
Reading Roberts: Prospect & Retrospect

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Reading Roberts Series

The Theory and Practice of “Pure Form”:
Elizabeth Madox Roberts’ “Death at Bearwallow”

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Having found its way into *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, “Death at Bearwallow” is probably one of the most widely read stories by Elizabeth Madox Roberts. This means students are exposed to a story that essentially lays out Roberts’ treatise on identity. Unfortunately, the story is so dense—its formal complexity competing even with Joyce—that without an intensely close reading, a reading marked by what Roberts called “a vast passion of mental desire,” much of its complexity is lost (*The Great Meadow* 24). Excellent critical work has been done on Robert’s Berkelian-influenced theories of knowledge and her characters’ use of such to build stable powerful identities. A close reading of “Death at Bearwallow,” however, leads to a somewhat heterodox position: the search for identity, in fact, ultimately leads to a complete effacement of the self. While this Emersonian approach to knowledge—the “transparent eye-ball” of selfless perception—is not unfamiliar as an idea, it is Roberts’ successful rendering of this theory in her writing that is astonishing and calls for a detailed inquiry. Reading “Bearwallow” as an investigation of her epistemology provides a way to explain a story whose formal intricacy at first seems daunting. The goal of this essay is two-fold: first, to give instructors a fascinating way to approach this anthologized story; and second, to argue that here we find Roberts successfully pushing her epistemological theories to their furthest limits, to a place where identity is superseded by form and form itself becomes ultimate knowledge.

Identity is clearly one of Elizabeth Madox Roberts’ central themes. Both her major novels open with central female characters naming themselves. Ellen Chesser draws her name in the air, and in *The Great Meadow*, Diony thinks her name aloud, “I, Diony Hall,” thus “gathering herself close, subtracting herself from the diffused life of the house” (3). A name separates us from others, pointing to our uniqueness, holding Diony out from all others. But “subtracting” is a strange word to use, as if finding identity in this way means a diminishing. And for Roberts, when naming means a separation from the world around us it is definitely a “subtracting.” Extensive work has been done explaining how Roberts’ characters find their identity within their community rather than apart from it. By the end of *The Great Meadow*, Diony has discovered that identity comes not from

a “subtracting,” but precisely from an ability to understand and add Boone and Berk and Betty and Elvira’s world to her own. While it is not clear that Diony’s inclusion of the experiences of those around her leads to any sort of erasure of her identity, when Roberts pushes this search for identity further, she reaches a point where identity itself disappears.

The poem “Self-Haunted Girl” serves as a case study of Roberts’ use of naming to move so far past the individual toward a representation of knowledge as communal that identity is actually erased. In this poem, a young girl wanders the countryside asking herself: “Who is she that walks now across the sunny plowed land?” (*Song in the Meadow* 17). The speaker lists possible names: Is it “Kate or Mary-Lou or Anne or Jo-Eliza”? But the poem refuses to answer. In *Sallie May*, Roberts inserts a similar list of names to define her protagonist: “Like the rest of her kind, like Homer or Julie or Erastus or Turner or Vic” (8). This is precisely at the moment when she is discussing Sallie’s special knowledge of her animals. Her knowledge is of a “kind” that everyone who lives in her community has, by the nature of the community in which they live. For Roberts a list of names is a way of establishing a realm of knowledge. All the girls listed in “Self-Haunted Girl” are of a “kind”: all have passed through this land. All are as much a part of it as the one passing now. Instead of giving us a name, the final stanza rearranges various lines taken from the body of the poem and then asks again, “Who is she that’s walking through the land?” (*Song in the Meadow* 18)—as if form can somehow give us this girl’s identity better than a name.

In this final rearranged stanza, the speaker repeats her question, “Is it Anne or Anna-Bell or Kate or Jo-Eliza,” and while we do not get the girl’s name, the rearranged stanza does provide an answer: “You couldn’t pluck a wild rose, it withers in an hour” (18). This implies that to pluck a girl from this list would be to watch her “wither.” Just as a “wild rose” depends on its place within the “wild,” so do these girls’ identities depend on their place within their land and community. And here is the paradox. To truly know this identity, Roberts effaces that which we most commonly associate with identity: the girl’s name. The world itself—birds trees, mill path, shorthorns, etc.—becomes primary—and the individual girl’s name disappears. The girl’s identity comes to us through her passing. The physical act of walking through the fields identifies this girl. Because she has no name, she is the one who “walks the mill path,” whose “shadow makes a tall girl go walking down the grass” (17). Her action serves to collect the world around her. This action forms her world, however, the girl herself “crumples up and passes” (18) out of the poem just as