The Joy of the Memorized Poem

Billy Collins: I first came across "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" in college, with other anthologized poems by Yeats. At that time, I found some of his work difficult—especially poems like "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Easter, 1916" that required historical context. But "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," this little twelve-liner, had immediate appeal.

The sentiment is very clear: the speaker has committed to go off to an island, and imagines himself there. The language is gorgeous—it has a beautiful, rhythmic, almost hypnotic spell. It also has a very tightly organized structure, despite its lyric quality. Each four-line stanza makes its own argument, starting with the first grouping of four lines:

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.

First, he puts you on the island in this idealized retreat, where he's going. He talks about the physical place, and his physical needs. He needs shelter—so he'll build a cabin. And he'll need food: he describes the beans he'll raise and the bees he'll keep for honey. (I don't know why kind of dish you can make from beans and honey, but—okay.)

In the second stanza, the poem escalates. He pivots away from his material needs and addresses his spiritual needs:

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.

In addition to honey and beans, then, he'll have peace. And we see how this feeling manifests, as he takes us through the day from the "veils of the morning" until very late at night. He runs around the clock, showing how peace spreads in this diurnal way.

In the final stanza, he recommits, reiterating his intent to leave:

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.

He continually hears this "lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore," but then there's the shock: he hears this island sound in the *city*. He hears it "on the roadway," and "on the pavements grey." It's all wishful thinking. He says "I will arise," but he never *does* arise. He hears the sounds of the water lapping at the shore, but he hears it in the city. He hears it in London. And we begin to understand that Innisfree is an internal place, a fictive place, a refuge that calls to him from than inside, not a place that he can physically go and visit. The poem ends with a strong sense of this internal motion, going in and down, in the final line: "I hear it in the deep heart's core."

It's a powerful, unexpected statement of a simple sentiment: I want to go somewhere better than where I am.

Shortly after coming across the poem, I heard a recording of Yeats reading it. I loved to hear his performance of the poem. It's as though he *sings* it, elongating the words and phrases with his musical voice. It gives you the shivers.

In this recording, as he introduces his recitation of the poem, Yeats gets rather testy. It took him a lot of bother and time to put the rhythm and the sound into the poem, he says, and he's not going to take it out in the reading. It's a justification of his incantatory, singing style of reading aloud.

One of the disadvantages of poetry over popular music is that if you write a pop song, it naturally gets into people's heads as they listen in the car. You don't have to memorize a Paul Simon song; it's just in your head, and you can sing along. With a poem, you have to will yourself to memorize it. That's what happened to me with "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." I knew the poem well—through many re-readings and through teaching it in my classes—but at some point, I remember thinking "I've just going to get this poem down." This process—going from deep familiarity to complete mastery—is a challenge and a great pleasure. In repeating different lines, your reading becomes more focused than you've ever had before. You become more sensitive to every consonant and vowel.

Years ago, I wrote an article called "Poetry, Pleasure, and the Hedonist Reader" in which I enumerate five or six of the principle pleasures of poetry. One of the final pleasures, for instance, is the pleasure of meaning—the moment when a poem's emotional effect begins to crystallize into significance you can articulate. But the very final pleasure is what I called "the pleasure of companionship"—and this was a way of talking about memorization. When you internalize a poem, it becomes something inside of you. You're able to walk around with it. It becomes a companion. And so you become much less objective in your judgment of it. If anyone criticizes the poem, they're criticizing something you take with you, all the time.

Some years ago, I had an MRI—and a very insensitive blockhead of a neurologist. The technology hadn't been in wide use for very long, and I'd never had an MRI before. I assumed it was like an X-ray or a CT Scan. The neurologist didn't prepare me at all. He didn't tell me it was like being buried alive in a very high-tech coffin. He didn't say, take half a valium. He didn't say, don't drink coffee.

So when I got there I was shocked to hear the technician ask: "Would you like music or no music?" I didn't know what he was talking about. Then he pointed to this high-tech, plastic coffin. "You'll be in there half an hour," he said. So, I asked for no music—afraid I might get caught with Neil Diamond classics or something.

I'm not a claustrophobe, but you don't need to be to feel claustrophobic inside an MRI. It's like being buried alive. I lay there with my eyes closed, and pulled "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" up in my memory. I pulled the whole poem up before me in my mind. Slowly, I started reciting it. And then more slowly. After saying it straight through a number of times, I used the poem as a kind of diagram to focus on. I said just the rhyme words: tree / made, bee / glade, slow / sing, glow / wing, like that. Then I tried to say every other line. By the time the MRI was over, I was in the process of saying it backwards. And the poem—like a good companion—had saved me from really freaking out.

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is very soothing in that way. After all, it's wishing for this rural and insular paradise from within the bowels of the city. It's about hearing the call of a safe, peaceful place, especially while under duress. Yeats hears that call while he stands "on the pavements grey," he says—but it could be "I hear it while I'm lying in the MRI." Or "I hear it while I'm in jail for the night," or "I hear it while I'm stuck on an elevator," or "I hear it while I'm waiting for the bus." You don't need to be in an extreme situation, or you can be. Once you've installed the poem in your memory, it's there to comfort you—or at least distract you—wherever you are.

I think that's one reason I've always made my literature students choose a poem to memorize, even if it's just something short—a little poem by, say, Emily Dickinson. They're very resistant to it at first. There's a collective groan when I tell them what they're going to have to do. I think it's because memorization is hard. You can't fake it the way you might in responding to an essay question. Either you have it by heart, or you don't.

