

Yeats's Digital Identity: Q&A with Web Editor Neil Mann

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Abstract

This interview with Dr. Neil Mann provides insight into his involvement with digital humanities and his interest in using experimental hypertext-like format to leverage its communicative possibilities. Dr. Mann, author and web-manager of <YeatsVision.com>, reveals why he was drawn to work on W.B. Yeats's *opus*, with a particular attention to *A Vision*. He discusses his experience with approaching Yeats in the digital environment of a website, including how he first structured the site and its current possibilities of development, as well as the content organisation and cross-references. Dr. Mann also speaks about the various issues concerning digital scholarly communication, from work-in-progress models, through copyright and creative commons matters, to digital identity concepts.

Keywords: W.B. Yeats, *A Vision*, e-Interview, Digital Humanities, e-Literature

A keen advocate of the potential of Digital Humanities and an expert on the Hermetic tradition in English literature, Neil Mann first became interested in William Butler Yeats while a student at Oxford University. In his postgraduate work, he explored the late nineteenth-century 'flight from reason' and the conflict of science and religion before returning to Yeats's occultism in his PhD dissertation, *W.B. Yeats's A Vision: Ideas of Man and God*, 2003. He has also researched the meeting of early science and Hermetic thought in the work of Athanasius Kircher, and explored the strange connections between Kircher and Yeats¹. In 2003, after gaining his doctorate, he created a website dedicated to Yeats's *A Vision* (<<http://www.YeatsVision.com/index.html>>) and he has recently started a blog (<<http://YeatsVision.blogspot.com/>>). 2012 has also seen the publication of *Yeats's "A Vision": Explications and Contexts* (Clemson University Digital Press), which he edited with Matthew Gibson and Claire Nally. This work is printed in conventional paper form and is also freely available for download from the web (<<http://www.clemson.edu/caah/cedp/cudp/pubs/vision/index.html>>).

As a web-author and Yeats scholar, Neil seemed to me the ideal candidate for the following Q&A on his digital, web-based analysis of William Butler Yeats's esoteric and occult poetry and vision. Using a traditional pdf format, the interview structure is intended to give hints as to further possible investigations and interpretations deepened, or even suggested, by the interviewer as well as by the interviewee. Besides trying to mirror the linking structure of hypertexts, it is hoped that this model can enable a sort of circular communication between the interviewer and the interviewee, leaving both of them free to draw on the open windows that respectively precede or follow each question and answer.

This 'open' and dynamic pattern published in the second issue of the journal «Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies», on an open journal system (OJS) platform, is intended to focus on Neil Mann's translation of his long-standing literary studies on Yeats's poetics and poetry into his website, licensed within a Creative Commons Public License (<www.ccpl.com>). Neil Mann's website on Yeats's *A Vision* is a comprehensive digital resource whose current version was launched in 2003. Unlike other sites on Yeats, Mann's website does not aim to give versions of Yeats's works, but rather to offer an in-depth analysis of a single work, *A Vision*², its ramifications and its complex backgrounds in literature, fiction, thought, and history. It starts from Yeats's esoteric and occult works and exploits the web's editorial, hypertextual and visual opportunities. To that end, the site also contains many links to other critical resources available on the web, as well as to Yeats's online poetry. One of the major features of the site is its aim at a form of inclusiveness on the subject and attempt to cover the themes of the System arising from the two versions of *A Vision* as well as Yeats's main esoteric *topoi*. In Neil Mann's opinion, the open-ended nature of links and the progressive organization of web-pages will take readers and users as far as they wish into the complexities of the Yeats's *schema*.

The main landing page gives an overall overview of the website objectives and features, but quickly drives its users on to a Contents page where the main topics are listed, each one leading to its related page. For the common reader, «each page starts with a general view and then moves on to more involved issues in the course of the treatment, again as far as is possible, so that readers who do not want so much depth can read the first few screens, while those who want more detail can go further» (<<http://www.YeatsVision.com/Yeats.html>>). An alternative to browsing the headings on the contents page is provided by the site map, which is conceived as an actual visual map giving an overall schematic layout to the ideas, supplemented by search engines. Users are provided with a great wealth of material, along with plenty of analysis, images, tables, diagrams and quotations. Critical works quoted within each page link back to the extensive bibliographical section of the site, which contains, besides Yeats's opus, scholarly treatises and the books within

the poet's own library that are relevant, as well as a collection of all the critical reviews of this work in both its versions, probably the only of Yeats's works for which such a resource is available. The map is admirably detailed and helpful in understanding the categorization of its contents. Technical documentation is also provided on the landing page, addressing possible problems created by web browsers and with instructions about how to overcome them.

