, drawing at her arm. But Americy clung the closer to Stig and Theodosia came swiftly away (*MHMF* 127).

Though inarticulate, this scene is essential in Theodosia's psychological development. The notion of 'knowing' is first introduced by Theodosia and then repeated by Americy, who claims that she had known about their being related all the time. The emphasis that Theodosia places on the determiner 'our' mirrors her need to belong with them, to be part of their group, yet sadly her revelation brings Americy and Stig closer, leaving her out. She therefore experiences another form of rejection from the ones she thought she had found and would cling to.

After this difficult exchange, Theodosia pictures her half-sister Lethe, whom she saw before disclosing her discovery to Americy and Stig. She knows that Lethe was ready to kill that night and when Lethe explained to her that she suspected Ross of having an affair with Lou, Theodosia suggested that she killed Ross, not Lou: "Kill Ross. Who's he to go free?" (*MHMF* 126). At that point, Theodosia could feel Lethe's pain because she too had lost the man she loved to another one. Before going to bed, Theodosia seems to dictate Lethe's actions: "Her hand would feel the dull resistance of human bone and it would rain up and down, stabbing deeper with each blow, letting out the blood, tearing through flesh until her hate had eased itself" (*MHMF* 128). More than describing Lethe's uncontrollable violence, these words give voice to Theodosia's internal conflicts. Stig's and Americy's passive response to her claim for love makes her want to give voice to the violent conflicts going on in her heart. Her body and Lethe's become one, so that Theodosia symbolically holds the knife she cannot hold in reality. Language is the medium she uses to let her dismay out, because language, as Kristeva has it, "retroactively gives form and meaning to the mirage of the primal Thing" (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 41). The 'primal Thing' becomes an almost bestial need in Theodosia, who "lay in the heart of evil [...] aware of herself as the residue of disaster, the leavings of tragedy, the nothing of the evil hereafter" (*MHMF* 128). The young woman's downfall is gradual, as the rhythm of the sentence conjures up, but her awareness of the evil around her suggests that it is melancholia she is experiencing at this stage rather than madness.

In the narrative, melancholia turns into madness when Theodosia realizes that she has lost Lethe. She maintains that she herself killed Ross and gives precise details as if she had taken control of her sister's mind: "Lethe stabbed Lou, but I killed Ross. I cut his throat open" (*MHMF* 129). Theodosia is convinced that her words were incantatory and that her evil spirit is what guided Lethe. Her state of mental madness justifies all she has gone through

and could not avoid doing and exemplifies Shoshana Felman's conclusions that "madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation. Far from being a form of contestation, 'mental illness' is a request for help, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration" (8). The castration Theodosia went through because of her grandfather is reflected in her retreat from the world after Lethe's crimes: "She was shut into some remote death, although breath came and went in her throat" (*MHMF* 129). Theodosia's existence has turned into "a living death", to use Kristeva's terminology (Kristeva 4), because of all the deprivations she had to face; she has lost "all interest in words, actions, even in life itself" (Kristeva 3). Acknowledging the black other and symbolically becoming that other has freed Theodosia from her inner troubles, but she has to go deep down inside her self to make sense of it all. Never again will she see her black kin, yet they are now a part of her she has to tame to survive in the world.

After the dramatic events, Theodosia is taken away from her home town to her aunt's house, where she slowly comes back to life although she now sees everything from a new perspective: "A day was but little different from a night, she observed under the fog of her reverie, one being light, the other dark, a mere difference" (*MHMF* 147). The play on light and dark reinforces the central metaphor in the novel and stresses Theodosia's awareness that color does not mean much, that her family's past is nothing to be ashamed of; however, its destructive power is such that she will never talk about it again. The voices that she starts hearing towards the end of the narrative help her see clearly through the chaos of life though they also reveal her mental fragility. Some of the voices are particularly significant for they take Theodosia back to the night when Lethe committed the murders:

SECOND VOICE: What was she out to kill?

FOURTH VOICE: She helped Lethe kill Ross.

SECOND VOICE: She wanted to kill. Kill kill! Why didn't she kill a hog?

[...]

THIRD VOICE: She wanted to kill. There was a night when she had kill inside her. She helped Lethe do her work.

[...]

SECOND VOICE: Her hand went with Lethe's. Into Ross. All night blood ran out (*MHMF* 152-253).

