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Introduction

For generations, Yeats has occupied a central position in the popular imagination. Today, the average doomscroller is most likely to encounter him online, in memes bemoaning authoritarianism, climate change, pandemic, and war. But popular incarnations of Yeats in internet memes are far less likely than references in preinternet media to establish coherent connections between his image and his texts or historical legacy. These allusions often sever all ties between W. B. Yeats and his digital heir—W. B. Yeets—evoking only a vague sense of the famous poet to bolster their own authority.

Elizabeth Cullingford's 2001 essay, "Reading Yeats in Popular Culture," considers advertisements, political speeches, tourist traps, films, and television series. She proposes that Yeats's "presence in contemporary popular culture, as a non-verbal icon or a source of poetic allusions, may reflect either a modernist or a postmodernist aesthetic."[1] Images of Yeats or allusions to his poetry in Cullingford's modernist sense rely on in-depth knowledge of Yeats as an author and of the context of his life and works. While "meaning may be elusive and difficult" in this modernist aesthetic, it remains recoverable. The same, Cullingford argues, is not true of the postmodern aesthetic in which "Yeats's phrases float free of their origin" and references frequently reflect a "depthless and mechanical copying" that no longer establishes a significant relationship between contexts.[2] She instances consumerist uses of the poet's image or work as promotional material, as symbols of cultural capital. The most visually striking of these is a Sears "Back to School Sale" advertisement featuring a young male model posing with a book of Yeats's poems. This example "demonstrates the use of a volume of Yeats's poetry as a fashion statement."[3] But overall, in 2001 it appeared to Cullingford that, although one might sometimes encounter questionable references to Yeats or his legacy in popular culture, many such allusions suggested that "nostalgia for the real thing survives" and that perhaps "theorists of postmodern culture have somewhat exaggerated the demise of the Author, the dispersal of the canon and the abandonment of 'truth, meaning and history.'"[4]

By the time of Geraldine Higgins's 2010 updating of Cullingford's assessment, the advent of the internet meant that many of the examples traced by Higgins no longer belonged to the same material culture in which Cullingford could discover a Yeats-themed Sears advertisement. Apart from print and film, Higgins points to YouTube videos in which images of the Twin Towers attack or soldiers in Iraq are paired with the words from Yeats's "The Second Coming" and music by John Lennon. Higgins then rightly asks if Cullingford's modernist and postmodernist distinctions hold or "should we now construe these allusions in a different way?"[5] Like Cullingford, she associates modernism and postmodernism with high and popular culture, respectively (while advising against making these distinctions too neatly). She emphasizes the importance of context and audience: "It all depends who uses it, where and to whom it is addressed."[6] Her approach views allusions to Yeats within a "connotative landscape"[7] that either authentically incorporates the original work and perhaps enriches the reader's understanding of its meaning or superficially incorporates its clichéd status to the extent that the reader need not demonstrate any significant understanding of the original work. While an allusion may be clichéd, it may still expand the creative possibilities of the meaning it conveys. Higgins considers Clint Eastwood's 2004 film *Million Dollar Baby* an example of such a clichéd yet creatively meaningful allusion since it creates an Irish version of Yeats's English "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" and employs it as "a marker of authenticity." The film's allusion makes for "authentic Eastwood, even if it is not authentic Yeats."[8] In the present essay, I build on the assessments by Cullingford and Higgins by arguing that popular engagement with Yeats's work on the internet is now largely detached from its textual origins or historical reality. Internet meme allusions to Yeats illustrate the fruition of Cullingford's notion of a postmodern aesthetic in which not only Yeats's phrases but also his likeness "float free" of history.

The fundamental difference between the material culture analyzed by Cullingford and Higgins and the material culture that produces Yeats-related online content is the interactive and user-driven nature of internet memes. This essay, therefore, considers a different type of text than a film, television series, political speech, or advertisement. In order to emphasize this textual difference, I view internet memes as digimodernist texts. The term "digimodernism" was coined by Alan Kirby, who argues that digimodernism has displaced postmodernism to become "the twenty-first century's new cultural paradigm."[9] In short, Kirby defines digimodernism as "the effects on cultural forms of digitization."[10] This new paradigm "owes its emergence and preeminence to the computerization of text, which yields a new form of textuality characterized in its purest instances by onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, and anonymous, social and multiple authorship."[11] In view of

Kirby's theory, internet memes can be read as digimodernist texts that are: 1) ongoing, continually altered, and therefore 2) always open to new content and 3) often appearing online only momentarily. More importantly, internet memes radically redefine textual functional categories such as reader, author, viewer, and the like. Any internet user can almost instantaneously remix an existing image with a phrase authored by or associated with yet another person via internet meme generators. Therefore, it is the "reader or viewer or textual consumer" who, to a varying degree, manufactures the text itself: "S/he makes text where none existed before."[12] Everyone can now make their own version of the Sears Yeats for any purpose and without claiming public authorship. While films and television series have writers and producers, and advertisements are endorsed by companies or institutions, it is increasingly difficult to determine the creator of any given internet meme. In line with the digimodernist conception of text, the author of an internet meme is "mostly unknown or meaningless or encrypted."[13] The figure of the participatory user "slides typically between maker and consumer, reader and writer, in a seamless complex singularity."[14] This redefinition of textual functional categories results in anonymous, multiple, and social authorship. In general, internet memes are created and shared anonymously, and, on some occasions, they are automatically generated by communities of users feeding digital material to internet bots that automatically compile prototypical internet memes.

The internet and digitization are significantly changing how Yeats is alluded to in popular culture. Unlike the examples cited by Cullingford and Higgins, internet memes relating to the poet are exploitative in a different digimodernist way, in that they are after digital gains: clicks, likes, and shares. While there may be monetary incentives for corporations who brand themselves through social media platforms and partake in the making and sharing of internet memes to gain approval and garner a greater following, the average individual does not make and/or share internet memes to gain a customer base. Instead, such an individual seeks to increase their social and cultural capital. To this end, digimodernist allusions to Yeats often repurpose or entirely rework the original with little or no serious regard for authenticity. The connection between digimodernist allusions to Yeats and Yeats's work itself becomes immaterial; the focus is on signaling an *apparent* authenticity that enhances the meme's popularity and consumption value.

The same is true of spreadable media and internet memes that reference other great writers. Most internet memes alluding to writers rely on the strength of the author's name or image. Consider, for instance, the following memes depicting Wilde (Figure 1.1). These memes do not directly quote Wilde but merely employ his images and name as puns or tokens of notoriety.