Q: Neil, I would like to deal with your double-faced research and interest. Usually PhD dissertations and scholarly research tout court take the form of electronic or paper volumes, published online under copyright or open access licenses, and eventually printed and distributed through the common channels of distribution at very high costs. The traditional publishing model is currently very debated as to copyright restrictions (i.e. authors have to pass their rights to publishing houses), to author-pays model (authors have to pay huge sums of money to have their works published), to the new open access possibilities (where online scholarly communication must be freely accessed by users), as well as to its obvious 'static behaviour'. You chose neither traditional publishing nor online publishing. Why did you decide to let your studies flow into the atypical pattern of a website? Is there a relationship between your scientific research and your technological, computer-based competencies?

*A: In 2002 I finished my dissertation. This coincided with a move to a new country where it was difficult to find work at the beginning and I was still in many ways based in London. A Visiting Research Fellowship at the Institute of English Studies at London University School of Advanced Studies gave me access to the libraries there, when I was able to visit, as I wanted to round out the research that I had had to limit for the dissertation because of length. The Institute was at that stage exploring possibilities on the web, with work on John Masfield and Fiona MacLeod/William Sharp being made available on-line, and I talked with the director of the Institute, Warwick Gould, about what might be possible with Yeats and in particular my area of research. At the time, I was enthused by the non-linear possibilities of hypertext and how these were particularly appropriate for a web-like symbol system such as the one at the heart of the construct behind *A Vision*. I was fairly confident with computers, so looked into web-page construction and taught myself HTML from a couple of websites, and started to build web pages, using material from the thesis, material that I had had to cut from the thesis, and new research into aspects that I had deliberately put to one side. I wanted to retain control of correction and updating, so in the end I decided to create my own website rather than relying on the university pages. This has had its downsides as well, which I have recognized more with hindsight, as it is cost me quite a lot of money over the years to maintain the site and*

also London University imprimatur might have helped to reassure some users about the work quality and credentials. But at the beginning, in particular, it was actually very exciting getting the pages up and making them available, seeing people coming to them, seeing them emerge on search engines and getting feedback from other people. I was particularly grateful for the feedback I got from Colin McDowell in Australia, a man whose work on *A Vision* I had followed and respected for many years, and he continues to be very positive in his attitude to the web-project. Over the years I have had many others comment on things from minor details and typos to conceptual input and suggestions, and I have also been flattered to learn that many professors recommend it to their students as a resource.

Electronic books, articles and journals *do* remain mere translations of their paper counterparts if one is not aware of the technology which may be employed when putting these texts online. [...] one can simply transcribe a manuscript and publish the transcript online, or produce a list of contents of an archive and post it on a website. To provide the latter with a search engine (such as that of the National Archives – <www.nationalarchives.gov.uk>) or create a multimedia hypertext (viz, those presented on *Romantic Circles* <www.rc.umd.edu>) is quite another thing. This kind of publication can have a momentous effect on both scholarly communication (being fully searchable) and on literary content: think of what a different experience it can be to read Rossetti's or Blake's poems on their own and to have both the picture which is related to (or is even meant to accompany) them on your screen; and this, while being able to move between various versions of the same poem. One has just to see what the Rossetti Archive (<www.rossettiarchive.org>) and the Blake Archive (<www.blakearchive.org>) can do.³

Q: From your standpoint, to what extent are new technologies able to enrich traditional research in the Humanities? And, what difference does it make, as Marilyn Deegan and Kathryn Sutherland put it, «to shift the locus of our literate culture from page to screen»⁴?

A: I do not think that we are shifting the locus to the screen, at least not entirely – the screen is one of the many areas where we experience literature and find ideas now, but the primary text is still more often than not on paper. However, the screen is certainly often the first place that we encounter both texts and information or ideas about that text. This is because the screen comes into its own in search, as well as in access to unique or limited resources.

Internet search is probably the single greatest change – and benefit – that has come since I first started research, enabling you to look up a quotation, find what resources are available on a particular topic, and to explore areas that are of potential interest. If I am reading a thesis or an essay and I want

to check a quotation, whether for accuracy or context, I can usually find it in seconds, at worst minutes. If I come across a reference to something that interests me or I am groping for something I half remember, the first place I go is a search engine. It is by no means infallible or complete and there is a danger of losing sight of material that is not available there yet or that has been badly digitized – a lot of OCR of texts is still poor, so though the text may be there, it is not entirely findable as only half the words are recognizable. But the riches opened up by the many sources included in Archive.org or Hathi, or that individual libraries now make available, are wonderful. I am still in awe of the Gallica project by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and have consulted seventeenth-century books held in libraries in Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic, as well as Italy and Spain. Increasingly also many manuscript materials are becoming available in digital form.

