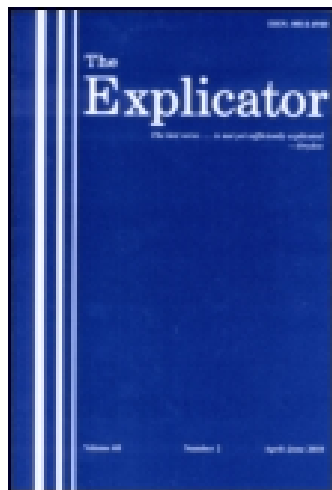


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Yeats, THE LAKE ISLE OF INNISFREE, and the Wisdom of Beans

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Yeats, THE LAKE ISLE OF INNISFREE, and the Wisdom of Beans

Keywords: William Butler Yeats, Henry David Thoreau, occult, Neoplatonism

One way of registering the complexity of William Butler Yeats's poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is to focus on the beans imagined by the speaker: "Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee, / And live alone in the bee-loud glade" (Yeats, "The Lake" 3–4). Why plant beans? The answer relates to Henry David Thoreau. The earliest version of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" appears in a letter dated December 21, 1888 (Yeats, *Collected*). Years afterward, Yeats described what was on his mind when he wrote the poem: "Sometimes I told myself very adventurous love-stories with myself for hero, and at other times I planned out a life of lonely austerity . . . I had still the ambition, formed in Sligo in my teens, of living in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree, a little island in Lough Gill" (*Autobiography* 94). Thoreau grew beans during his stay at Walden Pond, and in a chapter titled "The Bean-Field" he claims, "I was determined to know beans" (206). This is a joke, because "to know beans" is "to know 'a small or the least amount'" (Skwire 287n19). To say that a person "doesn't know beans" is to say that he or she is ignorant. C. Stuart Hunter concludes that "to know beans is to be wise. Hence one can see that it is possible for Yeats to have equated, tropologically, Thoreau's cultivation of beans with his pursuit of wisdom" (73).

Hunter finds Yeats cross-fertilizing Thoreau's Yankee litotes with the wisdom of Celtic mythology. Yeats's poem, however, also reflects his occult studies in London. He "was a member of the Theosophical Society" from "May 1887 to August 1890" (Monteith 216). Madame Blavatsky, the leader of this movement, influenced the young poet. She drew much of

her wisdom from ancient philosophers, and references to Pythagoras saturate her writings; there is no way that Yeats, reading *Isis Unveiled* (1877) or *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), could have overlooked the importance of Pythagoras. The most well-known reference to beans in Western philosophy is the Pythagorean warning to abstain from beans. In *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky mentions that “Pythagoras actually persuaded an ox to renounce eating beans, by merely whispering in the animal’s ear!” (1:283)—a story she repeats (2:78).

Thoreau also alludes to this famous avoidance of beans. He explains that he did not grow them to eat them: “for I am by nature a Pythagorean, so far as beans are concerned, whether they mean porridge or voting, and exchanged them for rice; but, perchance, as some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day” (207). The parable-maker turns out to be Yeats; indeed, as critics often note, the poem’s “I will arise and go” (lines 1, 9) echoes the Prodigal Son. But just as Christ’s parables—on a close reading—often turn ambiguous, so does Yeats’s poem. Thoreau jokingly calls himself a Pythagorean, but the Pythagoreans would not be amused. The Neo-Platonist Iamblichus reports that they were not even supposed to *touch* beans. He tells the story of a band of Pythagoreans who, if they had crossed a bean field, would have escaped from enemy troops; unwilling “to violate the dogma which ordered them not to touch beans,” they stood their ground and died (100–101). By Pythagorean standards, Thoreau’s casual attitude toward beans is naive at best—unbecoming in an ox, let alone a philosopher.

Iamblichus reports that the Pythagoreans’ “dinner consisted of bread and honey or the honey-comb” (52). Thomas Taylor, who translated Iamblichus, also translated Porphyry’s “On the Cave of the Nymphs,” a text later used in “Among School Children.” Porphyry claims that bees “do not sit on beans, which were regarded by the ancients as a symbol of generation” (185). Taylor explains: “when Pythagoras exhorted his disciples to abstain from beans, he intended to signify, that they should beware of a continued and perpetual descent into the realms of generation” (Porphyry 185 nm; Iamblichus 211–12). We know that Yeats had read Porphyry by 1893 (Wilson 27), but his occult studies may have brought him in contact with Taylor’s translations years earlier. In *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky quotes Taylor and praises him highly (1:283–84). According to R. F. Foster, “Thomas Taylor’s translations of Plotinus and the Neoplatonists,” lent to “young aspirants” by John O’Leary, formed part of Yeats’s “agenda for esoteric study” (50).

To go to Innisfree and plant “bean-rows” may, from a Thoreauvian perspective, reap austere wisdom, or it may, from a Pythagorean perspective, amount to a betrayal of wisdom, a “descent into the realms of generation.” The simple word *bean* condenses the struggle of a poet caught between London and Sligo, and suffering from homesickness (Yeats, *Autobiography* 94), sexual frustration (93–94), and intellectual exhaustion. The letter containing the poem reports that Yeats had been suffering from “collapses”: “I find a single vigorous [*sic*] conversation, especially if any philosophical matter comes up, leaves me next day dry as a sucked orange” (*Collected* 118). The dream of the lake isle may promise wisdom, but it also offers a wishy-washy alternative to the poet’s desiccating quest for knowledge. Henry Merritt has cogently argued that the poem’s longing for Sligo involves a flight from London’s “sexual entanglement” (103). The poem, however, superimposes London on Sligo. The Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society, which Yeats entered a few weeks before he wrote the poem, “required abstinence from meat, alcohol, and sex” (Ross 566). Innisfree, with its life of bean-growing solitude, parallels the ascetic conditions of the poet’s London activities. Moreover, Yeats, studding the poem with phrases from the Authorized Version, doesn’t even meet Gaelic halfway but wallows in the King’s English (Purdy 51). Imagining escape, the poem hunkers down in London. Sean Pryor notes that “lingering over the ‘I’ in ‘arise’ and the repeated ‘go’, the poet goes nowhere” (99). Doubt stalls him: Is going to Innisfree a way to obtain cleansing knowledge or contaminating folly? The doubt clings to the surprisingly rich word *bean*.

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