Figure 1.1: Wilde memes

Other spreadable media that directly quote Wilde (Figure 1.2) simply pair his words and image and therefore do not conform to the internet meme model in which the various elements are "iterated and remixed further as separate contributions."[15]

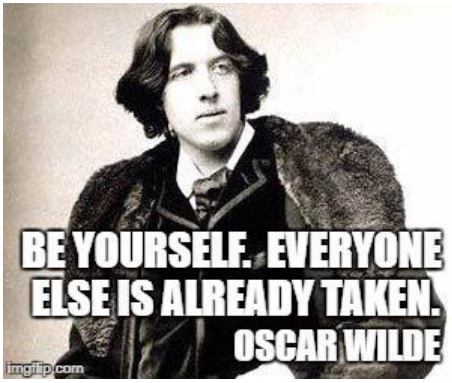

Figure 1.2: Wilde spreadable media

While there is no difference between internet memes *about* Wilde and those *about* Yeats, what differentiates Yeats's presence in the world of memes from that of Wilde's is that there are few or no memes composed of Wilde's famous sayings divorced from his image or name. Yeats is among the few writers whose lines have become so well-known in internet culture that they can function as idiomatic expressions independent of their author's image or name.[1] Specifically, lines from Yeats's "The Second Coming" have become so embedded in our collective consciousness that they share the type of canonical fame enjoyed online by, for instance, Shakespeare's famous quotations: "Shall I

compare thee to a summer's day?" or "Now is the winter of our discontent" (see Figure 1.3 below). These iconic lines are recognizable without any reference to Shakespeare as their author. Their use has also become so pliable that they frequently stand contextless and, hence, are ideal for use in a medium whose success depends on the generation of templates.

Figure 1.3: Shakespeare memes

It is clear that, as digimodernist texts, internet memes manifest traits that are very much entwined with how and where they are created. Kirby identifies four main digimodernist traits: "infantilism, earnestness, endlessness, and apparent reality."[16] The digimodernist trait of infantilism is, for instance, informed by children's stories and contemporary American popular cinema. This trait illustrates, among others, a reliance on "visual modes of storytelling (cartoons, comics, videogames)" and a "reflexive and yet inconsistent readiness to dispense with all known laws of nature and science (anthropomorphized animals, invented species, impossible ballistics, light-speed travel, outsize creatures, etc.)."[17] The digimodernist traits of infantilism, earnestness, and endlessness are evident in the medium of the internet meme. Throughout this essay, I, therefore, place a special focus on the user-generated nature of digimodernist allusions to Yeats and how they manifest the digimodernist trait of apparent reality as a means to authenticate itself.

The examples discussed here illustrate how digimodernist allusions to Yeats via internet memes present their connection to Yeats, or what his work symbolizes, as apparently real connections, as authentic intertext worthy of the cultural space they occupy. The majority of these apparently real connections are, however, "lost in the here and now, swamped in the textual present"[18] with little to no historical grounding. Where Cullingford's Sears Yeats and Higgins's authentic Eastwood still functioned as significant connections to Yeats's work or

his status as a poet, digimodernist allusions to Yeats have a decreasing relation to the historical existence of Yeats and his works. I begin by contextualizing the origin of internet memes after which I consider two methods of validation employed by selected image macros that either incorporate lines from Yeats's "The Second Coming" or are about Yeats. These two methods therefore entail 1) an exploitation of the preestablished authority of Yeats's poetry via quotation (attributed or unattributed) and 2) an exploitation of the preestablished popularity of Yeats's name.

Internet Memes as "Mutations of the Mind"

Until recently, internet memes have been viewed as a lower form of communication, a type of comical pastime intended only as surface-level entertainment. But despite their reputation, internet memes are increasingly accepted as "an important form of cultural currency, allowing people to share ideas, jokes, critiques, and commentary on a variety of topics."[19] Scholarly publications dedicated to the study of internet memes have increased over the last decade with such titles as the 2019 books *Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts* by Anastasia Denisova and *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture: Ideology, Semiotics, and Intertextuality* by Bradley Wiggins. Both these texts, and many like them, begin by explaining how the concept of a meme made the leap from biology to media studies. In short, the term "meme" was made popular by Richard Dawkins's 1976 publication *The Selfish Gene* in which he compares the human gene to what he considers the replicating entity of human culture, the "meme." Like genes that propagate "via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation."[20] With "meme," then, Dawkins had in mind "a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation."[21] In this sense, a meme can be understood as any idea, image, object, or method that behaves as genes do; it is a broad category of cultural inheritance that Dawkins warily and only metaphorically likens to a form of natural selection.

When introduced to the internet, the concept of a meme, as that which is imitated, takes on a dynamic and visual form through the spread of images, typed text, or video. Most definitions of internet memes are drawn, at least in a metaphorical way, from Dawkins's insight that imitation in culture is similar to reproduction in the gene pool. However, a significant difference between genes and internet memes is the notion that internet memes "exist as artifacts of participatory digital culture,"[22] most "[internet] memes do

not replicate themselves"[23] nor do they replicate with accuracy as do genes that survive evolutionary time. Internet memes replicate creatively. In 2013, Dawkins himself described internet memes as "a hijacking of the original idea" that, instead of randomly mutating, are designed "something like a mutation in the mind."[24]

The idea of a "mutation in the mind" sums up what an internet meme conveys in its broadest terms. An internet meme is defined as "a remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity."[25] Due to its digitized platform, an internet meme can take many forms, the most common of these include image macros (images with captioned text either above or below or both), GIFs (graphic interchange format), edited videos, hashtags, or any combination of these. Further, as Linda Börzsei points out, the images used in the compilation of internet memes are "simplistic, often low quality and mundane in style. They are not meant to be beautiful or particularly realistic."[26] It is often the most unaesthetic images that make successful internet memes precisely because of their unattractive or shock value.

The internet memes considered in this essay are mostly image macros composed of existing images (some already well-known in popular culture) combined with phrases relating to Yeats or images of Yeats. Image macros are most often created with free online tools or meme generators that provide templates and allow the user to adjust text or images. By way of illustration, consider the following image macro entitled "Bean's about to get yeeted" (Figure 1.4), posted on 9GAG, the self-professed "largest meme community on the internet." The image macro is composed of a screen capture of a scene from the 2002 action film *Equilibrium* in which the character Errol Partridge, played by Sean Bean, reads aloud from "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven" while holding his copy of Yeats's poems toward the gun barrel of his executioner. The screen capture is accompanied by the typical internet-meme white-and-bold-font text. Here, the text is a variation of lines from the poem: "But I, being poor, have only my dreams; / I have spread my dreams under your feet; / Tread softly because you tread on my dreams" (*CW1* 70). In each instance, the word "dreams" has been replaced with the rhyming word "memes." Note, moreover, how the quotation marks (though incomplete) and hyphen seem to be placed so that they align with the "Yeats" text appearing on the book cover in the background. It is common practice to position the captioned text of a meme without any indentation, the meme maker, therefore, had to go out of their way to place the bottom text just so.