The big problem remains copyright and the nature of intellectual property, and I see the various sides of the issue very clearly, though as yet no clear solutions or answers. There are things I would like to have included on my own site but have not put up because of copyright – and it is one of the reasons, for instance, why there are very few photographs of Yeats himself on the site.

Q: What do you mean when you claim that you «see the various sides of the [copyright] issue very clearly, though as yet no clear solutions or answers»? In your opinion, what kind of «solutions or answers» should be envisaged as for Yeats? In 2009 the greatest part of Yeats's works were freed from copyright having elapsed 70 years from Yeats's death. To what extent might this occurrence open towards those solutions or answers you are referring to?

A: You are talking about Europe, and I currently live in the United States – the copyright position is rather different here. For instance, here the public domain only applies to Yeats's works prior to 1923, which clearly has a significant effect on those of us dealing with the later works, including *A Vision*, which first came out in 1925. But this is one of the problems: the web is global and these laws are either national or confined to defined international communities such as the European Union.

Intellectual property is important, and writers and artists have a right to protection of their property. The question is how long after their death artists' property should last. It is reasonable that Yeats's widow should have benefited from his works, of course, and his children too, what about his grandchildren? Apparently Sonny Bono, an original sponsor of the move, wanted indefinite copyright (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copyright_Term_Extension_Act>), turning intellectual property into a form of perpetual entail. Custom does not really endorse this. It is a question about legacy and afterlife, surprisingly akin to a question about the soul afterlife that Yeats considered: when does a spirit lose the identity of its former life?

«Indian Buddhists cease to offer sacrifice for a particular dead person after three generations, for after that time he must, they believe, have found a new body. A typical series of lives described by my instructors suggest that as an average limit, but in some cases rebirth comes very soon» (*A Vision B*, 236). If we take three generations as 75 years, then the European copyright limit is probably more or less correct. And of course it is 70 years in the US too, until you reach that magic cut-off date, while unpublished material is still in copyright even in Europe, of course. But the Yeats Estate has been so incredibly generous and public-spirited over the years that it would be hard to grudge the heirs what remains of the copyright.

On the other side, I would like to see relatively free access to ideas and books, within the bounds of fair usage – the original position of the Google Books project, I think, more or less. If everyone were reasonable about fair use and followed guidelines such as those formulated in Creative Commons, there would not really be any problem. But, of course, plenty of people want to get round such guidelines and move into a form of piracy. Piracy of intellectual production was of course rampant until the twentieth century really – everyone from Shakespeare to Dickens was pirated. The moves by authors and creators to control and just reward for their work was hard-won, with the Berne Convention coming in 1886 – though the United States did not sign it until more than a century later. If I write a book, create a song or a movie, I have the right to see how it is used and to some reward for it, and those of us who want the artist to be able to live and continue producing work have to accept some form of market for these works, unless we envisage some form of return to the days of rich patrons sponsoring a Ficino or a Mozart, which nowadays tends to mean the state, or public projects, and these only work so far.

As for Yeats's leaving copyright for those in Europe, it does make access to his works ever more straightforward and potentially simple, but there are already plenty of sloppily put together texts out there, so even here we need to be a little circumspect. As always, it is the job of educators to help people to discriminate good material from bad.

This site is a work in progress, and the content is very gradually expanding, not least in response to readers' comments and suggestions. There may be some links to pages that are projected but not yet completed, and the site-map gives a picture of the current and projected shape of the site. Any comment is welcome. (Neil Mann, <<http://www.yeatvision.com/>>)

Q: Your website is an important avenue for Yeats scholars to explore his opus, symbols, and visions. Would you define it as an attempt to disseminate scholarly communication and, in particular, Yeats's opus through the web or

would you also view it as a somewhat new literary way to monetize through clicks and ads, or is it yet ultimately about getting new subscribers? Businesswise, what is the goal of your website?

