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Yeats and Digital Pedagogy

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YEATS AND DIGITAL PEDAGOGY

Rob Doggett

As people who love and admire Yeats, we need to reckon with the fact that digital technology is profoundly transforming the ways that readers encounter and thus experience his poetry. I'll begin on a mostly pessimistic note, arguing that digital media tends to encourage a mode of reading that is oriented toward the acquisition of practical knowledge and, in so doing, works to undercut the type of aesthetic experience that many of us traditionally associate with reading poetry. Next, I'll briefly mention the lessons that we can learn from Yeats's own efforts to use a new mass communication technology, radio, to encourage the public to see poetry as a living and communal form of art—which for him meant teaching people to appreciate those aural aesthetic qualities that are most apparent when a poem is chanted, sung, or read aloud. Finally, I'll return to the relationship between Yeats's poetry and digital technology in the present, offering a more hopeful take in which I'll sketch out some of the ways that teachers can use digital tools to foster a mode of reading that, instead of fixating on practical knowledge, opens students up to the types of profound questions that this art form can evoke. Building on Marjorie Perloff's work, this is a form of aesthetically-engaged reading that begins with the recognition “that a poem . . . is a made thing—contrived, constructed, chosen—and that its reading is also a construction on the part of the audience.”¹

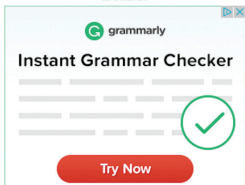
Not too long ago I was teaching an undergraduate seminar on Yeats, and I called on a student to read “The Second Coming” aloud. As the young man started in on the “widening gyre” and the inept falconer, I noticed that he was reading—not from the edition of Yeats's *Collected Poems* that I'd ordered for the class—but from his mobile phone. I admit that I am not, instinctively, a digital guy. I prefer actual, material books, which are what we use in my classes. But I let it slide, figuring that my students had already heard enough from cranky middle-aged professors decrying the evils of mobile phones and, anyway, it probably is, as Yeats once put it among a different generation of school children, “Better to smile on all that smile, and show / There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow” (*VP* 443–46, *ll* 31–32). I did, however, ask for the link to the site so that I could take the version he'd found and display it on a screen in front of the class. What I got can be seen in Figures 1 and 2.²

At that point, I stopped smiling. I began scrolling up and down through the site, taking in all of the hot links and flashing advertisements while muttering something about Yeats and the apocalypse. I turned to my students and asked with a mix of incredulity and growing horror: “Do most of you actually read


The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.


Surely some revelation is at hand;
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
 The Second Coming! Hardy are those words out
 When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
 Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
 A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
 Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
 Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
 The darkness drops again; but now I know
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?




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Figure 1 : “The Second Coming”

figure, pronounced with hard or soft g.
 Spiritus mundi - latin, World Spirit or Soul or World
 Wisdom, or Anima mundi, Great Memory.
 vexed - troubled, annoyed, angered.

Further Analysis of The Second Coming

With strong involvement in political, cultural and spiritual matters, William Butler Yeats the poet was in a unique position to write a poem as far reaching as *The Second Coming*.


The poem is full of exotic and unusual imagery. The first two lines for instance take the reader off into the air on the strong wings of a falcon, far away from the hand of the falconer. Control is already being lost.

Gyre means spiral or vortex, a geometrical figure and symbol fundamental to the cyclical view of history that Yeats held to. As the falcon sweeps higher and higher this vortex or cone shape widens and weakens the hold on reality.

Not only is the bird representing a cycle of civilisation, it is a symbol for Nature in its sharpest, cleanest sense. Humankind is losing touch with Nature and has to bear the consequences.

- In today's world, that means the effects of such things as climate change and global warming.

As this trend continues there is an inevitable collapse of systems and society. Again,



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ANDREW SPACEY
Analysis of the



ANDREW SPACEY
Analysis of Poem



ANDREW SPACEY
Analysis of Poem



ANDREW SPACEY
Analysis of Poem:

Figure 2 : Further Analysis of “The Second Coming”

poetry like this—on a phone? On the internet?? On this kind of site???” They looked at me with genuine pity, as if I’d asked whether or not they’d ever heard of Facebook or Instagram—the way that I used to look at my father, years ago, when he couldn’t figure out how to program the VCR to record his favorite television shows. And it struck me that something fundamental, something I had always taken for granted about the way we encounter and study poetry, had changed.