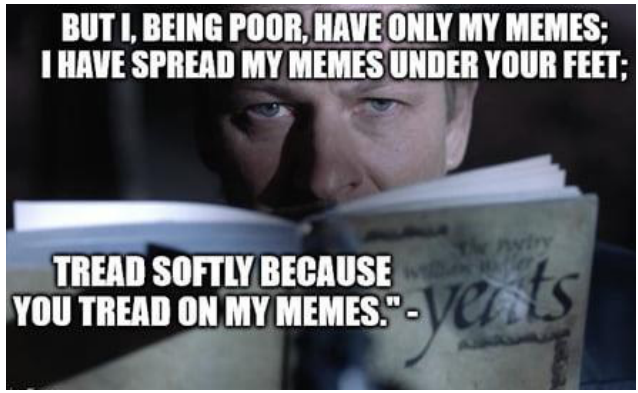

Figure 1.4: Bean's about to get yeeted

Viewers of this image micro will likely be more acquainted with the film *Equilibrium* than with Yeats or his oeuvre. Knowledge of the film only is sufficient context since it depicts Bean engaging with these lines and since Yeats's name appears on the cover of the book that is held up clearly and for quite some time as part of building tension in the scene. No further knowledge of the poet is required or provided. The viewer likely associates Yeats's name with what it symbolizes to Bean's character in the film and not with the poet himself or his works. In the world of *Equilibrium*, a totalitarian state ensures the suppression of all human emotion and expression. Bean's character, an enforcement officer of the Tetragrammaton Council, is executed for reading poetry and for forming part of the resistance movement against his own oppressive regime. When pictured in Bean's death scene, Yeats's work becomes symbolic not of poetry or creativity (as with the Sears Yeats) but of all human passions, a noble pursuit worth sacrificing one's life for, as Bean does. Yeats is employed here not to establish a marketable and authentic connection to poetic sophistication but as an apparently real representation of human creativity, expression, and resistance to oppression.

Where Yeats, and Bean by implication, were engaged with dreams, the meme maker is engaged with memes. Memes take on the same value as dreams in *Equilibrium* and are presented as equally significant forms of human expression (perhaps not wholly nonironically). When placed in this light, the meme maker is portrayed as being in league with Bean, as similarly headstrong in resisting the commonplace through participation in internet culture and by expression through memes, a medium frequently perceived as comical and superficial. This martyr-like profile implied by the image macro is surely a long way from Yeats's "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven" and its romantic offer filled with humility. Unlike the inauthentic Yeats but authentic Eastwood of *Million Dollar Baby*, internet memes frequently employ Yeats without any

cognizance of his life and work. As is characteristic of digimodernist apparent reality, the allusion has no significant historical sense but succeeds due to the popularity of the film and playful reinterpretation.

"Bean's about to get yeeted" (Figure 1.4) demonstrates both methods of validation common in image macros alluding to Yeats. Firstly, it exploits the preestablished authority of Yeats's poetry via quotation (though altered and incomplete), and secondly, it exploits the preestablished popularity of Yeats's name by positioning the captioned text to align with Yeats's name in the image. However, image macros alluding to Yeats do not commonly make use of these two methods together, as will be made clear by the remainder of the essay, which is divided into: 1) a section dedicated to image macros exploiting the preestablished authority of "The Second Coming" via quotation and 2) a section dedicated to image macros exploiting the preestablished popularity of Yeats's name through homophonous comical connotations such as "yeet" and "yeast."

"The Second Coming" Comes Again

Yeats's "The Second Coming," which celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of its publication in 2020, needs no introduction. Higgins considers "The Second Coming" the "Yeats brand's best-seller," one so integrated into popular discourse that it "has indeed become part of our lingua franca and has gained the elusive status of a crossover hit."[27] It is no surprise then that Yeats's bestseller would also appear in the media lingua franca, the internet meme. Most memes relating to "The Second Coming" reuse lines that are well-known and do so out of context and without attribution. Most of these lines are from the first stanza of the poem or include the last two striking lines, showing no awareness of the poem's original context. Whether Yeats is attributed or not and whether his lines are correctly reproduced or not, these allusions claim an authentic kinship with the fame associated with the familiar lines.

The online presence of "The Second Coming" is apparent from the existence of a Twitter bot of the poem's own. This Twitter bot, "Widening Gyre" (@GyreBot), joined Twitter in 2016 and has as its profile picture and cover image a medieval falconer from the *Codex Manesse* or "Great Heidelberg Book of Songs." The bot, itself another type of internet meme, tweets disarranged phrases from the poem every hour. It is what is known as a feed bot, a bot that tweets out "streams of data, usually at regular intervals, and usually forever."[28] Yeats's poem is the only source text from which the bot recycles text units (disarranged in Twitter's 280 character/40-70-word limit) and the account has no other activity. The hourly presence of a rephrased Yeats on Twitter fits perfectly into a digimodernist aesthetic in which the original Yeats is endlessly, but evanescently, re-created. While some tweets generated by @GyreBot

are surprisingly eloquent remixes of "The Second Coming" vocabulary, the majority are incoherent. Consider some of the more creative Tweets over eight hours in April of 2022 (Figure 1.5). Interestingly, apart from the hint in its profile image, @GyreBot has no description in its profile listing Yeats as the author or the poem as "The Second Coming." So, while there are other Twitter accounts like @DailyYeats that tweet Yeats quotes from different texts along with hashtags of varying relevance, accounts like @GyreBot appear to be dedicated not to Yeats or the appreciation of his oeuvre but to the popularity of a single poem whomever its author may be. The @GyreBot example is perhaps best interpreted as a pseudo-creative type of internet meme since lines that appear eloquent or coherent were artificially and randomly compiled despite human input via Twitter software.

Figure 1.5: GyreBot tweets (April 2022). Twitter (@GyreBot)

Internet memes alluding to Yeats or his works that are created with intent show a more nuanced type of digital participation. For instance, an image macro referencing "The Second Coming," the "This is Fine" image macro (Figure 1.6), includes the famous last lines of the poem's first stanza as the top and bottom text of the image macro. This is one of the few internet memes that attributes the text cited to Yeats. *Know Your Meme* describes the "This Is Fine" internet meme template as a "two-pane image of an anthropomorphic dog trying to assure himself that everything is fine, despite sitting in a room that is engulfed in flames, […] the cartoon is typically used as a reaction image to convey a sense of self-denial or acceptance in the face of a hopeless situation."[29]