A: For better or worse, scholarly material has never been there to bring its authors monetary gain, so that is less a consideration and is the reason, for instance, why our new book is available free online. However, at the same time publishing houses need to protect their revenue, otherwise they will stop publishing this kind of writing. Traditionally the presses have been one of the elements we have used to judge the likely quality of an academic book or article, knowing that a reputable publishing house will not endorse inferior quality work, but if there is no profit for the press, then they are possibly going to abdicate from that role. The universities may be able to come in and assume some of that responsibility, but it is a problem of the web – there is a lot of bad material as well as good, and one of the main jobs of educators nowadays is to teach discrimination and methods of verifying the value and authority of material on the web.

With my own website, I hope that the quality speaks for itself and that gradually the links and the endorsement that they imply – both explicitly perhaps or as part of the various algorithms such as Google's – will also give some further reassurance to users, but I also realize that it lacks any clear imprimatur from a press or university. Another factor that we tend to trust is the biography attached to the creator, and I have tended to keep that to a minimum, through natural reluctance. I have had a couple of professors writing to me at the e-mail I provide to check on my credentials before they feel able to recommend me to their students, and I quite understand that.

I certainly do not expect to make any money from the site, though I have recently accepted some minor advertising on a number of pages just to help me defray some of the costs of maintaining the website. At least one person has got back to me and said that he hates it and that it would be better to solicit donations, but for the moment there is a commitment and it seemed a permissible evil.

So to return to the question: it is definitely an attempt to disseminate scholarly communication rather than a desire for more subscribers or monetized clicks. Obviously I follow the site statistics keenly and consider how to adapt and improve the site in light of this. For instance, quite a lot of people come directly to the page on *The Second Coming* or the one on Blake's *The Mental Traveller*, so it is important that those pages can stand alone and lead in to other pages, rather than requiring the reader to go back. I think that the one on *The Second Coming* is largely satisfactory in that respect, but that the one on *The Mental Traveller* needs more work. At the time I made it, it was a supplementary extra and I did not realize how popular it would be.

Q: This is definitely an interesting point. Concerning the disposition of the topics within the site map, it is worth noticing a three-circle organisation of the contents you provide, each of which is in turn connected with one or several other topics, the greatest part of them being eventually gathered within a square frame. I suppose the circular or radial pattern you provided depends on the importance of the topics you intended to focus attention on when you started the project: the most relevant appear in the heart of the site-map, while the others are more or less marginal. The flexibility of a website certainly allows you to insert new topics in any level of the structure you created. Can you trace the development of your site and explain its technological structure and work in progress model? Which are the pages you are currently projecting?

A: I planned the site quite carefully in terms of topics and areas, trying to keep the material covered to a reasonable length and planning the links that would be included in the text that was already written or as I wrote the new material. I think I do have a relatively visual way of thinking and the site-map that appears is a simplified version of the kind of diagrams that I drew for myself when I was constructing the site. I decided that my site map would be a good deal more ‘mappy’ than the majority of those that I had seen, though I also include the more conventional lists of pages in other options. I hope that the structure is relatively clear – with the idea of the first ellipse being the major areas covered by *A Vision*, with the second ellipse being slightly more specific, often technical areas, and then the third ellipse giving further detail and background, with the connecting lines used to indicate important interrelations – a visual and very basic indication of a conceptual link, and a kind of large-scale hyperlink.

Effectively I put the website together over the year of 2002-2003, hand-coding from scratch, and it is showing its age a little now, just from the design point of view. Although my priority has always been the content, I hope to find the time to do some work to give it a slightly more polished and up-to-date look. When I first put it up, it was probably about ten or twenty major pages, and then I carried on adding to it, usually two or three pages a week. Quite a bit of the text had already been written, but it needed to be adapted and honed to the requirements of the site. After a while, of course, that slowed down, and I went back to improve or add to pages that I had left slightly unfinished. Increasingly, I realized that I could not or should not change too much if I wanted the site to be treated with the respect that would be accorded to a book or other paper-based resource. Any changes would need to be documented at least, so that someone who referred to the site could be assured that their reference would remain there. In fact, I have now largely confined my changes to correcting errors – fortunately fairly few – and expanding without removing earlier material.

If I were remaking it now, I would probably use quite a bit less colour than I did – it seemed a good idea to make it clear when a link took you to a new page and to use colour creatively, but it now looks rather gaudy and over the years I have toned the palette down a little. As people's computer screens have become bigger and sharper, there is an increasingly large amount of text on the screen and it probably needs a little more visual discipline – I have always wanted to leave it to the viewer to choose how to view the pages, but I hear quite a few people telling me that they really do not know how to change what they see so easily and that it is probably better for the web-creator to dictate a little more. I am working on other web-based projects professionally, and seeing how some of these sites have recently been redesigned has let me see some of the huge advances and what is now possible in terms of design.

