Personal Response

Seduced by words: The Lake Isle of Innisfree

This is a popular, oft quoted poem. We can see (or rather hear) the appeal of those seductive phrases: the bee-loud glade, peace comes dropping slow, midnight’s all a-glimmer, lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore.  It’s all rather lovely.

 Yet we know Yeats did not arise and go to Innisfree. He stayed somewhere much more comfortable.  As it remarks on e.notes.com:

 ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree suggests that a life of simplicity in nature will bring peace to the troubled speaker. However, the poem is the speaker’s recollection of Innisfree, and therefore the journey is an emotional and spiritual escape rather than an actual one.’

So the idea of going to Innisfree is symbolic, not actual.  We all have our ideas of perfect places, places of tranquillity: a palm fringed beach perhaps or a cottage in the country.  However, I can’t get away from a feeling of dishonesty about this poem. It’s something to do with the insistent ‘I will / I shall’ not once but four times.  He does not say ‘When I stand by the road on pavements gray / I dream of the Lake Isle of Innisfree / Where I might build… (etc)’    He is quite clear: ‘I will arise and go *now*.’

Further, Yeats is no more capable of building a wattle and daub cabin than you or I – and as for beans and bees: I don’t think so. Mosquitoes, perhaps.

But does all this matter?  That’s a personal thing.  For me, it means that I admire and enjoy the individual lines and phrases but I don’t admire the *poem*.   What do you think?

   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 honeybee,  
   And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

   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.

   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 gray,  
   I hear it in the deep heart's core.

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