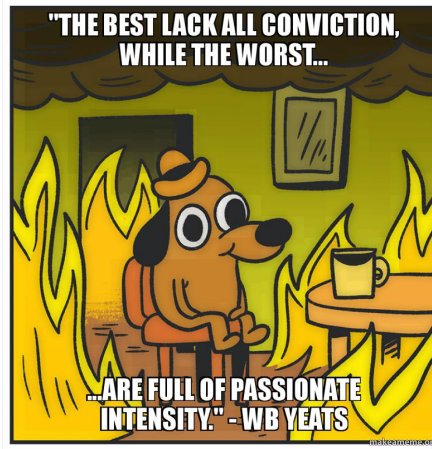

Figure 1.6: *This is Fine.*

As popularized on the internet, this image macro commonly extracts either the first or the first two panes of K. C. Green's *Gunshow* comic #648 entitled "The Pills Are Working" or "On Fire." As is common with a digimodernist aesthetic, this image macro favors an infantilism that does away "with all known laws of nature and science."[30] The comic in its entirety (Figure 1.7), rarely seen shared in memetic fashion, shows the anthropomorphic dog remaining seated and only apparently calm as he melts away entirely. By combining the quotation from "The Second Coming" with a popular image (its impressionistic meaning already known to the viewer), the image macro utilizes preestablished and possibly varying cultural knowledge to validate its likeness to "the worst" being "full of passionate intensity." The title of Green's comic, "The Pills Are Working," indicates that the dog's appropriate response to a dangerous situation is being suppressed since the pills he had taken "are working." Had he not been medicated he would have acted appropriately by seeking safety from the flames. His inaction is not due to his lack of conviction; indeed, it is because of conviction, albeit induced, that he remains in danger.

Figure 1.7: Gunshow #648 "The Pills Are Working" or "On Fire" by K. C. Green.

While we may want to interpret the dog's "passionate intensity," which facilitates his denial, as pointing toward the senselessness of passion in the face of mortal danger, this level of interpretation is likely unintended by participatory digital culture. The "This is Fine" internet meme functions without knowledge of Yeats's "The Second Coming" and relies only on the viewer's ability to link the provided quote containing the phrases "the worst" and "passionate intensity" with the inaction and denial of the cartoon dog. In line with digimodernist apparent reality, the allusion has no significant historical sense tying it to Yeats or the historical context of the poem it cites. The apparent similarity between phrases from Yeats's poem and what is presented in Green's comic is posed to the reader as a meaningful intertext when it is only a superficial and semantic similarity. The dog's burning environment can certainly be metaphorically compared to the historical context of the world wars along with the social and political upheaval that influenced "The Second Coming." The dog's

self-medicated denial of reality, however, appears incompatible with the notion of conviction in "The Second Coming." In the poem, those who lack conviction, M. L. Rosenthal argues, are "free of dogmatic ideology and unsure of what to do in the face of it."[31] Consider Yeats's own definition of conviction in the same section of *The Trembling of the Veil* in which he quotes the first stanza of "The Second Coming": "As life goes on we discover that certain thoughts sustain us in defeat, or give us victory, whether over ourselves or others, and it is these thoughts, tested by passion, that we call convictions" (*CW3* 163). This sense of conviction is markedly different from that displayed in the cartoon employed by the image macro. The image macro nonetheless conveys a coherent message through the familiar and apparently trustworthy convention of adding a quotation, thereby using the authority conferred upon Yeats to validate its own existence as an internet meme separate from Green's original comic.

There is certainly no lack of digital images online that quote from Yeats's works. Much like motivational quotes pasted against picturesque landscapes, lines from Yeats's poems are frequently pasted over images of Ben Bulben and other Irish landmarks or natural landscapes. Yet, often, the lines quoted are not even Yeats's, as is likely in Figure 1.8.[2] In such cases, Yeats is presented as the author of the quote to create the impression that the content is reliable since it comes from a well-known and reputable source.

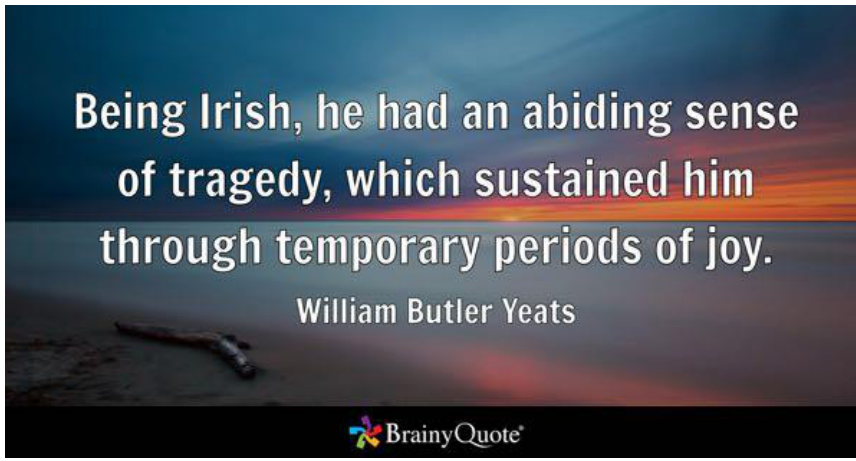

Figure 1.8: Spreadable Media/quotes.

The source of this quotation is, however, unknown. A handful of online users have questioned its origin on, for instance, the Ireland subreddit[3] (see Figure 1.9). Despite the r/ireland community's 544,000 membership, only fourteen comments were made on the question of the quote's origin before it was eventually archived, and comments were turned off.

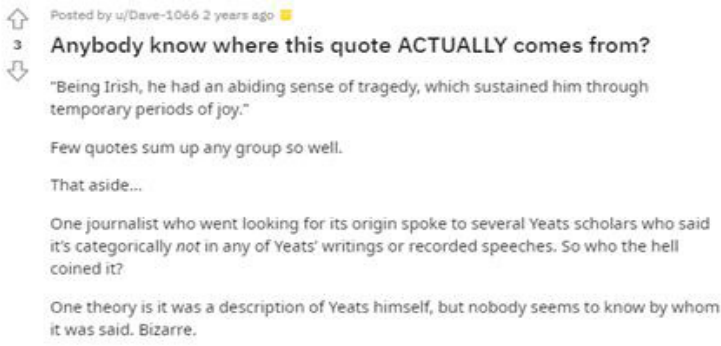

Figure 1.9: Reddit inquiry by Dave-1066.

Some of the Reddit responses speculated that the quote was not by Yeats but about Yeats by Constance Markievicz, Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett, T. S. Eliot, Patrick Kavanagh, or Flann O'Brien. The fact that the quote has been questioned is itself a niche response. In general, the misattributed quote is propagated online without thought to the author. While Yeats probably did not make the abovementioned claim about Irishness and tragedy, the presence of his name provides enough gravitas for a persuasive "BrainyQuote." Whether Yeats had said these words or whether it was said of him in print or in some other form of media (or, indeed whether it had anything to do with Yeats), the specific phrasing has been shaped by its online circulation. Considering the importance of apparent reality in the digimodernist platforms in which these types of quotations thrive, an anonymous quote about an already indistinct figure displaying a certain Irishness would not be as popular as a quote by a well-known Irish author. In Figure 1.8, Yeats's name, therefore, not only provides a semblance of literary authority and wisdom but also functions as an Irish connection since many viewers who might know nothing of Yeats will at least know his nationality. It is only fitting that what has become something of an aphorism about Irishness should be attributed to someone who is Irish. Viewers are not required to know details about Yeats or his work, they just need to know about a famous Irish poet named Yeats. In this sense, the author of a popular quote shared in this manner is largely arbitrary if they are well-known and associated with literary or high culture.

