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“It’s a Pagan Communion, and We Are the Priests”: Plenitude in Michèle Roberts’s Short Fiction

Abstract

Roberts’s short stories have not received extensive scholarly attention, yet they make up a substantial part of her *œuvre*. Her output of short stories is configured in a particular and coherent way, one that overlaps with her novels, but is consistent in itself. This configuration is summed up by the term plenitude. Abundance is noted in: genre and mood—in genre shifts and in a mixture of the comic and the dark; characters and settings—the range of female figures presented in the short fiction, and of time and place settings; character morphology—the recurrence of motifs of emotional excess, of longing, desire, and passion, in the shaping of characters (gender shifting is also relevant here); and language—the recurrence of motifs of excess on the level of language, the list, metaphoricity and self-referentiality, and the interpenetration of a variety of discourses. In her short fiction, Roberts conflates the spiritual and sensual, meals and wild gardens, the dark and the light. The plenitude of her created world and its language are entries to redemptive or consolatory experiences.

Keywords: Michèle Roberts, short fiction, genre, character, gender, passion, language

Michèle Roberts’s short fiction has not been extensively discussed by critics. This is scarcely surprising as British short fiction is still a widely-ignored form in Britain, and one that publishers and, to some extent, literary journals and review sections of newspapers disdain.¹ Roberts’s short stories form only a small part of her output, but it is a part that is of some substance: it comprises three collections, *During Mother’s Absence* (1993), *Playing Sardines* (2001), and *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love* (2010). In total, these collections contain forty-one stories. This is comparable in quantity to the work of writers, such as John McGahern or Ian McEwan, who are well-known for their short fiction and whose short fiction forms an important part of their *œuvre*. Roberts’s stories certainly have admirers. Sarah J. Falcus writes of her “rich and often poetic short fiction” (“Roberts” 359). In a review of *During Mother’s Absence*, Eavan Boland notes the coherence of the collection, and remarks approvingly of the author’s reworking of fable material. “It is a daring and demanding project”, Boland writes, “one that makes for exciting reading.” In a very positive review of *Mud*:

¹ See, in this respect, Malcolm 51–53 and Maunder vi–vii.



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Stories of Sex and Love, Stevie Davies writes, “The short story is an intimate, subtle and enigmatic form: Michèle Roberts reminds us in this virtuoso collection that she is one of our foremost practitioners of the art.” Elaine Feinstein lauds *Mud* as follows: “This is a delicious book, to be savoured mouthful by mouthful like caviar. . . . There is nothing predictable about the plots. . . . We are engulfed by these stories, and in them we remember our own lives.”

Indeed, although scholarly discussion of Roberts's short fiction is not extensive, it does exist. Laura Maria Lojo Rodríguez writes about “Charity” (from *During Mother's Absence*) as a presentation of a complex mother-daughter relationship (33–47). Monika Szuba examines the stories in *Mud* as involving feminist appropriations of silenced and occluded female voices (75–89). Marta Goszczyńska also addresses the stories in *Mud* in terms of their re-cycling, re-writing, and re-imagining major texts in the European literary tradition (89–96).²

Despite such exceptions and recommendations, Roberts's short fiction is, to a degree, ignored in commentary on her work. A good example is the long and illuminating interview between Roberts and Jenny Newman from 2003, published in *Cercles* in 2004, which contains not a single reference to either *During Mother's Absence* or *Playing Sardines*. Falcus suggests that Roberts's novels “often blur the boundaries between the novel and the short story,” for example in *Flesh and Blood*, *The Book of Mrs Noah*, and *Impossible Saints* (“Roberts” 359). Thus, it could be argued that critics write of her short stories, even if they do not know they are doing so. Certainly, the short fiction is thematically closely linked to the novels. The central thematic concerns of Roberts's longer fiction—female religious figures (Falcus, “Roberts” 359), mothers (Cain 408–09), domestic activities and skills (Falcus, “Her Odyssey” 240; Federici 132), food, cooking, and communion (secular and religious) (Sceats 127, 129–30, 133, 136)—are equally central to her short stories. Thus, it could be argued, discussion of them is redundant, or, at best, offers only a footnote to the more serious business of the novels.

