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METAPHOR AND IMAGERY IN
E. A. ROBINSON'S "CREDO"

By RICHARD G. LANDINI

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!¹

E. A. Robinson's sonnet "Credo" is an artfully structured expression of belief in the ultimate revelation of life's purpose and meaning. The poem's thematic resolve is interesting in that it emerges rather unexpectedly from a tense emotional complex of anxiety, fear, and loneliness which informs all but the final two lines of the poem. The narrator of "Credo" advances to the very edge of despair but, "above, beyond it all," despite an inhibiting sense of lost direction and his citation of dispiriting, negative evidence, he "knows" and "feels" the "coming glory of the Light."

The poem's paraphrasable content is seemingly paradoxical, therefore, in that the narrator's final position is inconsistent with his self described experience. On closer reading, however, one discovers that Robinson has effectively structured his poem to include a journey metaphor and that he has also interspersed throughout the poem a series of images and symbols of Christ's nativity. Metaphor and symbols combine to enhance the thematic character of the work by revealing so much of the narrator's sensibility as to make his final expression of faith logically acceptable, perhaps even inevitable.

Robinson establishes the journey metaphor in the opening line. The narrator immediately identifies himself as a lost

¹ Edwin Arlington Robinson, *The Torrent and the Night Before* (Gardiner, Me., 1896), 26.

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traveler ("I cannot find my way"), presumably at a certain stage of a progression. He has neither guide nor sign ("no star / in all the shrouded heavens anywhere") to help him find his way. No living voice, not even a "whisper in the air," can reach him or give him counsel and direction. Thus, in the opening lines Robinson sets both situation and mood: a traveler or pilgrim on a journey (quest) interrupted by his inability to find either guidance or directional signs. Further, the journey is inner-spaced, spiritually and intellectually, and aimed at an understanding of the purpose and meaning of existence.

Within this established context of loneliness and spiritual isolation, the narrator discerns one faint voice, presumably out of his past, so far removed from him in time and space that he "hears it only as a bar / of lost, imperial music." Though the voice provides a transient and indistinct element of hope, perception dissipates quickly into memory, and thus it fails to give him the direction he seeks for its distance and transmutation into ancient music.

The poem's theme of faith unaided by reason or illuminating perception and its activating metaphor of a spiritual journey are accentuated by Robinson's incorporation of Nativity images and symbols. "Star" (1.1), "shrouded heavens" (1.2), "imperial music" (1.6), "angel fingers" (1.7), "the far-sent message of the years" (1.13), and "the coming glory of the Light" (1.14) constitute a pattern of imagery peculiar to the Biblical account of the Shepherds and the Magi (themselves travelers and pilgrims) who attend the Christ child at his birth. The "star" guided the Wise Men and "imperial music" played by "fair and angel fingers" led the Shepherds to Christ, in accordance with the "far-sent message of the years." Thus those journeymen arrive at the final realization of human purpose—the "glory of the Light," Christ, the way, the truth and the Light.

Unlike either the Magi or the Shepherds, however, Robinson's narrator does not observe the signs and wonders—"there is not a glimmer, nor a call"—that might lead him into conscious knowledge of his life's and the world's purpose. In this respect perhaps Robinson is telling us through his narrator that our time and our condition cannot intellectually assimilate such metaphysical messages, that our pragmatically and scientifically oriented

culture cannot perforce accommodate the testament of religious prophets and tradition—"the far-sent message of the years."

"Credo" is then, as the title implies, an affirmation of Christian faith, or as close to one as we are likely to find in Robinson's poetic canon. Moreover, this affirmation is strikingly firm and resolute against an explicit background of conditions uncondusive to faith in anything beyond man's power to perceive sensually or to empiricize. The narrator *knows*, meaning that he has read and understands and accepts, the "message." He *feels*, meaning that he believes or intuits, that in death ("the black and awful chaos of the night"), which he "welcomes when he fears," will come the "glory of the Light." Finally, in that Light—knowledge, wisdom, revelation, Christ—he will apprehend the true meaning and full significance of his former existence.

The narrator's spiritual journey, different in time, conditions, and character from that of, say, the Magi, will nevertheless result in similar revelation and exaltation. His is a journey through life and experience in the modern world, and his expectation, his credo, is that at its termination the Light will reveal complete justification of his worldly being. That belief, as it did for Everyman and will for every man, sustains him "through it all—above, beyond it all."



A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF
ROBERT P. TRISTRAM COFFIN: ADDENDA

By RICHARD CARY

The three basic sections of this bibliography have appeared in the issues of *Colby Library Quarterly* for December 1965, June 1966, and December 1966. The following entries have been garnered in the continuing search for Coffin's plenitudinous publications. It is planned to consolidate these installments into a comprehensive volume after other additions have been reaped and several snags have been cleared. The editor solicits information concerning any items not as yet included in these four preliminary listings.