One of this website strengths, I am told, is how it illustrates and visualizes the material. When I was first creating it, I particularly enjoyed finding visual material to relieve the expanse of type of a largely text-based site and I also relished the freedom to construct diagrams and aids for the site. Quite a lot of the diagrams are significantly extrapolated from the Yeats's original formulations. It seems likely that the more visually minded one was George Yeats rather than her husband, so, though the diagrams in *A Vision* are important, there should probably be more of them. It is not helpful for Yeats to write about things going from left to right when he is talking about a circle and failing to clarify whether it goes under or above the centre – whether it is clockwise or anti-clockwise, and even the static diagrams are not always clear. What the website allows, through animation and multiple diagrams means that the movements can be made immediately obvious rather than something that requires long study and conjecture.

I think that I probably need to adopt a slightly more designed look, and to streamline the pages. They were designed for smaller screens than most of us use now, and so they can now appear rather cluttered. However, it will be a while before I have time for that, as this kind of reform takes quite a lot of thought, time and effort, so it will continue in its slightly cruder form for a while longer. I am not planning any pages immediately, though I would always be willing to consider one if someone asked, but I do not have so much time these days and I am generally quite a slow worker, going through a lot of drafting.

In today's digital environment the concept of identity is an issue of much greater complexity than it was in the days of the offline world. Our digital identity can exist in many forms and for many different purposes. Its existence on the web becomes a currency that can be unscrupulously traded and abused.⁵

Q: Neil, how do you take a 75-year-old research and bring it into the digital age without compromising its real identity and development? How do you perceive Yeats's digital identity in 2012?

A: It is not 75-year-old research – it is new research on something that was first formulated almost a century ago now, but something that has been to a large extent neglected. George Russell wrote one of the few reviews of the 1925 version of *A Vision* and he noted with foresight: «It is possible it may be discussed feverishly by commentators a century hence, as Blake's prophetic books—so ignored, so unintelligible a hundred years ago—are discussed by many editors of our time».

The Internet is at the forefront of people's journeys of intellectual discovery now, as it is the first place that many of us go nowadays to find out about something. I have tried to offer them something clear and interesting, but then I also want to indicate where this can also lead if the reader wants to follow things a little further. The site may seem a little daunting if all you are searching for is something on *The Second Coming* because it was quoted in an episode of *The Sopranos*, but I do not want to limit the site to popular nuggets. It is there to open up and to invite exploration, not to provide an easy answer.

Q: Do you think that, on the web, Yeats's esoteric and occult symbolism can be manipulated and, to a certain extent, trivialized at the expense of its own true intellectual identity?

A: I think that Yeats's digital identity is robustly healthy still, and that his words are very much alive, but that our culture can trivialize most things. Maybe Kant and Wittgenstein escape, but very few others. The important thing is to recognize that the web is a medium for communicating information and knowledge and for those who love our culture to keep putting quality material in. For instance, the exhibition on W. B. Yeats at the National Library of Ireland in Dublin was a superb piece of visual presentation of something that is hard to make into an exhibition: poetry. For the expert on Yeats, it gave real concrete expression to so much – Sato's sword and the carved lapis lazuli are both symbol and reality, as is the tower, of course – and to the person who had heard a few poems in school it provided a wealth of possible avenues for further exploration, as well as life lived in a key part of Irish history. Yet, in the end, probably many more people will have seen the virtual exhibition on the web than were able to visit it physically, while those who did visit will find so many things that they would not have had time to follow up in the exhibition. The interactive elements are superb, as is the visual quality, the captions and the whole conception – so that the virtual exhibition extends and expands the physical.

I had not taken up these subjects wilfully, nor through love of strangeness, nor love of excitement, nor because I found myself in some experimental circle, but because unaccountable things had happened even in my childhood, and because an ungovernable craving. When supernatural events begin, a man first doubts his own testimony, but when they repeat themselves again and again, he doubts all human testimony. (W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, CW3, 211)

This web site is dedicated to the work of the Irish poet W.B. Yeats (1865-1939), specifically to the strange, esoteric system which he and his wife, George, created, and which he expounded in *A Vision*. It is intended primarily for students of this work, and also for those who are interested in the intellectual and symbolic background to his later poetry and prose. (Neil Mann, <<http://www.yeatvision.com/>>)

One has not, perhaps, the right to laugh at Yeats for his mystical beliefs—for I believe it could be shown that some degree of belief in magic is almost universal—but neither ought one to write such things off as mere unimportant eccentricities.
(G. Orwell, *W.B. Yeats*, 189)

Q: Neil, you decided to focus on Yeats early in your career and were mostly fascinated by his occult system. Can you trace the main steps of this interest and try to explain the typical mood of Yeats's generation in blaming him for being magic addicted?