However, I wish to suggest that Roberts's output of short stories is configured in a particular and coherent way, one that certainly overlaps with individual novels, but is to a degree concentrated and consistent in itself. This configuration is best formulated in terms of plenitude and abundance.³ In what follows, I outline four aspects of this *foison*:

1. genre and mood—that is, the genre shifts that Roberts's stories enact within a collection and within individual texts, and also the mixture of the comic and the dark in the stories' created worlds;
2. characters and settings—that is, the range of female figures presented in the short fiction, and of the time and place settings in which they are located;
3. character morphology—that is, the recurrence of emotional excess, of longing, desire and passion, in the shaping of characters; gender shifting is also relevant here;
4. language—that is, the recurrence of motifs of excess on the level of language; examples are: the list, a clear metaphoricity and self-referentiality of language, and the interpenetration of a variety of discourses (religious, sensuous, and secular).

² The observations in Szuba's and Goszczyńska's essays are well-made and, indeed, germane to the central issue of my essay. However, the authors focus on one collection and do not attempt the overview of Roberts's output of short fiction that I do.

³ It is here that I believe Szuba's and Goszczyńska's comments on re-writing seem relevant to my essay. After all, the re-imagining and appropriation that they discuss add to an already existing textual plenitude.

Genre and Mood

Roberts's short fiction operates predominantly within the conventions of social-psychological fiction. The protocols of the realist text are largely observed: there are no ghosts, social and material minutiae are noted, places are documented, and the text's aim is to present a psychology in isolation or in interaction with others. The vast majority of her stories throughout the three volumes of short fiction lie within these conventions. For example, from *During Mother's Absence*, "Fish" is a short study of a few hours in a small child's life, during which she watches her father leave home in the morning and watches her mother begin to make a fish sauce and then abandon it. The child (whose gender is not specified, but I find it more probable she is a girl) walks out on the beach, sits by the sea, buys some fish, and returns to find her mother and father in good spirits, although they have quarrelled earlier. The story is narrated by the unnamed child and only her point of view is offered in the text. The child's mind and imaginings are at the centre of the piece.

The text is set in a recognizable and documented world. The mother has had her hair cut in Ipswich the previous day (64); the narrator's home, the houses along the promenade, the beach, and the sea are all rendered in verisimilar detail (66, 67). The mother's cooking (64), the appearance and contents of her purse (67), the feel of her newly cut hair and the contours and movements of her face are given in the closely sensed detail that would be a child's (64). Language is idiomatic and approximates real speech. "Bloody hell. We haven't got any bloody fish because your bloody father was supposed to go and get it before breakfast and he bloody well forgot," the mother remarks (65). The child is clearly an imaginative one, and when the reader learns of her invisible dog or the cable she holds that draws her into the sea or the sea to her, one is clearly meant to see these as her creative fantasies (67, 69). Indeed, the child's perspective on things is always provided without adult comment. Thus, with impeccable but perverse logic, she destroys what is obviously a cherished drawing of the mother because it is no longer accurate (67).

However, even in this firmly social-psychological, fundamentally realist text, there is an element of genre unsteadiness. The story begins in a fable-like fashion. "There was a giant on the causeway," declares the child narrator. "The causeway trembled as he pounded along it and the gulls wheeled off over his bristling black hair" (63). However, almost immediately the narrator shrinks her departing father "to human size," and the reader realizes that the observation is the act of an imaginative child. The father's size (from a child's perspective) recurs at the story's end when "my giant father" stretches out on the sofa with his feet hanging over its end (70).

Within *During Mother's Absence*, the majority of stories function within the social-psychological conventions observed in "Fish." This is true of stories with quite disparate story materials, characters, and settings: "Charity," "Your Shoes," "The Bishop's Lunch," "Taking It Easy," "God's House," and even—finally—"Une Glossaire/A Glossary." However, this last story should alert the reader to the genre shifts contained within the collection. "Une Glossaire/A Glossary" is, indeed, about the complex relations within an Anglo-French family, and the personal fates of Grandmère, Grandpère, Monique (the narrator's mother), and Brigitte (the narrator's aunt), and a host of other relatives, and about a French town, its festivals, a family's home, its store cupboards, its linens. But it is also a glossary, focused on persons, experiences, words, and objects, and an elliptical and non-chronological narrative. "Laundry" is a fable and *fabliau*, a bawdy tale set in the French medieval past, about an enterprising peasant girl who becomes a laundress, a prioress and a saint. "Anger" is replete with folk-tale and supernatural motifs of disappearance, transformation and restoration (24–29). It starts with "Once upon a time" (1) and moves between a harsh peasant tale of unhappy marriages and a version of the Melusine legend.

