

IMAGINATION AND RECOLLECTION: THE POWER AND PROCESS OF MEMORY IN “THE LAKE ISLE OF INNISFREE”

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“The poet’s imagination must be at the same time primitive and sophisticated, extending human consciousness to the extreme limits of our encounter with the present and our knowledge of the past.” —T.S. Eliot

William Butler Yeats’s poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” uses the speaker’s recollection of an excursion to an idyllic world as a vehicle through which the reader embarks on a similar journey in the span of three short stanzas. In order to take the reader on this journey from the familiar to the transcendent natural world, Yeats dislocates and challenges the reader’s ingrained sense of perspective. Instead of establishing a distance between speaker and reader, Yeats fuses the reader’s perspective into the speaker’s memory of a detached and physically separate island. The fact that Yeats’s speaker never actually *goes* to Innisfree during the poem is crucial to the development of this union between the speaker and the reader. The speaker’s physical separation from Innisfree, even when describing its most intimate details, allows the reader an important degree of accessibility to the isle and, subsequently, to the memory of the speaker. It is this new perspective created by the fusion of the speaker’s memory and the reader’s imagination that eventually allows Yeats to take us from the mundane reality of London’s “pavements grey” to the collective remembering of Innisfree’s “deep heart’s core” and back again in only twelve lines. Although it is generally considered one of his better early poems, the complex interplay of memory and imagination at work in “Innisfree” has been overlooked by the most prolific critics. That Yeats constructs a largely bucolic poem based on the memory of a fountain in a London shop window is not remarkable. What is remarkable, though, is Yeats’s ability to grant the reader participatory access to a complicated memory that is at once deeply personal and profoundly universal.

The poem’s physical and figurative structure locates not only the power of memory, but also the crucial process of remembering. Because, as readers, we come to participate in the speaker’s memory through our own imaginations, we too travel through the process of memory as the poem runs its course. We follow the speaker through his recollection back to Innisfree and rely on the process of memory in our own imaginations to construct meaning. At the most essential level, the power of memory lies in our ability to separate ourselves from any present reality. This is to say that our intimacy with a memory is directly proportional to our figurative distance away from our present situation. The more we can separate our minds (and imaginations) from reality while pursuing a recollection, the closer we become to the memory of the original experience. The cognizance of this separation from reality is ultimately what allows us to embrace the feeling of a memory.

Many Yeatsian critics, including Stuart Hunter, however, fail to see the full brilliance of the sophisticated but accessible construction of memory’s process that Yeats exposes at Innisfree. According to Hunter, “the poem is a simple nostalgic lyric expressing the speaker’s desire to find a kind of peace in a place of rural solitude he has known in his youth”

(72). As a result, Hunter analyzes only tangentially the distance between the speaker's recollection and the reader's imagination, referring to the spectacle of memory with inadequate terminology: a "reverie," "the dream or vision," and "a state of mind" (79, 72-3). More precisely, Yeats's speaker works to create and then bridge this distance between our present reality and the recollected place of Innisfree in order to expose the spectacle of memory's process that unfolds by the end of the poem.

An examination of Yeats's personal life at the time he constructed the poem affords us many insights not only into his poetic development, but also into the relationship between the poet's own imagination and his subsequent recollections. As many critics have noted, Yeats was a bundle of conflicting emotions at the end of 1888 when he resided in London. He repeatedly expressed disappointment and angst in letters to his colleague and poetic confidant Katharine Tynan regarding the sluggish, incoherent nature of his poetry while he struggled to complete *The Wanderings of Oisín*. Yeats's letters to Tynan not only record his dislike of city life in London, but they also reveal a concerted effort on his part to abandon the "rare and glittering scenes" of traditional romantic poetry for "the familiar landscapes we love" (Foster 78). In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats isolates the moment when he imagined "Innisfree" as he stood homesick at a Strand window display:

...walking through Fleet Street very homesick I heard a little tinkle of water and saw a fountain in a shop-window which balanced a little ball upon its jet, and began to remember lake water. From the sudden remembrance came my poem *Innisfree*, my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music. (153)

As Roy Foster notes, it was "a key insight" for Yeats to be suddenly transported from a Strand window-display to the waters of his home in Sligo (79). The power of imagination and recollection to transport the young Yeats between two very different places, both in body and mind, was a lasting epiphany. Yeats would recall much later in his life that this moment at the window was an experience that pointed him forward during a time of personal and professional despair.