And yet once they *do* get a poem memorized, they can't wait to come into my office to say it. I love watching that movement from thinking of memorization as a kind of drudgery, to seeing it as internalizing, claiming, owning a poem. It's no longer just something in a textbook—it's something that you've placed within yourself. And if you learn something written by a living poet, you might have have an edge on the writer himself. Not all formal poets memorize their poems—so you may own it in a way he or she doesn't. It becomes an exciting thing.

Poetry tends to be easier to memorize than prose, because it's designed to be memorized. A formal poem like the one we're talking about—with a steady beat, and with lines that divide neatly into two—almost asks to be remembered. And because the poem is so perfectly organized into 12 lines,

3 four line stanzas, an ABAB rhyme scheme in this common rhythm, it becomes a kind of grid that you can move around in. Unlike prose which is complete, linear headlong movement forward—a poem is a design that displaces silence on the page. You can look at it as a thing to wander in. You can say every other line. You can play with the design by getting inside its structure. When you're in duress, as I was in the MRI, you can put the poem to all kinds of diagrammatic uses.

Formal poems remind us that the origins of poetry lie in its mnemonic features, in rhythm, end rhyme, assonance, alliteration. All these devices were presumably ways of storing information, tricks pre-literate cultures developed to help commit things to memory before they could write things down. Poetry made it easier to recall basic survival information, like how to hunt or what to plant. But it also helped store vaguer or less material things, answers to questions about where your people came from, or what your tribe did hundreds of years ago. It helped store things about individual and collective identity, really. And the shamans or griots or bards—the society's poets—would be the people best at retaining that information, and most enchanted with the process of learning it and reciting it.

Once we did develop written language, practically speaking, poetry had outlived its practical function. And so, poetry has taken on other uses: as a form of enlightenment, a way of recording your internal life. But basically it still retains the powerful features that we put to use before we had writing.

I'm aware of these things as I go about my own work. The things that make a poem memorizable are important to me: The cadence of the lines, the cadence of the sentences, the flow of the syntax. These things consume a lot of my creative effort, even though my poems aren't formal, and they don't run to a metronomic beat, and they don't usually feature end rhyme. Free verse is obviously harder to memorize than formal poetry, but it's easier to memorize than prose because it does come in lines that are units—a units of thought, units of syntax. I try very much to make the poem roll, and syntactically hold together, in the same way that Frost or Yeats would try, only without the exact metrics, and without end rhyme. I'm very conscious of the rhythm of it. And I think that poems of mine are somewhat memorizable for that reason.

Writing free verse, it's hard to know exactly when a line has the feel or rhythm that you want. It's hard to describe, though you know it when you feel it. For me, it's often about gracefulness. I want graceful lines and graceful sentences. I try to write very simply. The vocabulary is simple, the sentences tend to be quite conventional—subject, verb, object. I try to be very unchallenging in syntax. I want the trip to be one of imagination and not completely of the language. But I'm also thinking about the reader, whom I'm trying to guide through an imaginative experience. I want the excitement of the poem—if I can generate some—not to lie in a fancy use of language, or an eccentric use of language. I want the poem to be an *imaginative* thrill. To take the reader to an odd place, or a challenging place, or a disorienting place, but to do that with fairly simple language. I don't want the language itself to be the trip. I want the imaginative spaces that we're moving through to be the trip.

I know that goes against some of the poetry you might encounter, where the language is the thing. Well, of course, poetry is all made of words and that's what we're working with here. But I don't just want the reader's staring at language to be the experience. I want to take the reader from Kansas to Oz: from a simple, familiar place, to a slightly unusual place.

Poetry's kind of a mixture of the clear and the mysterious. It's very important to know when to be which: what to be clear about and what to leave mysterious. A lot of poetry I find unreadable is trying to be mysterious all the time. It's not so much a mixture of clarity and mystery, instead of a balance between the two. If the reader doesn't feel oriented in the beginning of the poem, he or she can't be disoriented later. Often, the first lines of a poem—many times, I find them completely disorienting. But I'd like to go to that place, but I like to be taken there rather than than being shoved into it. It's like being pushed off the title into the path of an approaching train.

I think part of the reason for this is that the audience for poetry has decreased in recent years. There's really only one audience for poetry these days: poets themselves. In the last thirty years, this has been good news and bad news. The good news is there's all this poetry activity: open mics and workshops and readings and prizes. The bad news is that these events are populated largely by card-carrying fellow poets. Poetry's not getting out to non-practitioners as much as it used to. And the anxiety these days is not the anxiety of influence, but the anxiety of clarity. I think a lot of poets feel anxiety about being clear.

And yet I think poetry is as important today as it's ever been, despite its diminished public stature. Its uses become obvious when you read it. Poetry privileges subjectivity. It foregrounds the interior life of the writer, who is trying to draw in a reader. And it gets readers into contact with their own subjective life. This is valuable, especially now. If you look around at the society we live in, we're being pulled constantly into public life. It's not just Facebook, which is sort of the willing forfeiture of one's own privacy. The sanctuaries of privacy are so scarce these days. Every banality, from "I'm going out for pizza," to "JoAnn is passed out on the sofa," is broadcast to the wide world. I think I read recently that we're not suffering from an overflow of information—we've suffering from an overflow of insignificance. Well, poetry becomes an oasis or sanctuary from the forces constantly drawing us into social and public life.

Poetry exerts a different kind of pull on us. It's a pull towards meaning and subjectivity. It's the sound of lake water lapping by the shore. In "Dover Beach," when Matthew Arnold describes hearing the waves coming up from the English Channel, he says Sophocles heard this long ago in the Aegean. And it's one of those sounds that everyone has heard—Joan of Arc heard this, Cicero. Poetry presents us with these sensations: the things that cut through history, into the deep heart's core.