The interplay of genre is even more complex in *Playing Sardines*, both within the collection and within individual texts. As in *During Mother's Absence*, the majority of texts uses a variety of the conventions of social-psychological fiction. For example, "The Sheets" is a story of summer romantic entanglements among expatriate English in the French countryside. The narrator cleans and looks after a holiday *gîte* for Mrs Bertie. A writer much admired by Mrs Bertie comes to stay for six weeks, and Mrs Bertie puts forward her best efforts to allure him. He falls for her cleaner, however. After six weeks, he goes back to London, and proprietrix and help return to things as they were. The realist, social-psychological conventions are observed throughout. Indeed, the story has strong elements of social satire. Mrs Bertie's rather too youthful outfits and never-say-die demeanour are rendered in detail (49), as is the faux *décor* she deploys to win over her easily deluded guests (49). The narrator sets out the economics of Mrs Bertie's dealings in dodgy antiques (50), and offers an observation of men and flowers that roots the story in a known and probable world (55). The story is amusing as Mrs Bertie's efforts to win her glamorous writer come to naught, and he opts for the cleaner. A further comic sting in the tail of this piece (not revealed until the second-last page) is, however, that the house-cleaner is male and called Simon (59). Mrs Bertie's longing for her writer, although always strong—indeed, at the end she is discovered lying naked between his sheets (59)—was always doomed.

Of the eighteen stories in *Playing Sardines*, fifteen contain strong elements of social-psychological fiction. This is true (despite titles that might suggest otherwise) of "Playing Sardines," "Monsieur Mallarmé Changes Names," "No Hands," "Les Menus Plaisirs," "The Sheets," "A Feast for Catherine," "The Cookery Lesson," "Lists," "Blathering Frights," "The Easter Egg Hunt," "The Miracle," "Just One More Saturday Night," "Ma Semblable Ma Soeur," and "Hypsipyle to Jason." Even "A Bodice Rips," which for most of its length is a pastiche woman's romance, turns into a story about young girls' erotic and adventurous fantasies (149–50). Indeed, its subtitle is "A Novel in Seven Chapters," which indicates a rich variation on the level of a higher category than that of genre (short story/mini-novel). But just as some titles ("The Miracle" or "Hypsipyle to Jason," for example) suggest a rather different type of text than what one gets, the genre oscillation of the collection is marked. "Fluency" may look like a study of longing, but it involves an important supernatural shift of place (72–74). "The Cookery Lesson" develops into a Gothic tale of insanity, longing, and revenge (99). "Blathering Frights" does the same in a movement from social satire to Gothic excess and madness. "Lists" is not a traditional narrative at all, and moves towards a murder-story conclusion. "A Story for Hallowe'en" proceeds in the opposite direction and segues from ghost story into the social-sexual comic.

Similar genre diversity is seen in *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love*. "Honeymoon Blues" is a powerful study of grief in which Maud returns to Venice where she spent her honeymoon with her now dead partner in the 1970s. It is an exposure of the rawness of loss through a focalized third-person narration, mostly in present simple, which flows in and out of free indirect and free direct speech. Like all of Roberts's fiction, it is also fascinated with the material stuff of life: drunk girls and their colourful vomit (79–80), the advertisements in Venice airport (80), the reception area in Maud's hotel (82), and bedroom *décor* (85). The piece is, thus, rooted in social-psychological and realist conventions. Even Maud's delusions about bedroom and *loggia* are shown as precisely that (94–95).