The most amazing part of Yeats's construction of "Innisfree," though, is his ability to indoctrinate the reader with the same devices of imaginative transportation that bring him from a London shop to the island in Lough Gill. After all, it is the poet's imagination and the poet's recollection that allow us, as readers, to experience the association and memory that flicker over him as he stares into the window of a London shop. The words of Yeats's sister Lily, recalling the moment of her brother's excitement a year before the publication of "Innisfree," auger the seeds of imaginative power that Yeats would go on to plant within generations of his later readers:

In Bedford Park one evening, Helen Acosta & Lolly painting & I there sewing—Willy bursting in having just written, or not even written down but just having brought forth "Innisfree," he repeated it with all the fire of creation & his youth—he was I suppose about 24, I felt a thrill all through me and saw Sligo beauty, heard lake water lapping, when Helen broke in asking for a paint brush....None of us knew what a great moment it was.

Not that “Innisfree” is one of his greatest, but it is beautiful & perhaps the best known. (qtd. in Foster 79)

The astonishment that Yeats’s sister experiences as Helen Acosta disrupts her imaginative recollection of Sligo with a desire for a paintbrush is analogous to the reader’s feeling of incredulity when the poem comes to an end. In only twelve lines Yeats takes us on an imaginative journey where we participate in the speaker’s recollection of a place far beyond our own realities. The cognizance of this separation from reality, though, is the principle that allows us to embrace and assess the feeling of a memory that unfolds by the end of the poem.

In the poem’s first line, Yeats constructs the necessary distance between reality and memory by emphasizing the separation between the “here” of the speaker’s starting point and the “there” of the recollected lake isle. The comma placement in the first line introduces the importance of the figurative distance between the speaker and his Innisfree recollections while the future tense verbs used later in the stanza reinforce the physical separation from the world of the island being described: “I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree.” This first line allows Yeats to reconstruct the parameters of the speaker’s recollection by emphasizing the physical separation from the memory before beginning to take us there in the rest of the stanza. Although the speaker does not actually *go* anywhere, the reader’s imaginative journey to Innisfree commences at the moment the speaker begins to describe the conditions that “will” be established “there”:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

The disparity between the speaker’s arising and going in the first line and his activities once at the isle of his recollection allows Yeats to establish a necessary distance between reality and memory. This distance affords him the framework toward which the process of the speaker’s memory and the reader’s imagination will move during the remainder of the poem.

The provisional nature of Yeats’s verb choice, established in the first “will arise” and extending throughout the stanza, establishes a crucial point of access for the reader. The speaker “will” build a small cabin and “will” have nine bean-rows upon his arrival at the island. Since the ordering of new life at Innisfree has not yet occurred, Yeats allows his reader a participatory, or at least anticipatory, role in the various activities required to imagine living “alone in the bee-loud glade.” In this sense, Yeats joins the reader’s imagination and the speaker’s memory in the “going” to Innisfree, the “building” of the cabin, and the “making” of the clay and wattle foundation.