Think about what happens when we pick up a book and start reading “The Second Coming.” Even if we’re sitting in a crowded café, we enter into quiet solitude as we immediately register, through physical contact, what textual theorists such as Jerome McGann and George Bornstein refer to as a work’s bibliographical codes, those features of books—cover design, layout, spacing, arrangement, ordering, dedications, table of contents, introductions, and even copyright pages—that are part of any poem’s publishing history.³ The November 1920 edition of *The Dial*, where we get “a waste of desert sand” instead of “somewhere in the sands of the desert;” the Cuala Press edition, where the design recalls Yeats’s connection to the nineteenth-century arts and crafts movement; and the section of *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* from 1922’s *Later Poems*, which, like all of Yeats’s publications, was carefully arranged, so that by the time we encounter “The Second Coming” late in the volume we have already been taught to think in the terms and symbols of his nascent occult visionary system.⁴ On most poetry websites, if a user clicks on the “more poems” link, she ends up at the next title in alphabetical order (the much earlier poem “The Secret Rose”), but if a reader continues through the 1952 Macmillan *Collected Poems*, she arrives at “A Prayer for My Daughter,” which moves the reader from a broad-based vision of historical transformation to a more personal meditation on how that transformation might impact the poet’s own family. In this case, the connection between the poems is signaled by the clause “once more the storm is howling,” and by the “rocking cradle” transforming into “the cradle-hood” under which the speaker’s “child sleeps on.” (VP 403, ll 1–2).

The physical book, in short, prompts us to read the poem in the material context that the book has established, as much because of what the material text excludes—think of all those flashing advertisements—as because of what it incorporates. Added to this, readers immediately begin to draw upon our own more general contextual knowledge—about world history, literary history, culture, philosophy, religion, poetry in general, Yeats in particular, and so much more. A reader of the material text proceeds through the poem in a linear manner. Because the reader is holding a book of poems instead of, say, an instruction manual for programming a DVD player, he is not in a cognitive mode that privileges the poem’s instrumental, communicative function.

Instead, readers are attuned to what formalist critics define as a poem's "literariness," those qualities of language—imagery and metaphor, tone and point of view, rhythm and meter, syntax and punctuation—that constitute not just what a poem can plausibly mean but *how* a poem means. And, finally, because we are dealing with art, readers expect that the poem will elicit a broader intellectual or emotional response that cannot be reduced to any one summary statement—some snippet of what I referred to before as practical information. All this is to say that, at a basic level, the material text allows us to enter into a mindset that approaches the poem as a work of art.

Using "The Second Coming" as an example, readers move from the title into the poem itself and can begin to identify patterns that spark broader associations: the widening gyre and the flight of the falcon set against the falconer, who serves as the marker of a center that "cannot hold," chaos expanding in the face of a failing social order, "the blood-dimmed tide" overwhelming "the ceremony of innocence"—a state of affairs that is aptly summarized in the first stanza's concluding two lines, which are memorable partly because of the clauses' parallel syntax. The second stanza begins with the kind of grand rhetorical declaration that we often find Yeats's late poems, as if the societal disintegration envisioned in the first stanza portends the return of Christ, yet we immediately pick up on the irony by noting the repetition of "surely," as we now contemplate a nightmare vision of cataclysmic transformation. The images, which echo and expand upon the opening juxtaposition of flux and stability, invite us to try to assemble the associational patterns into some fixed statement of meaning that we cannot quite reach—that moment of aesthetic contemplation that Kant characterizes as "purposiveness without purpose," when the aesthetic object exceeds our cognitive judgement.⁵ The poem ends with a prophecy framed as a question, and a question framed as a prophecy—a striking combination of the interrogative and the imperative forms that gestures toward some metaphysical structure constituted by eternal transformation that can be evoked and partially apprehended through images, but that cannot be fully comprehend by the rational mind.⁶ As a reader's eyes pass over the final question mark and into the blank space between poems, she or he is left pondering this inscrutable something. Like Stephen Dedalus at the start of *Ulysses*, trying to recall his previous night's dream, readers are left "almosting it."⁷