Almost all stories in the collection have a marked social-psychological, realist framework, although there is often a genre fluctuation that adds a dimension to this. Thus, "Collette Looks Back," "Emma Bovary's Ghost," "Remembering George Sand," and "Sleepers" are all pieces of historical fiction, with marked meta-literary and intertextual components. "Sleepers," for example, develops characters and situations from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. "Vegetarian in France"

morphs from social comedy and satire on English insularity into a murder story. “Flâneuse” involves unexplained movement in time; it is unresolved as to whether the protagonist’s excursions into the eighteenth-century past are real or delusional. “The Lay of Bee Wolf” advertises its legendary and fabulous provenance. Even the searingly disturbing “Easy as ABC” starts off as a folk tale before becoming a story about wretched prostitution and people trafficking.

The three collections’ richness in terms of genres is reflected in their shifting moods. Many of the stories in *During Mother’s Absence* are dark pieces: “Charity,” in which the narrator survives loss and a complicated upbringing; “Your Shoes,” the monologue of a mother whose daughter has run away from home; and “God’s House,” in which the young narrator attempts to recover from her mother’s death. “*Une Glossaire/A Glossary*” is a celebration of community and family communion, but also a reflective piece on illness, death, and transience. However, “The Bishop’s Lunch,” “Taking It Easy,” and “Laundry” are comic celebrations of female resourcefulness, and (in the last two stories) of sexuality. The balance is different in *Playing Sardines*, in which the majority of stories is comic (or at least benign), however dark the matters they touch upon, as in “Playing Sardines” (betrayal, male patronizing, disdain, and wrong-footing of women), “Blathering Frights” (insane self-obsession), “The Easter Egg Hunt” (illness, death, loss) and “The Miracle” (dealing with a close friend’s choice of a glamorous partner who is evidently superior to oneself). But some stories are unambiguously dark—“A Feast for Catherine” (coping with an unreliable lover), for example—and others take on a dark tint despite their comedy: “The Cookery Lesson” is about unfulfillable, deranged longing, and in “Lists” the poor notetaker’s plucky but futile attempts to deal with her idiotic, snoring, and perfidious partner, indifferent offspring, and an unappreciative world cast a pall over the humour of the piece. The balance of dark and light shifts again in *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love*. There are comic and finally positive stories: “Mud,” “Vegetarian in France” (ultimately, although Nicolette’s years of marriage to an insular boor seem an awful waste) and “The Lay of Bee Wolf” (bloody though it be). “Colette Looks Back,” “Annunciation,” and “On the Beach at Trouville” all involve female survival and creation. But many stories in this collection show very dark sides of life. “Tristram and Isolde,” for example, seems to be about two lovers, but is really, it turns out, about a very disturbed young girl’s devotion to her father. It ends in intimations of imminent suicide. “The Dead Mother’s Club” is a long and moving meditation on the loss of a parent.

But the richness and variation—of genre, of mood—are there, part of an overall amplitude in Roberts’s short fiction.

Characters and Settings

While this issue is important, it can be set out relatively succinctly. Roberts’s short stories are rich in their variety of female figures, and in their temporal and spatial settings. For example, in the nine stories of *During Mother’s Absence*, the reader moves from nineteenth-century rural France (“Anger”) through twentieth-century England (“Charity,” “Fish,” “Your Shoes”) and twentieth-century France (“The Bishop’s Lunch”). Later stories shift between twentieth-century England and France—“Taking It Easy,” “God’s House,” and “*Une Glossaire/A Glossary*” (although the largest parts of these texts are set in France, and England is a distant presence)—while “Laundry” is set in rural medieval France. The central figures (narrators and protagonists) are all female (in “Fish” this is unclear, but a female narrator is perhaps more likely) and range from French peasant women (Bertrande and Melusine in “Anger,” Austreberthe in “Laundry”), to modern English children (“Fish,” “God’s House,” the narrator of “*Une Glossaire/Glossary*”), and to grown-up

French and English women (the mother in “Your Shoes,” Brigitte in “*Une Glossaire/A Glossary*”). Nuns recur (“The Bishop’s Lunch” and “Laundry”) and Roman Catholicism plays a formative role in the lives of the characters in six of the nine texts. Only in “Fish,” “Shoes” and “Taking It Easy” is it absent. The range is substantial and is repeated in the later collections.