Paradoxically, Yeats constructs and maintains a separation of physical locality between his speaker and Innisfree in the first stanza in order to reinforce this connection between the reader’s imagination and the speaker’s memory. This persona refers to Innisfree as “there” at two instances during the description of his building plans: “a small cabin build *there*, of clay and wattles made:/ Nine bean rows will I have *there*” (italics mine). The connection between the speaker and the reader hinges on the physical distance Yeats establishes in the “thereness” of the speaker’s Innisfree recollection. The distance that

separates the reader from the memory is the very same distance that separates the speaker from Innisfree. Although the reader's imagination depends on the latter's remembering, the reader and speaker *both* have to access the island now through the same process of memory. Therefore, the separation from the memory paradoxically unites the speaker and the reader within a shared perspective outside Innisfree's physicality. Yeats converts this mutual separation from the physical island of memory into a fusion of experience between the speaker and the reader. The cabin and bean rows have not been "built" by a speaker already "here" at the island; instead, the collective participation of the journey through the process of memory begins with the building of cabins and bean rows only when the speaker and reader arrive "there" together.

The second stanza takes us as close as possible to the speaker's memory—removing us (with the speaker) more and more from the position of physical reality from which we began. Here, the process of remembering unfolds for the speaker and reader alike as we are more and more removed from our reality by the natural harmony of the memory. Yeats acknowledges the reader's participation in this part of the memory by emphasizing the peacefulness of the recollection beyond the speaker's individual relation to it. The speaker's "I-association" with the island recollection makes up only one half of the first line whereas the description of the island's "peace" comprises the stanza's remaining three and a half lines:

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

The second stanza is a single sentence made up of short phrases enclosed in a series of commas and semi-colons that put the "I" of the speaker at greater and greater remoteness from the world of this island's natural harmony. Here, as in the first stanza, Yeats constructs a separation between the speaker and the island's natural harmony in order to create an avenue of accessibility for the reader. Because the speaker refers to the island as "there" twice in this stanza, the reader is joined in his or her detachment from the island by the speaker's intimate but removed recollection of it. The reader, then, comes to participate in the "glimmer" and "purple glow" of the speaker's recollection in the same way that the speaker conjures the images for the poem in his own imagination away from Innisfree. With this stanza construction, Yeats exploits his persona's separation from the island and, in doing so, fuses the reader and speaker together in a journey to a world removed by locality, by solitude, and by observational distance.

Yeats uses the inviolable laws that dictate the process of memory to unite the reader's imagination and the speaker's recollection amidst this peaceful imagery of the island. The speaker and the reader are united in a mutual inability to gain access to the reality of Innisfree that set the process of remembering in motion. It is impossible for the speaker to access the exact same feeling of peacefulness that he felt when physically at the island. The fact that Yeats's speaker is not actually there in this recollection now means that the reader has access to the best possible surrogate—the speaker's memory of that peacefulness. As readers, we travel through this memory to see and hear the same images that make up the other's

recollections. It is through the senses associated with a place that we access a feeling that has passed. The best this access (of any memory) can be, for both speaker and reader, is only a recollection of the original feeling. The speaker's recollected feelings of peacefulness are precipitated by the same sights and sounds of Innisfree that we see and hear in our imaginations. We hear the "cricket sing[ing]" and the sound of "the linnet's wings," and we see the "glimmer" of midnight and the "purple glow" of noon. In this way, the reader's imagination is united with the persona's memory as both gain only limited access to the original feeling.

Despite the pervasive feeling of peacefulness that these recollections prompt, the second stanza shows Yeats's careful acknowledgement of memory's limitations. The stanza begins with the future prospect of peace and then proceeds to describe that peace in more depth as we move deeper and deeper into the recollection. The use of the future tense verb "shall" followed by the word "there" in the first half line suggests that we *will* experience some version of peace in this memory—but not yet and not the same one as the original version. Yeats uses present tense verbs to create and describe the memory of this peace in the remaining lines of the stanza. The fact that "the cricket sings" and that "midnight's all a glimmer" helps Yeats bring the reader's imagination into the speaker's memory of a peace that "comes dropping slow." These present tense verbs bring both reader and speaker as close as possible to the feeling of peace that was experienced there in the original, physical journey to Innisfree. In this way, the speaker's recollection and the reader's imagination are united in a partition of memory—a version of the original peace experienced first-hand. Since memory ceases to become memory when it merges with experience, though, Yeats is careful to limit both the speaker's memory and the reader's imagination with the use of the qualifying word "there" twice in the second stanza. As readers, we are ensconced in the speaker's memory by the pervasive description of this peace but also are reminded of our inability to capture the original feeling of that peace by the fact that we, like the speaker in his recollection, are not "there."