I realize that this kind of reading speaks to a very specific type of aesthetic experience—one that occurs in quiet solitude, begins with sustained concentration and, ideally, ends with contemplation, as certainty gives way to uncertainty. I'm not suggesting that it's a universal experience, but at the very least, it's the kind of aesthetic experience that many scholars have had, generally value, and often model for their students. And for good reason: the invention of the printing press, followed later by the mass distribution of easily portable

books, produced, at a material level, a cognitive mode designed to generate precisely this type of aesthetic experience.⁸ Literary theorist Katherine Hayles defines this cognitive mode as “close reading,” distinguishing it from other modes that have emerged in the digital age.⁹

Another mode that Hayles identifies is “hyper reading.” It involves engaging simultaneously with multiple texts and information streams, shifting quickly among diverse modalities—texts, still images, moving images, sound, etc.—and it ultimately aims for the rapid acquisition of content knowledge, most of which, if recent studies in cognitive neuroscience are accurate, is quickly forgotten. What struck me in my classroom, and what continues to give me pause, is that my students frequently encounter poetry in a technological medium that, because it makes hyper reading seem intuitive, is perfectly engineered to undercut the very aesthetic experience, born out of close reading, that I took to be the foundation of literary studies.

Consider the digital version of “The Second Coming” my student was using (Figure 3).¹⁰ A summary precedes the poem. The poem is bracketed by links to analytical essays on other Yeats works; there are also embedded links to themes, key terms, video commentaries, audio clips of famous people reading the poem, biographical information, more Yeats poems and, of course, advertisements. It’s made for hyper reading, which means that it is difficult for even those trained in the mode of close reading to engage the poem itself with anything like sustained concentration, let alone contemplation. If, as Keats famously wrote, the ideal poet “is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason,”¹¹ this particular site

The screenshot shows a digital summary of the poem "The Second Coming" by W.B. Yeats. The main content includes a title, a sub-header "William Butler Yeats 1820 | Source", and a paragraph of text. To the right of the text are social media sharing icons (Facebook, Pinterest, Email). To the right of the page is a vertical list of related literature articles, each with a small image and a title. At the bottom of the page is a "Maven Recommendations" section with a grid of six article thumbnails, each featuring a portrait of W.B. Yeats and a title.

Figure 3 : Summary of “The Second Coming”

demands that we continually reach for additional facts and additional information. According to the philosopher Malcolm Budd, “The value of a poem as a poem does not consist in the significance of the thoughts it expresses, ... for if it did, the poem could be put aside once the thoughts it expresses are grasped.”¹² This website, however, encourages us to see the value of the poem precisely in the thoughts that are expressed—the supposedly true meaning of the poem’s content neatly summarized at the outset, and then developed in all of those additional interpretative essays. For the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, the crucial difference between literary language and ordinary language is that the former is impractical, in the sense that literary language impedes the efficient transfer of information.¹³ When we’re in the digital realm, though, the technology is expressly designed to enable the efficient acquisition of knowledge—think about the mindset you enter into when doing a Google search. Thus the technology in general, and certainly this poetry website in particular, alters the rhetorical context to such an extent that a poem which is clearly intended to be received primarily as aesthetic discourse is now received, like everything else on the page, as pragmatic discourse. It’s as if the poem were designed to communicate practical information and just happens to feature line breaks, unusual syntax, striking images, and cryptic metaphors.

Media historians generally agree that there are four ages of literature: the oral age, when poems were recited from memory and plays were performed at festivals before live audiences; the chirographic age, when literature was produced in the form of hand-written manuscripts; the print age, which introduced mechanical reproduction and eventually the mass dissemination of literature; and our own digital age, where online technology has made literature more widely available than ever before. Each of these ages has been marked by a fundamental shift in the medium within which literature is encountered. We are now living through one of those instances of profound transformation, the first in over 500 years. As I’ve been pointing out, the digital medium effectively collapses the distinction between aesthetic and pragmatic discursive modes, to the point that it encourages us to understand poems not as art but as vehicles for information transmission. All of which is to say that teacher-scholars need to reckon with this moment of profound technological change. Even if we continue to value books as material objects, for more and more people hyper reading will become the default mode, which will change the way that material texts are read. In his polemical 2008 article for the *Atlantic*, “Is Google Making Us Stupid,” Nicholas Carr gives us a taste of how this could play out:

What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. [...] My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. [...]