On another level, attribution, whether accurate or not, reflects the desire for control over language as a system. By adding the name of any renowned author to phrases without a singular identifiable source, internet users establish an apparently real command of a system within which humans but operate. Accurate attribution, too, allows for the apparent affirmation of whatever new context a quotation is drawn into, as is common in many of the internet memes alluding to Yeats's words or his name. However, since Figure 1.8 does not recontextualize or reimagine the (mis)quotation (regardless of who the author may be), it should be considered a form of spreadable media and not an internet meme. If, for instance, picturesque landscapes are replaced with images that carry political or nationalistic significance, these types of spreadable media become internet memes proper. Consider the following exemplary quotation from Yeats's poem "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven" posted across the American flag (Figure 1.10).

Figure 1.10: Star-spangled Yeats.

In Figure 1.10, Yeats is (mis)quoted in the typical internet-meme white-and-bold-font text. To the viewer familiar with Yeats and "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven," the image macro may imply a kinship between Yeats's Irishness and American identities. To the viewer unaware of Yeats as a famous Irish poet, the message conveyed is one of national pride and perhaps also a similarity between the quoted "my dreams" and the American Dream. In either case, the poetic authority that comes with the Yeats quotation lends the image macro an air of authenticity that an anonymous saying otherwise would not. When seen as one aspect of an image macro consisting of various templates, catchy or particularly relevant quotations take on the same symbolic value that is communicated by strong visual symbols such as country flags.

Internet memes relating to "The Second Coming" have unsurprisingly taken on a political dimension with, for instance, image macros of less flattering

images of American political figures. Indeed, as Anastasia Bertazzoli believes, "Memes have become the fast food of modern politics."[32] Simon Caterson, for one, notes a surge in the popularity of "The Second Coming" coinciding with the advent of the Trump administration and a new era of global turmoil.[33] In 2019, the American author and academic Jay Parini, recounts reading the opening stanza of "The Second Coming" to his class, after which he asked them to imagine the circumstances of this stanza, and one student replied, "He's writing about Donald Trump, right?"[34] We see these concerns manifested in image macros that combine the famous last lines from "The Second Coming" (often altered) with images of Donald Trump exhibiting aggressive facial expressions and confrontational body language or images of him appearing to be slouching across a stage (Figure 1.11). By connecting the phrases "rough beast" and "Its hour come round at last" to Trump's political career, the maker of the image macro employs Yeats as an apparently real commentator whose words relate directly to the depicted circumstances.

Figure 1.11: Slouching Trump.

In this instance, we may expect some viewers to be familiar with Yeats's iconic line: "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" (*CW1* 190). However, even if the viewer does not recognize these words as extracted from a famous poem with an apocalyptic prophecy, the apocalyptic tone of the words themselves is still linked to Trump and no further context about the poem or poet is required. In most cases, Yeats is not listed as the author of the quote since the lines are not used because of who wrote them or what the poet may symbolize. Instead, these lines are

exploited because they are well-known and likely to be recalled by many viewers who may or may not remember the author. Even without attribution, the words themselves are powerful in their use of rhythm, alliteration, and striking imagery. In particular, the verb "slouching" conveys much of the thoughtlessness implied by the pairing of the image and quote and is most effective when used alongside an image that can be imaginatively paired with the act of slouching. The quote, moreover, poses a broad enough question that can easily be applied to different contexts as a template expression of disbelief. Although the words alone lend the image macro authenticity, it seems unlikely that this quote from "The Second Coming" would have become the material of an internet meme template without having first reached superstardom in popular culture.

Yet, it is not the coming of a new antithetical age that Yeats saw arising from the convulsions of cyclical history that these memes are comparing to Trump. What they repurpose is the sense of apocalypse that is ingrained in the memory of anyone who recognizes the lines either from reading the poem or from continually being exposed to only the famous lines in popular culture. This imperfect collective memory is then utilized as political commentary that equates a new presidency with the apocalyptic fame of the "rough beast" in "The Second Coming" and not the detailed meeting of gyres behind the imagery of the poem. The surface-level similarities between the destructive effects of deficient leadership and Yeats's rough beast establish an apparently real literary connection. Digimodernist allusions to Yeats give participating users of different convictions the same tools, allowing internet meme critique to extend to both sides of the American political dichotomy. True to the onwardness and haphazardness of digimodernist texts, the same lines from "The Second Coming" intended to ridicule Trump also appear in image macros depicting Hillary Clinton, Trump's opponent. For instance, a previous campaign poster combined with Yeats's famous lines (Figure 1.12), paints Clinton, too, as a rough beast slouching not to Bethlehem, but to Washington. The eye of the beholder makes both Trump and Clinton, as they were in the 2016 US election, the same slouching rough beast. The apparently real aesthetic of digimodernism seems to facilitate a variety of realities—as Kirby states, "the triumph of appearance carries it beyond the true/false dichotomy."[35] Whether Yeats's rough beast is aligned with the ideologies of the left or right is irrelevant seeing that the famous lines from "The Second Coming" are equally effective in expressing the concerns and contempt of both political parties. This digital mixing and matching of Yeats quotes illustrate their template status in a platform where objects are not propagated by virtue of their truth but by their popularity and memorability.

Figure 12: Slouching Clinton

This increasing remix of striking digital imagery and well-known quotes is, moreover, evident in automatically generated internet memes. One such example is an image macro alluding to "The Second Coming" that combines a scene from *The Simpsons* and a Garfield figurine featuring the last lines of Yeats's poem (Figure 1.13). The digimodernist preference for infantilized and visual forms is also manifest in this internet meme's combination of an anthropomorphized animal and a cartoon character.

Figure 1.13: Slouching Supreme Overlord.

The image macro was compiled by the internet bot ShitpostBot 5000, which generates internet memes by randomly filling in the blanks of internet meme templates with source images that are user-submitted and admin-reviewed. As of April 2023, ShitpostBot 5000 claims there are over eleven quindecillion unique possible memes to be generated from its database of 10,420 source images and 2,409 templates.[36] This image macro is perhaps the most reflective of a purely digimodernist text since it was not created by an internet user but by the internet itself. An automatically generated internet meme is presented as though it, too, is a human-created internet meme layered with intertext and intention. In this case, the meme template comprises *The Simpsons* character along with the bottom text while the photo of the Garfield figurine quoting Yeats is the source image submitted to ShitpostBot 5000 by a user identified only as "ORGANISM" in 2016. The animated news reporter is Kent Brockman, a character from the sitcom *The Simpsons*. This depiction of Brockman is from a 1994 episode in which he utters the overlord line when he "mistakenly assumes the Earth is about to be invaded by giant space ants."[37] The still image of Brockman's image along with the "I, for one, welcome our new . . . supreme overlord(s)" phrasal template is popular online as a means of expressing "mock submission towards an obsessively controlling individual for the sake of humor."[38] The template is also common when criticizing large companies like Google or Facebook by replacing the on-screen image with company logos or other controversial images. See Figure 1.14.

