



Edwin Arlington Robinson

(1869-1935)

Credo (1897)

I cannot find my way: there is no star
In all the shrouded heavens anywhere;
And there is not a whisper in the air
Of any living voice but one so far
That I can hear it only as a bar
Of lost, imperial music, played when fair
And angel fingers wove, and unaware,
Dead leaves to garlands where no roses are.
No, there is not a glimmer, nor a call,
For one that welcomes, welcomes when he fears,
The black and awful chaos of the night;
For through it all – above, beyond it all –
I know the far-sent message of the years,
I feel the coming glory of the Light.

ANALYSIS

At the age of 28, Robinson set forth his creed of Idealism in this sonnet, traditional in form, modern in complexity. The poet sounds alive, yet he may be dead—a soul experiencing the metaphors in the poem not merely as figures of speech but as realities. The ambiguity makes the poem apply to both the material world and to a spiritual one: In both applications, “Credo” is an allegory of transition to an afterlife, in the tradition of Dante and Hawthorne. In a general way its Platonism accords with Christianity and with many accounts of near-death experiences. The poem is also archetypal in rendering the common aftermath of disillusionment, the feeling of being lost and deprived and lonely to the point of welcoming death, then attaining transcendence through knowledge, intuition and faith.

The poet speaks as a secular modern man lost in the dark without a star, implicitly with no savior, no revelation, no guiding light. The heavens are “shrouded” as if dead. He has no faith anymore and is anticipating extinction, or being forever lost. The “living voice” far away sustains the ambiguity as to whether he is still alive. He can hear the voice only as distant music, evoking transcendent harmony as expressed in the traditional metaphor of the “music of the spheres.” This music is “imperial,” almighty and governing the universe in which he sees no star. Because he has lost his faith, the music is lost to him, as if he can hear it but cannot feel it. The “fair and angel fingers” evoke the ideal woman of the period, the Victorian icon, the Fair Lady who becomes the Angel in the House. She personifies ideals of faith, love and transcendence beyond his reach both literally and spiritually.

The ideal personified in the lady is so far away, so little realized in his life, he sees nothing of her but fingers—like the manifestation of a spirit playing a harp. The verb “wove” applies to weaving as well, the domestic activity most emblematic of the Victorian “true woman,” again identifying woman with the divine—an old tradition in America. In New England two centuries before, in his poem “Housewifery” (1682), Edward Taylor cast God as a housewife and himself as His spinning wheel. In “Credo” the angel, like Dante’s Beatrice and Hawthorne’s Phoebe, may be modeled on a real woman, but one unaware of his love. Robinson lost his fiancée to his brother Herman and perhaps he felt she was unaware of how much she meant to him. In this poem she is more a metaphor than a person. There are “no roses” in his life. There can be no romance without faith and he cannot find his way to her. Unaware of him, she weaves no roses, only garlands of “dead leaves.” He has characteristics in common with Hawthorne’s Coverdale, James’s John Marcher, and T. S. Eliot’s J. Alfred Prufrock.

He hears the music of angel fingers, but hears no call and sees no light. In his disillusionment, loneliness and loss of vitality, he welcomes death, though he fears it—“The black and awful chaos of the night.” His acceptance amounts to a spiritual death in the individuation process, leading to rebirth and transcendence. Having failed to attain the Ideal in this life, he hopes to attain her in an afterlife. Like Hawthorne, his faith derives from both the head and the heart, from knowledge of “the far-sent message of the years” and from intuition: “I feel the coming glory of the Light.”

Michael Hollister (2015)