Immersing myself in a book [...] used to be easy, [but now] my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.¹⁴

Whether or not we feel the same way, we need to begin answering the question: how might we use digital technology to enable new generations of readers to engage with Yeats's poetry *as* poetry? How might we encourage them to become close readers—capable of “being in uncertainties”—without simply telling them to turn off their mobile phones? I'm going to sketch out some ways to answer these questions, but first I need to introduce one important caveat.

Although my focus has been on a specific type of aesthetic response—one that brings together elements from Enlightenment philosophy, Romanticism, and formalist literary criticism—the fact of the matter is that, regardless of how we frame the issue, there is no hard and fast line between aesthetic and pragmatic discourse, between emotional and rational thought, between knowledge and contemplation. Reading poetry always combines a bit of both, so that when we read Yeats's poetry in an aesthetic mode, we nevertheless draw upon prior information about his life, his writings, his theories, the work of other scholars, historical and political contexts, and much more. The expert does this more intuitively, the novice often through research, but both have traditionally been reliant on those institutions—publishing houses, libraries, and universities—that control the flow of scholarly information. With digital technology, those barriers have mostly fallen away, to the point that a vast storehouse of “prior knowledge”—drafts, editions, letters, biographies, allusions, interpretations—are often just a click away. This is generally a good thing, even if we aren't entirely sanguine about the quality of frequently unvetted information out there. What this means, in any case, is that we have a technology that has vast potential to assist people in reading and thinking about Yeats's poetry, even as the medium itself often serves to undercut the kinds of aesthetic responses to his poetry that, for many of us, are the reason that we value his writings in the first place. As readers, admirers, and teachers of Yeats, we have a pedagogical responsibility to engage with that technology in creative ways so that a new generation of readers, confronting this vast storehouse of information, will learn to pause, embrace uncertainty, and come to value his poetry in all of its aesthetic complexity.

As Yeats's work on the radio suggests, the temptation—which is always the case when any transformative media technology comes on the scene—is to engineer the technology in such a way that it will replicate the kinds of experiences people had prior to the advent of that technology. For Yeats, that meant trying to

re-create, on radio, the intimate communal experience of a live poetry reading, a country pub sing along, or a literary salon.¹⁵ For us, it might mean creating websites featuring Yeats's poetry that duplicate and expand upon best practices in editing and book publication, thereby replicating what happens when someone who needs a bit of help with contextual knowledge to get going encounters his work in a skillfully annotated edition of the poems. As early as 1996 William O'Donnell and Emily Thrush, in their article, "Designing a Hypertext Edition of a Modern Poem," show how a hypertext version of "Lapis Lazuli" can offer not only "a direct translation of the conventional methods of a printed edition" but can do so in a way that will smoothly incorporate notes, commentaries, and bibliographical information that will "be helpful to any (rather than most) of a wide range of readers. If the structure of the annotation is effectively designed," they continue, "the expert can pursue topics of interest that would be arcane to most readers, while at the same time the nonexpert is free to pursue topics that would be annoyingly tiresome to experts."¹⁶ In their version from the mid-1990s, readers can hide these comments (so that they simply have the poem standing alone on the screen); they can display them (so that they have access to a wealth of background information); and they can turn on the "text history" feature (so that they see individual lines as they appeared in drafts and early editions). This site remains a terrific model for how digital technology can help readers of all levels to understand and interpret Yeats's poetry. What is noteworthy in O'Donnell and Thrush's article is that the focus remains on accessing content knowledge, the kind of information that is useful for formulating arguments about the communicative meaning of Yeats's poetry. Or, to put in the terms I've outlined, no matter how well we engineer the technology, we're still operating in and encouraging readers to operate in a hyper reading cognitive mode. By contrast, helping people attend to the literariness of a poem—the formal density of language—is, I strongly believe, still best achieved through interactive pedagogy of the classroom, since habits of mind and aesthetic sensibilities develop slowly over time and through guided practice.