Patterns are observable, however. Place settings in all collections move from England, with London as a particularly recurrent locale, to rural, largely northern France. Italy recurs in later stories (“Honeymoon Blues” and “Remembering George Sand”), while “Easy as ABC” is partly set in an unnamed Central European country, and “The Lay of Bee Wolf” takes place in an unspecified fabulous land of dragons. Time settings are equally rich: more or less contemporary times in France, Italy and England, nineteenth-century France (and Italy) and earlier. Particularly striking is Robert’s capturing of relatively long periods of time, with their changes, such as in “*Une Glossaire/A Glossary*,” “In My Shoes” and “Annunciation.”

Despite a varied richness, patterns are also observable in terms of the figures (narrators and protagonists). Above all, they are almost all female. Even when they are not, the protagonist is a cross-dresser (in “Monsieur Mallarmé Changes Names”) or is feminized by social and sexual roles (Simon in “The Sheets”). Roberts’s children, girls, and more mature figures do have certain features in common. Many survive in the face of considerable damage (inflicted by careless or malign men) or loss (illness, death). This is the case in stories like “No Hands,” “A Feast for Catherine” (*Playing Sardines*), and “Mud,” “Vegetarian in France,” “Honeymoon Blues,” and “Sleepers” (*Mud*). It is hard to see how Eva in “Easy as ABC” can be said to be dealing with her appalling situation, but in a fashion she is. Tensions and complications in mother-daughter relationships underlie several stories, for example, “Charity,” “God’s House” (*During Mother’s Absence*) and “The Easter Egg Hunt” (*Playing Sardines*), and “Tristram and Isolde” and “The Dead Mother’s Club” (*Mud*).

In addition, Roberts is interested in women who are insane or at the edge of insanity. This is apparent, for example, in the comic-not-so-comic stories “The Cookery Lesson” and “Blathering Frights” (*Playing Sardines*) and in the much darker “Tristram and Isolde” and “Easy as ABC” (*Mud*). A further recurrent aspect of Roberts’s female figures (and not only her narrators and protagonists) is that they are often in domestic roles. For example, the protagonist in “Playing Sardines” loves and excels in cooking, and is despised for that by her snooty lover. As she penetrates her host’s *palazzo* outside Venice, she comes across the kitchen and the women who have prepared the superb meal that the guests have enjoyed. She takes instruction from them and example by them. Félicité is a maid in “Emma Bovary’s Ghost,” Giulia is a nursing auxiliary in “Remembering George Sand,” and the narrator of “Sleepers” is a nursery maid (*Mud*). Brigitte in “*Une Glossaire/A Glossary*” is a dynamic and independent woman; she also runs a good home with a fine kitchen (*During Mother’s Absence*).⁴

Thus, a richness is present on the level of diversity of character and setting, a richness that is not diminished by strong patterning.

Character Morphology: Excess and Gender Shifting

Gender shifting in Roberts’s short stories is really limited to “Monsieur Mallarmé Changes Names” (in which the great poet dons his wife’s, daughter’s, and mistress’s clothes to write ground-breaking verse) in *Mud*. The narrator of “The Sheets” is a gay male from the beginning of the story. But the reader does not know that, and the revelation that he is not a woman comes as

⁴ See, in this respect, Falcus, “Her Odyssey” 240–41.

something akin to a gender shift. However, the excess, the abundance, the uberty implicit in gender shifting and cross-dressing—not one identity, but at least two—is present in the motifs of longing, desire, and intense passion that govern so many characters, their situations, and the action of so many stories. Emotional intensity drives much of the action in Roberts's short fiction.

In *During Mother's Absence*, one notes this in Bertrande's loathing of her husband and her dropping her child in the fire (8–9), and in the village schoolmaster's obsession with Melusine's secrets (22) ("Anger"). In "Charity," the intensity of Marie's sense of loss at her aunt's death is striking, as is the redemption her friend achieves for her in the story's conclusion (61–62). "Your Shoes" is a despairing monologue for a lost child. Lily's distress at her mother's death haunts her throughout "God's House." The narrator's deep affection for her French family is evident throughout "*Une Glossaire/A Glossary*," as is her profound sense of passing time and loss, and what might stave those off temporarily: the rituals of the town, the joyous family meals (133–37, 147, 175–76).