Figure 1.14: Variations of the Supreme Overlord image macro.

The suggested overlord pictured in Figure 1.13 is a photograph of an adjusted vintage Garfield Gemini figurine produced by Enesco in 1981. Of course, the original figurine did not quote Yeats, instead, it read: "Entertaining, versatile, witty, logical, spontaneous, and charming, the kind of person you would love . . . to hate" in reference to Gemini characteristics (See Figure 1.15). The user who uploaded the photo of the adjusted figurine to ShitpostBot 5000

must have pasted printed lines from "The Second Coming" over the original zodiac description to create the link between the double-headed Garfield and Yeats's image of the rough beast described in the poem as "A shape with lion body and the head of a man" (*CW1* 189). While not exactly a lion, Garfield is a feline depicted here in a beastly fashion.

Figure 1.15: Gemini Garfield (©eBay/ Enesco).

Seeing that it is bot-generated, the image macro depicting this cartoonish rough beast as "our new overlord" could not have had any intention of evoking meaningful references to Yeats's poem. Yet the combination of image macro elements does, uncannily, give the impression that the meme maker has been communicating effectively. One may interpret the Yeatsean Garfield overlord as reflective of widespread mock submission toward the slouching rough beast that is cyclical time, yet no such interpretation was actually made by a human internet user. It is a striking coincidence that any such interpretation can be made from an image macro that is one of eleven quindecillion unique possible memes that are automatically generated.

While its resemblance to the poem is purely coincidental, the presence of Yeats's lines in a source image submitted to ShitpostBot 5000 is telling. Once more, the preestablished authority of "The Second Coming" lends the image macro an apparently real connection to Yeats and his bestseller. Where the real-world meme, the adjusted figurine, jokingly yet effectively alludes to

"The Second Coming," the internet meme (including the figurine) reveals the template status of famous lines from the poem. The user who submitted the photo must have considered the Garfield-Yeats combination meme-worthy, not because the internet bot may match the photo with an appropriate meme template but because it could achieve the opposite. A disjointed pairing of user-submitted photos and templates is precisely what users expect from the internet bot ShitpostBot 5000, as can be derived from its naming. The meme can be considered a "shitpost," which the OED defines as "a nonsensical, irrelevant, or deliberately provocative post on social media, esp. one that is intended to amuse an in-group, elicit a reaction, subvert a discussion, or distract from the main conversation."[39] If we read no further into it, the ShitpostBot 5000 produced a shitpost by using a medium that normally conveys a message to compile an image that haphazardly merged unrelated characters and phrases. However, by chance, the ShitpostBot 5000 fails in its aims and produces an internet meme that is not entirely nonsensical since Kent Brockman's submission to the coming of a new dispensation is in some way related to both the strange appearance of the Garfield figurine and the turning of a historical gyre in "The Second Coming." Even if it were intended, the allusion to Yeats in this instance is devoid of any historical consciousness, "lost in the here and now, swamped in the textual present."[40] Yeats is not quoted as the author, and it is unclear to a viewer who may recognize Yeats's lines whether they are authenticating Davis's also well-known Garfield or whether it is the other way around. The continual layering and seemingly endless potential to be reused is a digimodernist trait that may well result in many internet users who are unfamiliar with "The Second Coming" associating overquoted famous lines with its use alongside Garfield's character and not with Yeats at all.[41]

Yeats or Get Yeeted

The established authority of Yeats's poetry extends to both his name and photographs of Yeats that are frequently shared alongside quotes. These aspects are consequently also employed by internet memes alluding to Yeats, especially by image macros engaging with the homophonous comical connotations of the poet's last name, such as "yeet" and "yeast." Since allusions like these are more removed from the context of Yeats's poetry than quotations, internet memes that exploit Yeats's image or his name also appear to have a less significant relation to the literary origins of the fame associated with the name. Image macros exploiting Yeats's name largely rely on surface-level humor by replacing words that sound like or rhyme with the last name Yeats. The "Yeats Infection" image macro, for example, presents a pun by alluding to the similar sounding but more serious yeast infection (depicted in Figure 1.16). This image macro

does not attempt to participate in the ideas associated with Yeats or his poems but relies on a colloquial understanding of Yeats's name as a symbol of all Irish poetry. If one were to be overexposed to Irish poetry, one would catch not a Joyce, Wilde, or Heaney infection, but a Yeats infection. It is not necessarily that the reputation associated with Yeats's name surpasses that of other Irish poets or authors but that his surname happens to be both well-known and sonically related to the type of infection.

Figure 1.16: Yeats infection.

In general, the efficacy of wordplay internet memes such as these is not determined by any message one may derive from it but by the success of the pun. It is funnier that there is some sonic similarity between Yeats and yeast and that, theoretically, an infection of both can be picked up by the woman pictured in the image macro, than is the underlying idea that Yeats can be representative of the entire tradition of Irish poetry. For the internet meme to succeed and be spread further, it is enough that the viewer can recognize the famous name as an Irish poet's and connect it to the similar-sounding infection.

The more common kind of wordplay in image macros that repurpose the image of Yeats is the Yeats-yeet wordplay. Consider Figure 1.17 in which Yeats is named and depicted in comicbook frame style. While all is as it appears in the uppermost frames of the image macro, the bottom frames present not William Butler Yeats but William butler YEETS in capital letters alongside a blurred

copy of the same photograph. Yeets is used here as a verb that indicates a rapid throwing movement. Initially, the slang term yeet referred to:

> […] a choreographed dance stylized by dipping one's shoulder in rhythmic steps […]. It became popular in February 2014 after footage of people performing the dance were uploaded to the video-sharing sites Vine and YouTube. In recent years, the term "yeet" has adopted a meaning of launching or throwing something at a high velocity or exclamation of doing so.[42]

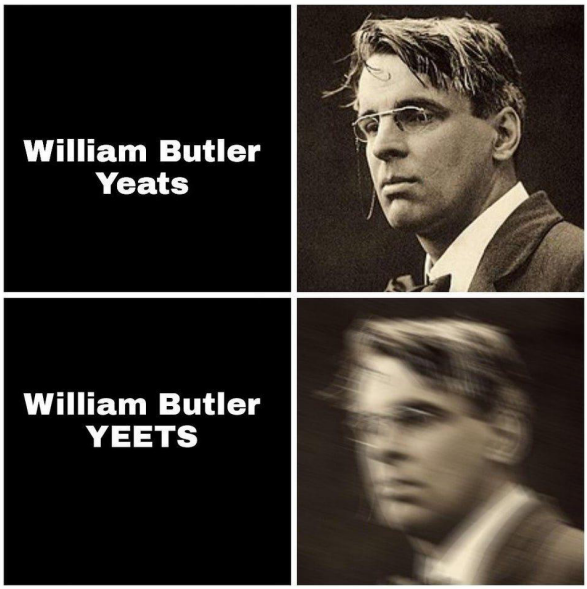

Figure 1.17: William Butler YEETS 1.

