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A Poet to His Beloved

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“A Poet to His Beloved” by famed Irish Revival poet William Butler Yeats is a succinct dedication to a lover, but with a bittersweet feel. Employing exacting and florid metaphors, Yeats lulls us to a climatic end in just a few lines. The power of the poem is felt in its economy and word choice.

The first two lines are simple, but work efficiently in their originality:

I BRING you with reverent hands
The books of my numberless dreams,

The first line notes the delicacy with which the author is delivering his prized verse. Note how the “i” sound carries the line forward, giving weight to its reading. The poet goes straight to the action instead of giving a backstory, which is a more accepted technique nowadays in poetry. The second line is at once metaphorical and objective: the reader understands what Yeats means, and yet there is a mystery to it. In this line, the “o” and “u” sounds work well together to create melody, drawing the reader further into the poet’s words with encouragement.

The subsequent couplet begins a stream of direct metaphors that Yeats uses to illustrate the intensity of his adoration and reflection:

White woman that passion has worn As the tide wears the dove-grey sands,

In this case, “white” refers to purity, not in a racial sense. Passion is being described as a deterrent to purity by saying that it been degraded by delving into personal desires. The “w” sound supplies it with a wispy feel, and which provides “passion” with an extra punch. What is also intriguing is Yeats’ use of the word “worn” as a double meaning of “wearing something” and “degrade.” The second line truly demonstrates Yeats capacity for metaphor. He creates an illustrative image that is at once original and understandable. Like the best poetry, the metaphor is used to enhance meaning, not just as a form of glitter.

And with heart more old than the horn That is brimmed from the pale fire of time:

White woman with numberless dreams, I bring you my passionate rhyme.

Once again, Yeats uses alliteration as a rare comparison and with a great sense of sound. His use of the “o”

sound is also evident in the first line, allowing readers to almost hear the sound of the horn itself. The way the word “brimmed” comes in the second line is brilliant, as the image it creates is exacting and unique. Along with the accompanying metaphor “pale fire of time” Yeats does a splendid job at imprinting an image in the readers’ mind.

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The last two lines make a recourse to the beginning of the poem with “numberless dreams.” He shows the interconnection of love between the poet and his lover. The last line works well sonically, as “bring” and “rhyme” work as half rhymes. When I finished reading the poem for the first time, I was astounded at its force and economy. After reading the poem several more times over, I found the meaning had changed for me, yet my admiration had only grown.

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