In the final stanza, Yeats brings reader and speaker back to the journey's starting point—giving us a return mechanism with which to assess our progress and exposing both the power and the process of memory. Although Hunter realizes that "we are returned from the speaker's world of reverie to the world of reality" in the final stanza, he stops short of analyzing the memory that Yeats provides to bridge the gap between recollection and reality (79). The final stanza's initial half-line parallels the first line of the poem: "I will arise and go now." With this particular construction, Yeats brings the reader and speaker alike back to the physical locality of the journey's starting point and reinforces the fact that the speaker has remained stationary during the entire memory of Innisfree that has occurred so far. Yeats continues to emphasize the separation of the speaker from the recollected world of Innisfree in this last stanza by acknowledging the distance between the speaker's physical location and the origin of his memories: "I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;/ While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey." The speaker, here, is as detached from the world of Innisfree as the reader. It is this separation, created by the detached speaker's standing "on the roadway," that allows Yeats to fuse the experiences of the reader's imagination and the speaker's memory into one of mutual partition.

The return mechanism provided in the final stanza is effective only in so far as it combines the persona's physical separation from Innisfree with his ability to conjure the

essence of the experience despite that detachment. The power of memory to take us on such a journey is affirmed by its capacity to hold our imaginations as well as the persona's recollections. To accomplish this, Yeats combines the detached "here" of the speaker's starting point and the "there" of the latter's Innisfree recollections. The parallel structure Yeats uses in three of the final stanza's four lines isolates the "here" of the speaker's location along the left margin, away from the recollections of Innisfree's natural harmony that appear separated near the ends of the lines:

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

In the first line, the "I" of the speaker is separated from the "night and day" in the same way that the speaker's physical location is detached from his memories of Innisfree's halcyon rhythms recalled earlier in the poem. Likewise, Yeats's second and final lines separate the location where the speaker "hears" and the place from whence the "low sounds" originate: "the deep heart's core" at Innisfree.

The lines of the final stanza also expose the power of memory to bring us to the fringe of a remembered experience. The distance from a stationary reality to a remembered experience exposes the power of memory to bridge that gap. Each line of the last stanza alternates between the "here" of the journey's starting point on "the pavements grey" and the peacefulness of the memory just recalled. The speaker, standing in the same place as the first line of the poem, declares that he "will arise and go now." This statement affirms his separation from Innisfree but the second line recalls the journey of the memory: "I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore." The third line puts us back on "the roadway, or the pavements grey" at a point of separation from the memory. The final line is a recollection back to memory's "deep heart's core" that resonates in the speaker's soul. This alternating pattern between starting point and destination creates a figurative distance between reality and recollection that ultimately exposes both the power and the process of the speaker's remembering and the reader's participation in that memory. The speaker says he "will arise and go now" without saying *where* he will go in the last stanza after he explicitly intended to "arise and go . . . to Innisfree" at the beginning of the poem. This simple discrepancy is perhaps the poem's most poignant testimony to the power of memory; it changes even the speaker's agenda as he now no longer needs to go to Innisfree—he can visit the isle in his memory.