A: I was drawn to Yeats early on for a mix of reasons. As a teenager I had been very interested in astrology, tarot and related subjects, and had a fascination with that symbolic form of thinking. I had also decided to study English Literature for my degree course. Early on I was fascinated by Yeats and by the way in which he used this kind of symbolism and how he made it unashamedly the centre of his work. I was disappointed by *A Vision* at that time, as it did not fit clearly into the astrology and Cabala that I knew and understood, but I read it a little bit at a time and took in some of the ideas. In my final year, I decided to do an optional thesis on *A Vision*, as I had recognized that most people who studied Yeats and wrote about this kind of area really had little understanding of the Golden Dawn, Cabala and astrology – they studied this weird material because they wanted to look at Yeats, not because they were interested in it for its own sake, so they often learnt a bare minimum, enough to understand, but little more.

I think the symbolic approach is just something that certain people are drawn to: a certain way of thinking that is linked to a wide range of other aspects, including the supernatural, whether of conventional spirituality or what are now termed 'alternative' or 'new age' beliefs, including the magical. It exists all the time, but there are periods when it finds greater expression in the *Zeitgeist* or in the collective imagination. Yeats grew up in one of those and

was actually far from atypical of his period. Those who criticized him most were from his parents' generation – John O'Leary, for instance, and his father – or from the younger generation – like T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, or George Orwell. In his own generation, there were of course rationalists on the one hand and those committed to established religion on the other, and both groups disparaged such interests, but the more forceful critics are those who had not been young in the 1880s and 1890s. Yeats, though, certainly took such things further than most. He was an eminently clubbable man, and definitely liked being involved in organizations and societies – for all that he saw himself in *A Vision* as a solitary individualist – many of those were literary and artistic, others political and nationalist, but others included Theosophy and the Golden Dawn.

Magic is one of the more extreme forms of symbolic thinking, since it seeks to influence or manipulate aspects of reality by dealing with things through correspondence, which is usually symbolic. Large parts of experience and life are grouped together under certain headings, linked for instance to planets or the Cabalistic Tree of Life, and there is some flow or real connection, usually seen as a single animating force. Yeats calls it the Great Memory or Imagination, or *Anima Mundi*, the Soul of the World. It places great emphasis on symbol and words: this is no bad belief for a poet, certainly not for one who saw himself as a late Romantic. Even in his later poetry, where there is the clear influence of modernism on his poetic diction and form, he deals with a world where the physical is only part of the total reality.

Yeats did not quite understand the younger generation's desire to depict the Dublin of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom or to place the Fisher King on an urban canal by a gasworks – though of course he has an explanation for it in terms of his own system in *A Vision*. His poetic reality needed the sanction of time: he could write poetry about the moon and swans, also spades and kettles, but not tractors and telephones. It means that there is sometimes a lack of reality about Yeats's world, a lack of contemporary specificity, but also that it is relatively timeless.

I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed; and I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are—

That the borders of our minds are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.

That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.

That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.

(W.B. Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil*, 29)

*Q: Deeply interested in spiritualism, theosophy, and occult systems tout court, Yeats enjoyed the lasting effect of his juvenile occult influences throughout his works. The system at the basis of Yeats's later poetry appears to remain similar to the precepts set forth in *Magic* (1901). Yeats's occult system appears to be totally reproduced in *A Vision*, even though in a partially new 'queer dress' as he was to say of Blake's in *The Works of William Blake*. What, in your opinion, is the most significant development of Yeats's occult system that can be observed in *A Vision A and B*?*

*A: I think he continued to develop his thought and made significant modifications in his world-view, refining and extending his ideas, but he himself wrote, «I am persuaded that our intellects at twenty contain all the truths we shall ever find, but as yet we do not know truths that belong to us from opinions caught up in casual irritation or momentary fantasy. 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» (*Autobiographies*, 189). So Yeats saw himself as trying to discover the truths that he had had all along, winnowing out the chaff from the grain.*

He also noted that he and his fellow students believed «that truth cannot be discovered but may be revealed» and that with the right preparation, revelation would come «at the fitting moment» (*A Vision A*, x). For him, *A Vision* was that revelation and had come at the right moment to the right person. Within its own mythology, the work is created by his and his wife's *Daimons*, in many ways their higher selves, and it certainly shows the hallmarks of much of Yeats's own kind of thought. What was most significant for him was that the system outlined in *A Vision* provided a whole framework for him, within which all his other interest and aspects could be related to each other, and also linked to broader philosophical questions.