The motif of intense passion is evident in *Playing Sardines* too. This is the narrator of "Fluency" on love:

I was thinking about love, how it creeps upon you and grabs you and knocks you out before you're aware of what's happening. Love the stalker. Love the mugger, the boxer, the bruiser. Love the poacher, setting you traps, throwing a net over your head and capturing you in a fierce grip. Love like a force of nature that cannot be checked, an avalanche, a mudslide, breaching your carefully built defences, flooding through you and possessing you. (67)

Indeed, it is strong enough to bring about a magical shift of place: London suddenly becomes Paris (72). "The Cookery Lesson" is about culinary, erotic and murderous obsession and madness, "The Easter Egg Hunt" about intense love and loss, while "A Bodice Rips" is a non-stop sequence of genre-appropriate emotional highs, and that, of course, is why Maria and Nanda play their games based on those characters and situations (149–50).

The stories of *Mud*, too, revel in intense *jouissances* of varying kinds. This is the ecstasy that the narrator of "Mud" feels on a walk in the country:

Yes I could have eaten a handful of earth, dry-damp-delicious in my mouth, and I could have eaten the long woven hedges and the bright grass and the black thorns glossy as silver. I wanted to lick all of it, taste it and swallow it and be one with it. And then, dissolving, I wasn't myself, I wasn't myself any more. I'd gone. I was just part of the mud, fresh in the rain and the sun and I was fed by the world, mouth open, full, churning with joy. (4)

Of herself, she says: "I wanted too much of everything: too much pleasure; my mouth opened to the world to kiss it and take it in" (2). She achieves this plenitude with her lover: "I could taste mud and I mouthed to the artist and nibbled and licked him and we were each other's camembert red wine mud feast" (6). Many of the remaining stories in the collection are of equally passionate feelings and encounters: Colette's with Jean-Luc ("Colette Looks Back"), Félicité's fascination with Emma Bovary, a woman herself driven by powerful feelings ("Emma Bovary's Ghost"), Izzy's destructive (heading for a *Liebestod*?) devotion to her father ("Tristram and Isolde"), Maud's grief at Tom's death ("Honeymoon Blues"), and Giulia's love for her cousin and her fascination with Sand and de Musset, themselves far from calm figures ("Remembering George Sand"). Eva in "Easy As ABC" is betrayed and debased beyond tolerable limits, while for Polly in "Flâneuse," the intensity of her out-of-normal-time experience offers a release from a chilly exploitative relationship. "The Dead Mother's Club" is a powerful evocation of complex and intense grief.

Passionate plenitude permeates Roberts's short fiction.

Language

Motifs of excess and abundance recur on the level of language. They do so through Roberts's fondness for lists, metaphoricity and self-referentiality of language, and the interpenetration of religious and sensuous and secular lexis and discourse.

The list is a clear discursive sign of excess; you only make them if you have a lot to do, see, or worry about. Roberts's fiction is full of lists. They are predominantly lists of foods and objects; menus, bric-à-brac and detritus abound. The list recurs in a rudimentary and shorter form in many stories, for example, in "Charity" (50), but full-blown lists are common. For example, in "Fish," the narrator notes her finds on the shore:

I started to look for shells and the green bits of broken bottle, rubbed smooth by the sea, that I called jewels. I found a lot of pebbles covered with sticky black tar, a couple of dry cuttlefish, a dead seagull, several rotting fish-heads. I found just one good stone, a lump of pink quartz still glistening with sea water. (68)

In "God's House," Lily constantly makes inventory of what she sees—in a garden (101–02), in a cemetery (103), and in the abandoned priest's house:

A corridor wound around the ground floor. I passed a store-room full of old furniture and carpentry things, a wine cellar lined with empty metal racks, a poky lavatory with decorated blue tiles going up the wall. I picked my way up an open wooden staircase, like a ladder, to the salon and the bedrooms above. The salon was empty, grand as a ballroom but desolate. Striped blue and gold wallpaper hung down in curly strips, exposing the plaster and laths behind. . . . The bedrooms were dusty and dark, falls of soot piled i the fireplaces. Old stained mattresses rested on broken-down springs, old books, parched covers stiff with dirt, sprawled face down on the lino, old chairs with cracked backs and seats were mixed up anyhow with rolls of lino, split satin cushions. (109)

"*Une Glossaire/A Glossary*" is full of listings (indeed, a glossary itself is a list of sorts). See, for example, the list of cutlery (132), of dessert items (135), and, as in "Fish," of the detritus on a beach at low tide (180–81).

