

Edwin Arlington Robinson

(1869-1935)

L' Envoi (1897)

Now in a thought, now in a shadowed word,
Now in a voice that thrills eternity,
Ever there comes an onward phrase to me
Of some transcendent music I have heard;
No piteous thing by soft hands dulcimered,
No trumpet crash of blood-sick victory,
But a glad strain of some vast harmony
That no brief mortal touch has ever stirred.
There is no music in the world like this,
No character wherewith to set it down,
No kind of instrument to make it sing,
No kind of instrument? Ah, yes, there is;
And after time and place are overthrown,
God's touch will keep its one chord quivering.

ANALYSIS

This sonnet is “the far-sent message of the years” proclaimed in “Credo.” The poet feels moved by the “transcendent music” he heard in that poem, onward toward “the coming glory of the Light.” In this poem the music is no longer soft and distant and sad, it is “a glad strain of some vast harmony” beyond our perception in the material world: “There is no music in the world like this...” Such music implies an afterlife in an orderly universe, beautifully created by the Greatest Composer.

The poet has moved closer in this poem to the source of the music, feeling intimations of immortality like Wordsworth in his famous “Ode.” The music he heard in “Credo” is no longer a “piteous thing by soft hands dulcimered,” but a cosmic symphony, resounding “in a voice that thrills eternity.” In Edward Taylor’s “Housewifery” (1682), God is cast as a housewife and the poet as a spinning wheel “complete”-- His instrument. Robinson here casts God as the Supreme Musician and each human soul after death as a chord in His “vast harmony.”

Michael Hollister (2015)