An image macro depicting Yeats either yeeting or being yeeted demands no knowledge of Yeats the poet. In fact, the image macro benefits from the viewer's ignorance since anyone familiar with Yeats would notice that the name Yeats does not exactly rhyme with yeets. While all the Yeats-related context required to get the joke, as it were, is present in the image macro (name and photo), its reception is greatly enhanced by the poet's notoriety. However, the essential background called for relates to the term yeet. After the online success of the initial yeet video (itself an internet meme), more videos replicating the style were propagated online, often accompanied by a yeet hashtag. The internet meme continued to evolve to different mediums and as screenshots of the dance moves became incorporated into image macros, new images were designed to depict the act of yeeting and its accompanying attitude (see Figure 1.18). The term "yeet" is now

frequently used to express not only a violent propelling, death, or defeat due to this propelling, but it is also used as a response or exclamation of sudden excitement (either approvingly or disapprovingly).

Figure 1.18: Yeet & Can I get a yeet?

Once the term became independent of visual references to the original dance moves, it became the basis of other subgenres of image macros. For instance, the "Baby yeet" internet meme, which incorporates an image of a woman "yeeting" a baby as if taking a shot in basketball, inspired image macros on other topics (Figure 1.19).

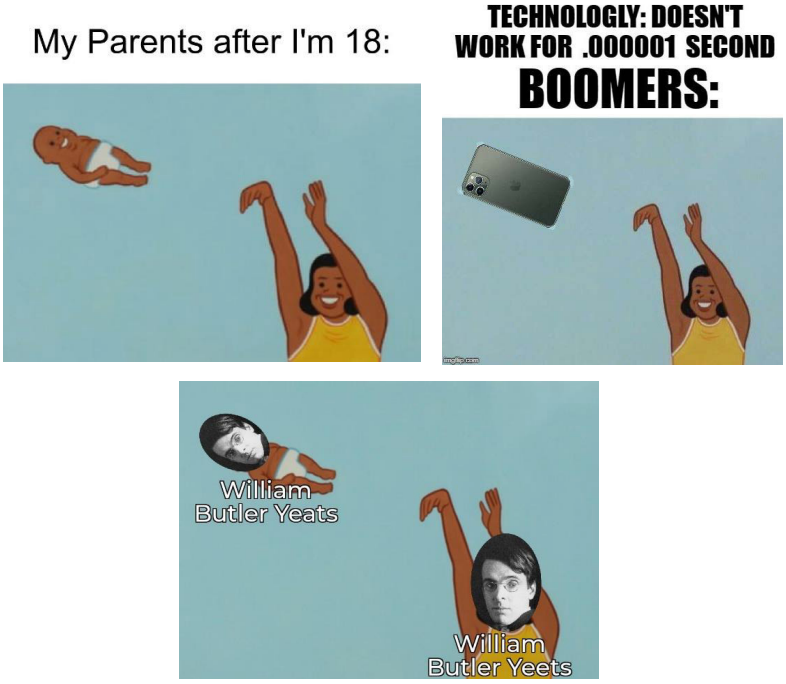

Figure 1.19: Baby yeet meme.

More recently, yeet image macros developed yet another layer of interpretation with the addition of crying laughing emoji Photoshops. According to *Know Your Meme*, in 2018, "image macros featuring various portmanteau's [*sic*] using the word 'yeet' began trending on the /r/dankmemes subreddit, which often featured photoshops superimposed with the Crying Laughing Emoji and OK emoji."[43] By playing on the rhyme between yeet and words like "heat" or "meat" and by dovetailing with the yeet catchphrase, combinations of the crying laughing emoji and OK emoji express a similar throwaway and humorous attitude (see Figure 1.20). A normal heater just heats whereas a yeeter yeets. In these instances, yeet denotes a type of joking much like internet trolls dedicated to online provocation.

Figure 1.20: Crying laughing and OK emoji yeeters.

It is in this emoji Photoshopped-style that W. B. Yeets reappears (Figure 1.21).

Figure 1.21: Crying laughing W. B. Yeets.

In these examples, each reworked image of Yeats includes a crying laughing emoji and an OK emoji placed over his face and hand. As with the "Yeats Infection" image macro (Figure 1.16), it is not Yeats's ideas or poetry commented on or

repurposed but only his last name and photographs. Viewers are not expected to recognize Yeats from his photographs or to be familiar with his name or works. The only context required is knowledge of current internet meme formats, the slang term "yeet," and for viewers to accept the man pictured as an authority figure from the distant past. In each instance, the transition from Yeats to Yeets is helped along by a lighter, more playful text font as well as an image filter and additional emojis. The success of the image macro lies not in its ability to establish an apparently real connection to Yeats, but in its ability to construct a new metaphorical Yeats, a digitally reanimated internet jokester. William Yeets's success as an image macro is nonetheless dependent on a relation to the actual Yeats portrayed in the meme. Without the top frame's black-and-white introduction to the historical person, the jokester variant would be impenetrable. As with the appearance of lines from "The Second Coming" in ShitpostBot 5000, Yeats's appearance in internet memes that are unrelated to his reputation as a poet is founded on his broader fame.

Another variation of the William B Yeets phenomenon depicts the famous photograph of a young W. B. adjusted with what is called the "laser eye" or "glowing eyes effect" (Figure 1.23), a "photoshop meme in which the eyes of various people, characters and animals are edited to appear as if they are glowing with bright energy, mimicking a common trope found in various animated films and television shows."[44] Glowing eyes have been used as a way to express intensity, focus, and to "show off someone's Life Energy" or to indicate "someone's just triggered their Super Mode."[45] The Gordon Ramsey image macro below (Figure 1.22), for instance, exemplifies the eureka moment of locating the lamb sauce.

Figure 1.22: Glowing/laser eye effect.