But how can we encourage these habits of mind among our students in the digital age? The key, it seems to me, is to help students recognize that a poem is not this stable, autonomous art object that they are tasked with decoding. Instead, in thinking about a poem as "a made thing," I aim for my students to see poetry as a collaborative or interactive aesthetic experience that depends upon their own close reading.

I was thinking about all this roughly a year ago when I began putting together an upper-level undergraduate seminar on Yeats, and it occurred to me that the moment when I was most conscious of that sense of poetry as collaboration was when I'd had the opportunity to prepare an edition of Yeats's early writings. Editing Yeats makes one acutely aware of his attention to craft

and to audience reception, of the way that every published edition alters the bibliographical codes and thus changes how we encounter his writings, and of the fact that his poems, which he revised again and again, are not stable monuments but dynamic, living utterances. What struck me in that pedagogical project is that digital technology could help my students experience precisely that sense of collaboration. By creating websites focused on the drafts of individual poems, the publishing history of a volume, a theme that connects his poems across several periods, and the design of one individual work, my students—I know this sounds idealistic but I think it's true—would actually *be re-creating art with Yeats*. The point, I want to stress, is not the product (what they produce) but the process (the act of production). By attending to Yeats's poetry and his volumes as made things, which they would then re-create in a new medium, my students could develop those close reading skills that will open them up to the kinds of aesthetic experiences that many of us—schooled in quiet solitude, concentration, and contemplation—take for granted.

The students produced four websites, hosted on a private university server to comply with copyright legislation. The first site deals with “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Byzantium” (Figure 4).¹⁷ After an overview of the Cornell Yeats Series, which features drafts of individual poems, and the *Variorum* edition of Yeats's poems, my students used a tool called a “Versioning Machine” to create a website in which readers can explore Yeats's drafting process of these two poems in a format that allows for easy side-by-side comparison of individual lines (Figure 5). The site is an example of what might be produced as an alternative for scholars who do not have ready access to the expensive Cornell Series, or who prefer seeing the drafts visually presented in this way.


Byzantium			
3.0			
Total Versions Line numbers Bibliographic panel			
Bibliographic Information	Version base: The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats	Version D: Rapallo Notebook D	Version ink: Two leaves of ink holograph on white
<p>Byzantium</p> <p>by William Butler Yeats</p> <p>Original Source</p> <p>Byzantium William Butler Yeats</p> <p>Witness List</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Witness base: The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats edited by Richard Finnegan • Witness D: Rapallo Notebook D • Witness ink: Two leaves of ink holograph on white paper punctured by paper fastener at top left. <p>Electronic Edition Information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text encoding by Sean McAnany and Kelly Parment • Criticism by Gaeann Towlack and Dan Mariani <p>Publication Details:</p> <p>Published by English 425: Enterprises: Editing Yeats.</p> <p>This poem and its variants are available to ENGL 425: Enterprises: Editing Yeats</p>	<p>1 The unspurred images of day recede; 2 The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed; 3 Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song 4 After great cathedral gong: 5 A startit or a moonlit dome destains 6 All that man is, 7 All mere complexities, 8 The fury and the mire of human veins, 9 Before me floats an image, man or shade, 10 Shade more than man, more image than a shade; 11 For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth 12 May unwind the winding path; 13 A mouth that has no moisture and no breath 14 Breathless mouths may summon, 15 I hail the superhuman; 16 I call it death-in-life and life-in-death, 17 Miracle, bird or golden handiwork, 18 More miracle than bird or handiwork, 19 Planted on the starlit golden bough, 20 Can like the cocks of Hades crow, 21 Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud 22 In glory of changeless metal 23 Common bird or petal 24 And all complexities of mire or blood, 25 At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit 26 Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit, 27 Nor stern disturbs, flames begotten of flame,</p>	<p>1 All the foul The unspurred images of day recede. 2 Soldier, robber & victim The Emperor's drunken soldiery are a bed. 3 Night resonance recedes; night-walkers song 4 After great startit-cathedral gong; 5 A startit or a moonlit dome destains 6 All that man is, 7 All the intricacies-mere complexity 8 All the mire & blood Mere mire & blood of human veins 9 Before me unads fits an image, man or shade 10 Shade more than man, more image than a shade; 11 An image that was wound bound in mummy cloth 12 Best knows that Resolvo Can recall winding path 13 A mouth that has no moisture & no breath 14 Cries out the summer Can sternly summon 15 Can all blood summon Can sternly summon 16 I hail the superhuman; 17 And I call it Death in life or life in death. 18 Miracle, bird, or golden handiwork, 19 More miracle than bird or handiwork, 20 Matters upon Planted on a startit golden bough 21 All that the birds of Hades know Can like the cocks of Hades crow</p>	<p>1 The unspurred images of day recede; 2 The Emperor's drunken soldiery are a bed; 3 Night resonance recedes, night-walkers song 4 After great startit-cathedral gong; 5 A startit or a moonlit dome destains 6 All that man is 7 All mere complexities, 8 The fury and the mire of human veins 9 Before me floats an image; man or shade, 10 Shade more than man, more image than a shade; 11 For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy cloth 12 May unwind the winding path; 13 A mouth that has no moisture & no breath 14 Breathless mouths may summon 15 I hail the superhuman; 16 I call it death in life and life-in-death, 17 Miracle, bird or golden handi work, 18 More miracle than bird or handi work, 19 Planted on the star-lit golden bough, 20 Can like the cocks of Hades crow 21 Or by the moon embittered scorn aloud 22 In glory of changeless metal 23 Common bird or petal 24 And all complexities of mire or blood, 25 At mid-midnight on the emperors pavement flit 26 Flames that no faggot sumishes feeds that no</p>