A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame; while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or familiar principle, and belonged to fancy and not to imagination: the one is revelation, the other an amusement.

(W.B. Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil*, 176)

There is a form of meditation which permits an image or symbol to generate itself, and the images and symbols so generated build themselves into coherent structures often beautiful and startling. When a young man I made an exhaustive study of this condition in myself and in others, choosing as a rule for the initiatory symbol a name or form associated with the Cabbalistic Sephiroth, or with one of the five traditional elements. Sometimes, though not in my own case, trance intervened and the structure attained a seeming physical solidity [...].

(W.B. Yeats, *Prometheus Unbound*, *Ec&I*, 422)

Q: *As you know, Yeats was deeply concerned with the migration of his symbols from poetry to art (see his covers). Can we assume that with your website you have been able to support this migration from poetry to figurative arts and create a sort of digital iconographic symbolism: from poetry to art, from the paper to the web, from copyright restrictions to open access, etc.?*

A: Yeats was trained as an art student, of course, and had grown up with his artist father and his father's friends, so he had a deep appreciation of the visual arts. He certainly supervised his covers and other artistic elements with some care – but also trusting his artistic collaborators to conceive the actual representation. Various critics have traced the influences of the visual arts on his writing, and I think that there are strong connections. That said, the diagrammatic aspect of *A Vision* seems to derive in the main from George Yeats rather than from her husband, so in extending and increasing the diagrams, I have been following in her footsteps probably more than his. In selecting illustration for the site, I have tried to respect all forms of copyright, but also to give something for the user to spark certain connections and to make the text more memorable. Many people find it easier to remember a concept that is associated with a visual cue, not a symbol, just a prompt or focal point, so it can be helpful to find images to serve this function.

Q: *The 1925 edition of *A Vision* was limited to 600 copies signed by the author. Soon after Yeats embarked on a new revised edition that did not come out before 1937, published by Macmillan. As you rightly observe, the two editions are so different as to be considered two heterogeneous books. On your website, after showing the differences between the two versions on a very helpful table, which I have reproduced above, you maintain that «*A Vision A* was however a very necessary stage in the development of a public version for Yeats himself». Could you explain this assumption?*

A: In certain respects it may seem that *A Vision A* was perhaps premature. If Yeats started revising it almost immediately after publishing it, then it is clear there are some aspects that he felt dissatisfied with. Yet he had been working on the book for nigh on seven years when it finally came out in January 1926 (dated 1925), and I think he needed to feel that there was some hope of finishing it. He called it his «Old Man of the Sea», alluding to Odysseus's struggle with Proteus, who kept changing shape to avoid capture – this work also kept changing shape and he struggled with it mightily. There are drafts before and after that are even more different, but to a large extent in *A Vision A* he had found the form that he wanted to use. Quite a few readers find *A Vision A* more direct and personal, and the fact that the material is slightly less digested may give it some freshness. The revision was largely finished by 1931 – the delay after that was mainly because the publishers were less than enthused by the work.

<i>A Vision A (1925)</i>		<i>A Vision B (1937)</i>	
	pages		pages
Introduction to <i>Vesdagia</i>	ix-xxiii	A Packet for Ezra Pound	3-30
		Rapallo	3-7
		Introduction to 'A Vision'	8-25
		To Ezra Pound	26-30
Introduction by Owen Alberne	xv-xxiii	Stories of Michael Roburaries and His Friends	32-35
		The Phases of the Moon	59-64
What the Caliph Partly Learned	3-117	Book I: The Great Wheel	67-184
Wheel and the Phases of the Moon	3-8		
Dance of the Four Royal Persons	9-11		
I: The Great Wheel	12-37	Part I: The Principal Symbol	67-80
		Part II: Examination of the Wheel	80-104
Twenty-Eight Embodiments	58-117	Part III: The Twenty-Eight Incarnations	105-184
What the Caliph Refused to Learn	121-176	Book II: The Completed Symbol	187-215
Art Geometry or the Gift of Harun Al-Raschid	121-127		
Geometrical Foundation of the Wheel	128-176		
I: Dove or Swan	179-215	Book III: The Soul in Judgment	219-240
	179		
Great Wheel and History	180-215		
I: The Gates of Pluto	219-256	Book IV: The Great Year of the Ancients	243-263
Fool by the Roadside	219		
Great Wheel and from Death to Birth	220-252		
		Book V: Dove or Swan	267-302
		I: Leda	267
		II-V	267-300
		The End of the Cycle	301-302
Souls' Night	233-256	All Souls' Night: An Epilogue	303-305