Normal Yeats, as in Figure 1.21, is transformed into a laser-eyed William Butler YEETS (Figure 1.23). In this image macro of Yeats, the laser eyes effect is the equivalent of the laughing emoji in that it illustrates the transition from Yeats to Yeets. However, the yeet factor implied is somewhat different from its most common use. When paired with the glowing eyes effect, the term "yeet" becomes linked to a supernatural element. Instead of a joking air, this William Butler Yeets is illustrated as an ascended being or superhero character with light beaming from his eyes. Since this image macro has no frame or panel format and does not introduce the historical William Butler Yeats re-created by William Butler Yeets, the viewer is expected to have some background. However, user-viewers are more likely to recognize this image macro as a response to other image macros such as the Crying Laughing W.B. Yeets (Figure 1.22) than they are to recognize Yeats from his photograph or name. In that case, all the context required to engage with the internet meme originates from internet meme culture itself. While Yeats-Yeets image macros employ both Yeats's name and his image, it does not also exploit the preestablished authority of Yeats's poetry via quotation. This absence of textual context further illustrates the need for a quotation to already be popular before it is made use of in internet meme culture.

The Yeats-Yeet wordplay also entered existing internet meme templates such as the image macro that opened this essay (Figure 1.4). As the slang term developed to also refer to the result of being yeeted, the phonetical connection was made between this type of yeeting and what does indeed

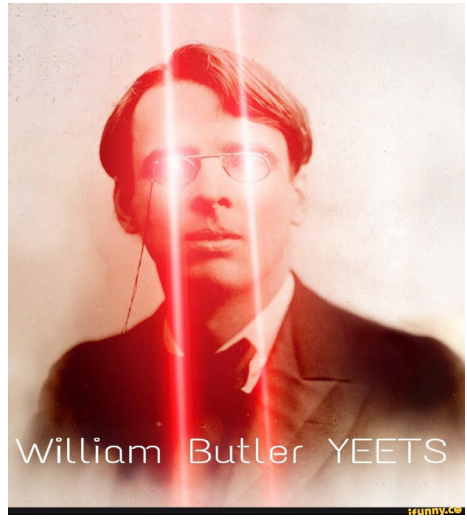

Figure 1.23: William Butler YEETS 2.

happen to Sean Bean's character in *Equilibrium*. The image macro in Figure 1.24 places Yeats's name in quotation marks as though the name is more unfamiliar to the viewer than is the word "yeeted." The aim appears to be a retrospective expression of the humorous connection between Bean's reading of Yeats and the word "yeet" that would become apparent only once the usage of yeet developed to also refer to violent throwing. Like the initial "Bean's about to get yeeted" meme, the updated variant is an internet meme about an internet meme; it appears in praise of internet meme culture for unknowingly having connected its new slang term with the author of the book depicted in another meme, precisely at the moment when a character undergoes a yeeting.

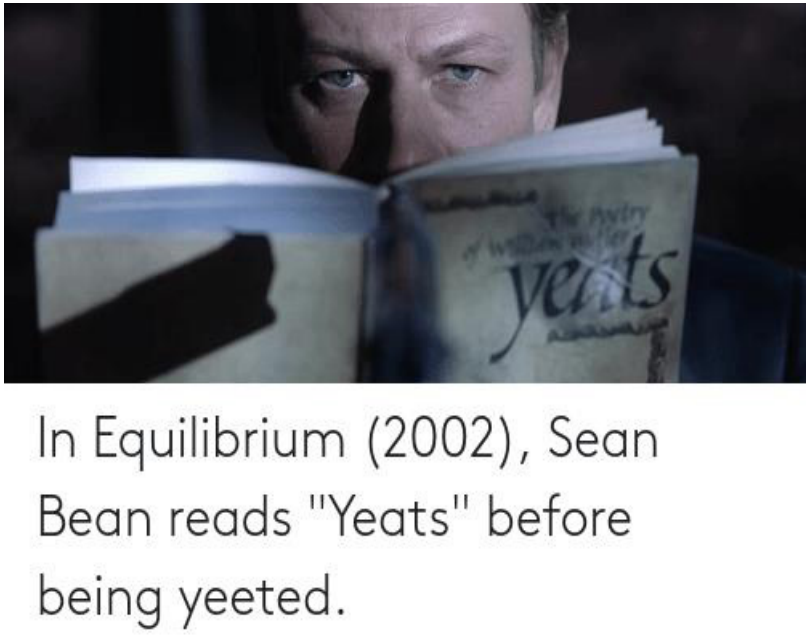

Figure 1.24: Bean gets yeeted.

Conclusion

In the two decades that have passed since Cullingford's 2001 essay on Yeats in popular culture, the internet has so transformed that same culture, that it is perhaps no longer the case that "theorists of postmodern culture have somewhat exaggerated the demise of the Author, the dispersal of the canon and the abandonment of 'truth, meaning and history."[46] Indeed, Alan Kirby's view of digimodernism foresees the radical redefinition of textual functional categories such as reader, author, and viewer. Today, digimodernist texts are commonly anonymously or socially cocreated, which frequently leaves intertextual connections unaccredited and disconnected. As for "truth, meaning, and history" in popular culture, it, too, appears multiplied to the extent that no single version thereof prevails. This is not to say that all references to Yeats in contemporary popular culture are empty and meaningless, but that the digimodernist texts created by internet meme culture, in particular, tend to employ the existing influence of well-established messages without cognizance of their origins.

The examples highlighted in this essay illustrate how references to Yeats in internet meme culture are most often unconnected to the poet and his work. In many ways, digimodernist allusions to Yeats are not allusions to Yeats at all but to the fame associated with his name or quotations from his poetry. This is apparent from internet meme references to famous lines from "The Second Coming." It is its bestseller status that lends the poem to political dichotomies and internet bots. The same is true of Yeats's name. It is because of its fame that the name became entangled with similar-sounding terms, which in turn, prompted such image macros as William Butler Yeets with laser eyes, a digimodernist allusion far removed from the historical Yeats. Digimodernist allusions to Yeats certainly show no nostalgia for the real thing, in the way that cinematic allusions in 2001 had done, and continue to employ Yeats's lines, images, and name as digital templates. In extreme cases, as with the reoccurrence of Yeats alongside Garfield, unattributed lines from "The Second Coming" may become known for their use as an internet meme element and not for their occurrence in Yeats's poem. This type of decline in the correlation between Yeats and his words, as a product of the workings of the internet, does pose an uncertain future for Yeats online.

Endnotes

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8 Higgins, *Popular Culture*, 410.
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10 Kirby, *Digimodernism*, 53.
11 Kirby, *Digimodernism*, 1.
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41 Consider, for instance, the following Twitter photo response depicting another Garfield figurine quoting "The Second Coming." It is likely an imitation of the previous user who pasted Yeats's lines over the original zodiac description on the figurine and submitted it to ShitpostBot 5000. While not an image macro per se, the appearance of the figurine (along with Yeats's unattributed lines) in a photo response illustrates how the image is succeeding as spreadable media and, if it continues to do so, may become an internet meme in itself.

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