Figure 4 : Byzantium Versions

Poems ▾ Publications ▾ Credits English @ SUNY Geneseo

The Tower (1928)

- [Sailing to Byzantium](#)
- [The Tower](#)
- [Meditations in Time of Civil War](#)
- [Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen](#)
- [The Wheel](#)
- [Youth and Age](#)
- [The New Faces](#)
- [A Prayer for My Son](#)
- [Two Songs from a Play](#)
- [Leda and the Swan](#)
- [On a Picture of a Black Centaur](#)
- [Among School Children](#)
- [Colonus' Praise](#)
- [Wisdom](#)
- [The Fool by the Roadside](#)
- [The Hero the Girl and the Fool](#)
- [Owen Aherne and His Dancers](#)
- [A Man Young and Old](#)
- [The Three Monuments](#)
- [All Souls' Night](#)



The Tower, cover by T. Sturge Moore

A Map of *The Tower*:

Listed above is a Table of Contents for Yeats's *The Tower*, as it would have appeared in the volume's first publication in 1928. You can click on any of the poems listed above in order to track its evolution, from first publication to its inclusion in *The Tower*.

Each poem will be presented as it appeared in *The Tower* in 1928. Consult our [A Closer](#)

Figure 6 : The Tower's Publishing History

SEARCH

SPECIAL PAGES

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Maud Gonne in Yeats

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He thinks of his Past Greatness when a Part of the Constellations of Heaven

He Wishes For the Cloths of Heaven

He Wishes his Beloved were Dead

Old Memory

The Lover Mourns For The Loss Of Love

The Rose of Battle

Transitional/Middle Yeats


His Phoenix

MAUD GONNE IN YEATS

A Project for ENGL 425 Fall 2018

MAUD GONNE IN YEATS

1 This is the project website for the Fall 2018 Enterprises: Editing Yeats course. Our group has chosen to do an advanced annotation project to explore the ways that Maud Gonne changes in Yeats' poems, as his views of her shift throughout his life and become more complicated. We hope to gain a more nuanced look at the relationship between these two figures, and see the differences between the real Maud Gonne and the idealized Maud in Yeats' poetry.