Daniel Harris, in a critical reading of the poems of place between Coole Park and Ballylee, notes how Yeats generates this "magical stasis in time" (memory): "The seminal poem about Sligo, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree,' anticipates Yeats's obsession with a numinous place. The poem is a memory of place now revived to inspire the future, yet with such intensity that expected happiness becomes present joy" (10). Although Harris focuses his argument almost entirely on the shifting verb tenses, it is Yeats's emphasis on the alternation between reality ("pavements grey") and memory of Innisfree in the final stanza that eliminates the spatial-temporal dichotomies between London and the present, the island and the future (Harris 11). This elimination of chronological time prompts William

Pratt to compare Seamus Heaney's Irish bogs to Yeats's achievement in "making a symbolic landscape of the countryside around Sligo . . . so that readers far removed from Ireland could inhabit and feel at home there" (268). In this pursuit to establish a stasis in time, Yeats has constructed a reality, a present experience for both speaker and reader, built on the past and the future, which does not now need either the past or the future in order to exist.

This principle, which allows the speaker to "hear lake water lapping with low sounds" despite being nowhere near "the shore," is the same principle that enables the reader to participate in the speaker's memory through the recollections in the poem's previous stanzas. The "veils of the morning" that mark the speaker's memory of a peaceful Innisfree also shroud the reader's imagination within the poem. The reader perceives the same midnight "glimmer" and noon-time "glow" that touches the speaker's eyes, and hears the same "linnet's wings" that resonate through the speaker's ears while recalling Innisfree. In this sense, the peace at Innisfree that "drop[s]" slowly is part of the "low sound" that touches the "deep heart's core" of both the persona's memory and the reader's imagination in the final line of the poem.

Hunter's assessment of the poem's final lines contains an analysis of the speaker's experience of the "noumenal nature" of Innisfree only: "the sound that lures the speaker back to Innisfree is less a sound that is audible to the physical ear than a prompting to the ear of the spirit. The speaker is drawn back to Innisfree by the fairy magic of the tribes of Danu" (79). This failure to include the reader in the analysis of the final lines arrests the very process of memory and imagination that Yeats exposes by the end of the poem. Moreover, Hunter's assumption that the sound reverberating from "the deep heart's core" is physically inaudible only supports Yeats's endeavor to separate (and paradoxically unify) both speaker and reader within a realm of mutual partition from the original experience at Innisfree. This must be what T. S. Eliot calls "the auditory imagination" in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. As a corollary of his argument that Matthew Arnold's account of poetry "does not go deep enough," Eliot describes the *auditory imagination* as "the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word" (Eliot 118-19). Yeats invokes this unconscious association of memory and place far below the words of "Innisfree." Just as we cannot physically *see* memories with our eyes, the speaker and reader alike cannot physically *hear* the sounds from "the deep heart's core." Yeats exposes the power of memory, though, in these final lines by bridging the gap between reality and recollection and, more importantly, by forging a new present out of both the past and the future. It is precisely this triumphant unification of memory and place that makes inscrutable Harold Bloom's remark that "the power of mind over outward sense [is] a mark missing in Yeats's plangent but drifting poem ['The Lake Isle of Innisfree']" (113).

The "auditory imagination," as Eliot would have it, extends even beyond the verbal and sensory agencies in Yeats's "Innisfree" to include a scriptural echoing of the Bible. A. Norman Jeffares suggests that a Biblical source of the poem stems from the parable of the prodigal son, in Luke 15:18: "I will arise and go to my father" (Jeffares 31). In his note entitled "Yeats and the Rose of Sharon," though, Wayne Chapman investigates the more germane connection of "Innisfree" to The Song of Solomon lyrics. Even if Eliot's "auditory imagination" operates below the conscious level of thought and feeling on the poet's (and reader's) part, Chapman's connection of "Innisfree" to The Song of Solomon is particularly meaningful because it traces the Biblical antecedent beyond individual lines in the poem.

Chapman extends his analysis to a larger spectrum of Yeats's work and, in doing so, reveals the poet's auditory (or scriptural) imagination at work. In this sense, not only is there a phrasal parallel between The Song of Solomon and the first and last stanzas of "Innisfree," but there is also a more profound (and perhaps unconscious) connection between Solomon and several of Yeats's more exceptional early lyrics.