These cases are drawn from *During Mother's Absence*, but many other such examples can be found in *Playing Sardines*: the presentation of the wild garden in "No Hands" (33), the objects of the narrator's shopping forays in "The Cookery Lesson" (92–93), the items in a meal in "The Miracle" (152). Detailed lists occur, too, in *Mud*: George Sand's rooms (102–03) and George Sand herself. "Now, if I try to remember her, to describe her, I end up making a list" (104), the narrator remarks in "Remembering George Sand." A very different kind of list recurs in "Easy As ABC," that of the men who have intercourse with Eva: "Adam, Abel, Adrian, Alexei, Amos, Angelo, Apollo, Arthur, Aziz, Ben, Benoit, Bill, Brian, Bruno, Cain, Cal, Carl, Charles, Clarence, Clive, Christopher, Dan, David, Dinos, Edward, Eugene," (131). Such sobering and comprehensive lists return (133, 137, 139, 140) through to "Zebedee," and the story ends in a comma (to be continued?), not a full stop. More amiable lists run throughout "The Dead Mothers' Club": for example, the plants in Louise's mother's garden are itemized (196), as are the contents of the strata of London's earth: ". . . down through the dark layers of history, down to a mulch of broken Saxon pots, fragments of wicker coffins, drifts of human ashes, shards of animal bones, down to that place where everyone becomes part of everybody else; part of mud, part of coal" (209).

Roberts's lists are predominantly drawn from three fields: food and meals, gardens and detritus. These fields indicate the sources of richness in her created world: women's domestic labour and care in kitchen (there is only one male cook in her short fiction, in "The Cookery Lesson," and he disappoints) and in garden, and nature's providence that creates a wild garden

or tosses bric-à-brac on the shore. But whatever the provenance of the material of the world, that world is rich indeed.

Linguistically, the plenitude of things is marked by self-advertising metaphoricity (an adding of meaning beyond denotation) and self-referentiality (an attention-drawing embellishment) of language. Thus, the reader is encouraged to see the artichoke in “*Une Glossaire/A Glossary*” as a metaphor of the world’s and the narrator’s French family’s plenty:

ARTICHAUTS

Artichokes. Big, fat and green, with closely packed pointed leaves. The inside ones are violet, almost transparent. We eat them, boiled, for supper, pulling off the leaves one by one and dipping them into hot cream, before scraping them between your teeth. The heart is the best, mashed up in the cream. Grandpère eats them with vinaigrette. (133)

In “No Hands,” the narrator sees her wild French garden as a metaphor of the possible rich benevolence of life: “One of the things I loved about the garden was the way it kept giving us gifts” (33). When Colette enters the forest on her way to her assignation with Jean-Luc, she enters a richly sensuous world, but one that clearly embodies the uncertainties of her situation and future, and yet, too, the possibilities of escape. It is, of course, a literal French forest, but it is richly figurative too:

. . . greyness muffled the world. Fog hung under the trees. I stepped carefully: I could hardly see a metre ahead. The world shrunk to impenetrable grey mist. On either side of the deep rutted track enormous toadstools sprouted, red ones with white spots, luminous blue-mauve ones, fluted like trumpets. The air, steeped in moisture, put clammy hands to my face. I smelled wet earth, wet leaf-mould. Such silence! (23)

As Louise reflects on the multiple layers of London earth, her image of the small neo-classical church that once stood there is elaborately metaphorical: “a holy submarine cruising the sewers and the underground tunnels of the city. The parson in his black coat and white bands clutches the edge of his pulpit, his ship’s wheel, steers his church-boat, his stone ark. . . .” (209).