2 This project uses WordPress in order to collect the Maud Gonne poems in one place, however there are many other benefits to using digital interfaces for this project. For example, we were able to connect annotations right to specific lines in each of the poems, so readers don't need to flip to another page in order to see what the annotation will be. This content management system also allows us to be in dialogue

Figure 7 : Maud Gonne in Yeats's Poetry

ideal beloved do not square with what historical accounts indicate? In creating this site and having to puzzle through these types of questions, my students became acutely aware of how editorial decisions about something that initially seemed pretty simple—offering background information—can have a profound impact on how readers experience a poem. They came to realize that information, which we tend to amass rapidly in hyper reading, is not neutral, and that the contextual apparatus is always a kind of argument about the poem—one that starts by defining which information is relevant and which is not. I hope that this exercise has made my students more attentive readers of poetry in general and, when it comes to digital versions of poetry, that they will be less likely to immediately click through links hunting for the supposedly true meaning of poem. I hope they will also be more cognizant of the interactive, collaborative relationship between reader and text.

The last site focused on *In The Seven Woods* and was in many ways the most ambitious part of the project. After conducting research on the Dun Emer Press and the role of Yeats's sisters in creating volumes of his poetry, the students set out to make a new, digital version of *In The Seven Woods*—one that would allow the reader to experience the work in an entirely new way (Figure 8).²⁰ The homepage features a map of the seven woods of Coole Park, with each poem tagged by location and by a flower, whose color corresponds to one of the four seasons. The idea is that readers would undertake a temporal and spatial journey, charting their own path through the woods, where the poems would evoke place and seasonal associations. A journey through the spring begins with “In the Seven Woods,” goes to “Under the Moon,” and ends at “The Players Ask for a Blessing,” whereas, autumn takes users to “Never Give All the Heart,” “The Folly of Being Comforted,” and “The Old Men Admiring Themselves in



Figure 8 : Digital In the Seven Woods

the Water.” Readers could spend a lot of time debating how well the poems fit within these groupings—for me, they often do, at least in terms mood and imagery—but the key point is that the students have taken the original version of the volume and re-made it so that it can signify in new, unexpected, and aesthetically meaningful ways.

The undergraduate students involved in this project collaborated with Yeats, and in so doing, they made decisions that required them to see the poetry not as some static art object, cold and distant, but as something that is alive. We cannot force students to abandon their mobile devices in favor of books, and we cannot impose the exact kind of aesthetic response to poetry that many of us value, but we can develop a form of digital pedagogy—creative, collaborative, and built on active engagements with poetry’s richness and difficulty—that will foster a mindset that is more attentive to the aesthetic than the pragmatic, art over information, the formal density of language over its prosaic communicative function.

NOTES

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1. Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of the Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 27–28.
2. Figures 1–3: “Summary and Analysis of the Poem ‘The Second Coming’ by William Butler Yeats,” Owlcation, Updated March 5, 2019, <https://owlcation.com/humanities/Summary-and-Analysis-of-Poem-The-Second-Coming-by-William-Butler-Yeats>.
3. See Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991) and George Bornstein, *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
4. For the differences in editions, see VP 401–02.
5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 57–59.
6. Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing Since 1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 174.
7. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 47.
8. For an excellent overview of the issues at stake in current debates about reading habits in the digital age, see Adam Hammond, *Literature in the Digital Age: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016). This essay was partly inspired by his work.
9. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012), 11–12.
10. Figure 3: Andrew Spacey, “Summary and Analysis of the Poem ‘The Second Coming’ by William Butler Yeats,” Owlcation, Updated March 5, 2019, <https://owlcation.com/humanities/Summary-and-Analysis-of-Poem-The-Second-Coming-by-William-Butler-Yeats>.

11. John Keats to George and Tom Keats, December 21, 27 (?), 1817, in *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, vol. 1, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 193.
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17. Figures 4 and 5: Sean McAneny, Daniel Mariani, Kelly Parrett, and Gaston Touafek, “Byzantium Versions,” SUNY Geneseo, December 2018.
18. Figure 6: Matthew Albanese, Cindy Castillo, and Jennifer Galvao, “*The Tower’s* Publishing History,” SUNY Geneseo, December 2018.
19. Figure 7: Nicole Callahan, Hannah McSorley, and Leah Christman, “Maud Gonne in Yeats’s Poetry,” SUNY Geneseo, December 2018.
20. Figure 8: Kira Baran, Hannah Fahy, John Lathrop, and Emma Medina, “Digital *In the Seven Woods*,” SUNY Geneseo, December 2018.