If these voices are the work of the unconscious, they tell a lot about Theodosia's state of mind. Although she is now far from Lethe, Stig and Americy, she is haunted by her past and by her guilt. The voices also enable Theodosia to express herself; but instead of justifying the past, she avoids it in a very southern fashion by quoting verses she remembers from "the literary society at the Seminary" (*MHMF* 152). On another occasion, the voices retrace the births of the children, legitimate or not, and this time Theodosia punctuates their comments by

adding details; significantly, the only one for whom she seems to have tenderness is her late sister Annie: “An angel among the white angels of the graves. All the sweetness of the earth brought into one frame” (*MHMF* 158). The facts that she is given to see are as hard as the story displayed in the letters and Theodosia is on the verge of committing suicide, which she sees as the only way out of her torments. But when at last she faces the present and decides to let the past go, Theodosia is really reborn:

THIRD VOICE: You are a murderer yourself. You, Theodosia. And an adulteress. Which of the commandments have you not broken?

THEODOSIA: I thought that was finished, settled. I thought I'd put that by (*MHMF* 162).

The accusations of the voices do not have any effect on Theodosia once she has pronounced the end of the case. To really live again, she has to go through an apocalyptic experience that will allow her new self to blossom: “She sat leaned forward, tense with new life, with the new world, and she penetrated the embers with her gaze and saw into the universe of the fire, the firmament of dimly glowing heat that receded, worlds on worlds, back into infinities, atoms, powers, all replete with their own abundance. She laughed in joy and went with the fire, more living now than the coals in the heart of the red ash” (*MHMF* 165). The stress that is placed on novelty and joy paves the way for Theodosia's awakening. In this scene, she imaginarily recreates the world in this scene, a world she sees as plentiful. Interestingly, in a letter to B. W. Huebsch dated August 7, 1927, Roberts confessed that she had thought of “The Abundant Woman” as a potential title for the novel:

My ideal title would center to the woman and her abundance as a sensitive body and mind. It would be such a word as the French adjective *Abondante* used as a noun, *L'abondante*, and I have cast about to try to find an English equivalent, but there is not any. “The Abundant Woman” and all such are rejected. “The Time of Man” gets in the way of any title with “woman” in it. Such an idea as this word could convey is exactly what I want. It would cover the abundance of the woman's trouble or sorrow and her discipline. It would include her as a lover and as a living spirit. It is a great title and I wish the book might go into French so that it might be used (qtd. in McDowell 127).

Theodosia certainly faces a lot of problems in the course of the narrative but her reaction in front of the fire implies that she knows that the world is crammed with atoms that must be controlled if meaning is to be given to their existence. She becomes a relativist and is no longer afraid of what people might say or think about her. If the voices she heard at night put words on her fears, it seems that her behavior in the last chapter of the novel witnesses a tremendous change: “When she went inside [the school] she found the blackboards and walls written over with obscene words, her name along them. (...) She erased the words slowly, carefully, without anger, thinking how they belonged to the entire country, valley and upland and the farms beyond, the town, all towns and cities” (*MHMF* 178-179). The rhythm of

Theodosia's movements proves that she is now able to weigh things and that she has understood that no matter what she says or does the South will not change, the truth will be insinuated but not spoken, the pain felt but not shown. The words on the board stand for another revelatory letter that Theodosia can read without fear and anger. No need for her to brood on it for she knows what hell is like and she is not willing to return to it.

My Heart and My Flesh presents what Ciuba sees as one of the effects of miscegenation on the southern white community: here too Anthony and Theodosia show that "White discomfort at the possibility of black doubles turned resentment into rage" (Ciuba 30). More importantly, the use of letters in Roberts' novel makes it akin to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall Paper" since, like it, it can be read as "the story that all literary women would tell if they could": "Th[e] paper surrounds the narrator like an inexplicable text" (Gilbert and Gubar 145, 146). Indeed, Theodosia is also surrounded by papers: even though she threw them into the fire, the stories they told are forever part of her. In the last pages of the novel, Theodosia "remembered hell. A clear sharp memory, acutely realized, the more acutely realized in that it fell in this moment of pleasure. Self apparent, saturated with memory-realization, herself subtracted from the earth, and elevated to a pinnacle of searching, her body hungering, seeing itself slipping into decay" (MHMF 191). The alliterations in /s/ bring to mind the snake, which symbolizes temptation; they keep the reader aware that it is curiosity, and thus temptation, that guided Theodosia to the upper room. It is also thanks to the letters that she discovered her heart and her flesh. The end of the novel shows her step into a new world in spite of one last attempt at going backwards: "she called her grandfather, Anthony Bell, but when she was more quiet again, the memory receding, she called in mind the newer name" (MHMF 191). Although Theodosia goes through a succession of ordeals in the course of the narrative, she ultimately finds love: *My Heart and My Flesh* is not only a story about revelation, it is also a story about survival.

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