The Song of Solomon sections of the Bible would have secured an intimate place in the young Yeats's unconscious for numerous reasons. Aside from the fact that it is the Bible's only "love poetry," images of escape and descriptions of the pastoral countryside of Israel pervade The Song of Solomon. To the discouraged and homesick Yeats in London, this particular section of the Bible must have been a welcome family memory and poetic expedient. Yeats's grandfather, the Reverend William Butler Yeats, exercised a significant religious presence in Sligo and his mother also facilitated religious feeling within the household. As Chapman has noted, the Yeats household library also contained numerous missals, Bibles, and other religious literature—even a scarce edition of *Ecclesiastes; or The Preacher, and the Song of Solomon* (52). Yeats's first published play, *The Island of Statues* (1885), and its principal icon, the Rose, reveal several allusions to The Song of Solomon:

I rose, I rose
Where in white exultation
The long lily blows,
And the wan wave that lingers
From flood-time encloses
With infantine fingers
The roots of the roses (2.3.163-169).

Beyond the biblical allusion to the Flood, these lines more accurately resemble the rose of Sharon section from The Song of Solomon:

I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys. As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters. . . . Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of thy stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely. (2.1-2, 13-14)

The allusion becomes even more substantial when Yeats reveals that *The Island of the Statues'* hidden prize, the concealed rose, is hidden in "a cleft of rock," a "cloven rock dispart" (673).

Amidst The Song of Solomon's imagery of lilies, apple trees, roses, vineyards, and gardens, a pattern of escape, and the yearning to escape, emerges. The rose of Sharon passage not only suggests the speaker's desire to get "away," but it also reveals a reluctance on the lover's part to "arise" and "come away" from the "secret places." Yeats's early poetry, especially the poems composed during his stay in London, reflects this desire to vanquish temporal obstacles and escape—either alone or with a lover. In his poem "To an Isle in the Water," Yeats's speaker expresses a rather simple but earnest yearning to overcome his lover's "shyness" and "fly" to an island in the water. These dichotomous principles of confinement and escape are geographically realized in Yeats's only published novel, *John*

Sherman. The London scenes of intellectual restraint and personal confusion are set in a fictional Hammersmith while the known, familiar, and serene world of Sligo is depicted by a kind of paradise known as Ballah (possibly a corruption of Blake's Beulah). Roy Foster notes that the novel "evokes a sense of place, and a passion for a homeland, which at certain key points conveys a homesickness and alienation both powerfully and precisely" (69). In one such scene, John Sherman stands alone and confused at a Hammersmith street corner only to have his memories of home whisk him back to his recollected and beloved Ballah:

A certain street-corner made him remember an angle of the Ballah fish market. At night a lantern, marking where the road was fenced off for mending, made him think of a tinker's swing-can of burning coals Delayed by a crush in the Strand, he heard a faint trickling of water near by; it came from a shop window where a little water-jet balanced a wooden ball upon its point. (qtd. in Foster 69)

It is from one such instance of powerful recollection that W. B. Yeats forges the journey of memory and imagination for the reader in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree."

Weaving retrospective into a more fantastic present for speaker and reader alike, Yeats creates but also bridges the distance between reality and recollection—to such extent that he *replaces* reality with recollection. The recollected images of "Innisfree" serve to sharpen both the memory of the speaker and the imagination of the reader; they reduce the inevitable glare that time and distance put between ourselves and our recollections. Just as the speaker is satisfied with his recollections of Innisfree, we are content with our opportunity to nod knowingly at a place where "peace comes dropping slow." The speaker travels to Innisfree though he never leaves his place on "the pavements grey," and so we are encouraged to enjoy our time in the memory of "the bee-loud glade." In a feat of unmitigated genius, Yeats has conferred to the reader the very power and process of memory which swept over the poet as he stared longingly into a London shop window in 1888.

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