Roberts’s language is also frequently highly self-referential, drawing attention to itself by the embellishments of syntactic repetition and phonological patterning. In “Easy As ABC,” these devices are used forcefully to express psychological disturbance:

You see, Nana, ha ha, they don’t find the youngest doll of all because she hides inside her bigger sister. Screw my sister not me! They seize her, hands grip her waist, untwist her, yank her this way and that, pull her apart. Smash and grab job. Into her insides. They throw the two wooden halves onto the floor. Like two halves of a walnut shell. She’s their succulent nut dipped in salt then crunched between their teeth. They want to swallow her down she wants to spit them out. (132)

The syntactic parallelisms here are clear (“They seize her. . . .”), as is the chiasmus of the last sentence. The bitter paronomasia of “screw” is apparent in a wider context. But the multiple phonological chiming of this passage is also marked: “**hides/inside,**” “**bigger sister,**” “**Smash and grab job,**” “**succulent nut**”). A more genial example of such organization can be found in “*Une Glossaire/A Glossary*”: “Calvados. Brandy made from cider apples. Sipped, in tiny glasses, after Sunday lunch. Made on the Spriets’ farm, and named after Falstaff, who is supposed to have once stayed there” (150). Most of the entry consists of syntactically parallel structures: “made/Sipped/Made/named.” Notice, too, the recurrent /s/ sounds of “cider apples. Sipped, in tiny glasses, after Sunday lunch.”

These examples must serve for many others. See, for example, the conclusion of “Hypsipyle to Jason,” which deploys the same linguistic devices as the above example. One should remember

that Roberts is a fine, if underrated, poet, and her collection *All the Selves I Was* (1995) deserves much wider discussion and recognition. Her short stories frequently drift purposefully toward the kind of language more associated with poetry than prose. Thus, on a linguistic level—through the device of listing, through metaphoricity and self-referentiality—Roberts's stories encapsulate the richness of things, and enact this plenitude themselves.

The final way in which her stories embody an amplitude—primarily on a linguistic level, although, in consequence, thematically too—is in a recurrent interpenetration of religious/spiritual and secular lexis.⁵ The merging of food, sanctity, and love is evident in “A Feast for Catherine.” Catherine has been let down by her feckless lover. She speculates on love, and on St Catherine of Sienna, whose effigy she has seen in a church. She restores herself from grief by ordering a splendid (perhaps a marvellous) meal that brings together both saint and modern Catherine (84). “In God's House,” Lily achieves the same kind of secular-existential-spiritual relief in the wild garden of the priest's abandoned house (119). In “Fluency,” love assails one like the Holy Spirit, transforms one's life, achieves magic (67–68). Transubstantiation is secularized in “The Dead Mothers' Club.” Louise reflects on the priest's vestments: “green for ordinary Sundays, purple for Lent and Advent, white for joy. Brocade copes embroidered with costly gold thread. . . . All through the week he [the priest] just wears black. Then on Sundays he throws off his disguise and bursts into colour: a magical totem suddenly displaying his true costume” (205).

The merging of the secular and the religious is very clear in “*Une Glossaire/A Glossary*.” This story is a celebration of the narrator's French family, of her memories of childhood, of an arcadian locale brimming with wonders, but it is also a reflection on transience, illness and death. These are kept at bay, never defeated, but staved off by the marvels of the world and by social and family occasions. These are secular, and sensuous, but are given a potent spiritual dimension in the text. “The present is full of pain and change,” the narrator notes. “We concoct these timeless meals to keep it at bay” (147). Earlier, she has spoken of her admission to the world of women, her aunts, in the kitchen. “The kitchen is the sanctuary,” she says, “the tabernacle of the women, where the superlative feast is prepared by their hands alone, while the men talk to the priest next door” (135).

Towards the end of the text, the narrator writes of the “PAIN BÉNI DES HOMMES” (the men's blessed bread), which women do not receive, but which they can consume since it is not actually the body of Christ. But an enriching, a transubstantiation, does take place. She remarks: “It's a pagan communion, and we are the priests” (178). Secular and spiritual meld. This can stand as a motto for Roberts's conflation in her short stories of spiritual and sensual, for meals, wild gardens, the plenitude of the world and language are all entries to redemptive or consolatory experiences.

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⁵ This has been noted by Sceats 133. See also Roberts's *Cercles* interview, in which the author roots mystical experience in the body.

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