Neil Mann, <<http://www.yeatsvision.com/Versions.html>>

Q: *Would you speak of the new book you have co-edited with Matthew Gibson and Claire V. Nally, W. B. Yeats's *A Vision*. Explications and Contexts (2012), in terms of a return to a scholarly safe and legitimated side of traditional publishing, or, rather, as an exploration into alternative forms of scholarly publishing?*

A: Both, I suppose. Firstly, this is a collaboration – it is not just me involved, so I do not decide everything and it was important to have a range of contributors, many of whom need to publish in more traditional ways because of their universities' academic requirements. A book is a known quantity – it goes into the Library of Congress and any other libraries that buy it, so it is accessible in other catalogues and forms of referencing too. Secondly, the book is available for free download, so in many ways it is part of a new, hybrid form of publishing, where the paper book gives a physical presence and permanence, while most readers will probably come to it in electronic form, and probably by search. The fact that it is pdf rather than fluid text for an e-reader may place it on the more traditional side, but that is a factor that we are considering. Finally, I do not see any real conflict between the book and the web – they are complementary technologies and I certainly use both, side by side.

Q: *In Everywhere that antinomy of the “One and the Many”: the Foundations of “A Vision”, the introductory essay to the new volume, you maintain that «Yeats's clearest statement of the system foundation comes at the opening of the second book of A Vision B, the Completed Symbol». In what sense does «the Completed Symbol» represent the groundwork of the whole system and why, as you argue, «it is not given the prominence that it may seem to warrant, placed as a supporting comment» (5)?*

A: I was actually referring to a single, particular sentence on the first page of that section: «The whole system is founded upon the belief that the ultimate reality, symbolised as the Sphere, falls in human consciousness . . . into a series of antinomies» (AVB 187). This is the system metaphysical foundation, which Yeats explores relatively little. Yet if you look at the context Yeats is dealing with something quite different, the *Principles*, and this statement is put in almost as an aside, «a supporting comment». I think it should have been given a lot more prominence, and that Yeats should probably have realized that his readers would like a little more exposition of the more universal first principles than he actually gives.

Possibly «the Completed Symbol» itself suffers some neglect too, as you suggest, from the fact that most people reach it with some fatigue after the opening sections, only to meet more new definitions, and this time without even the apparently practical elements of the previous book. Most people tend to find the *Principles* too sketchy and that Yeats's approach is dominated by mechanics rather than by concepts. I think that many, understandably, skim this material.

Q: *Neil, if you were asked to create a new website on another work by Yeats, which one would you choose?*

A: *A Vision* is very much a special interest of mine, and I do not think that there is the same need for new material in other areas of Yeats studies – there are so many books on so much already and quite a lot of primary material already too. Again, I think one of the big problems is the US copyright cutting things off at 1923. There were plans a few years back with the National Library of Ireland looking at making some of the Yeats manuscripts accessible online, and that would certainly be a fascinating possibility, but it is something that only the National Library could do.

Another factor is that *A Vision* is not a work of art, and none of Yeats's other works needs explication in the same way or is so convoluted. It is very different when you are dealing with a work of art, where the form and the expression are essential to the work itself – *A Vision* has artistic elements but Yeats never intended the explanation of the system to be taken as art⁶. Having said all that, however, I have long had an interest in the role of the Golden Dawn elemental magic in *The Wind Among the Reeds*. Certain aspects there might lend themselves rather well to the flexibility of the web and the potential for non-linear exploration.

And I am sure it will be another great project!

This interview has been shaped and carried out collaboratively through e-mail communication (March-June 2012). All my gratitude to Neil Mann for his constant interest in my Yeatsian 'web-related' projects and for his relevant and careful comments on the draft of this Q&A.

Notes

¹ These include the essays *George Yeats and Athanasius Kircher*, «Yeats Annual», 16, 2005, pp. 163-193 (<[http://www.yeatsvision.com/Mann.George Yeats and Athanasius Kircher.pdf](http://www.yeatsvision.com/Mann.George%20Yeats%20and%20Athanasius%20Kircher.pdf)>) and *W. B. Yeats and the Vegetable Phoenix*, «Yeats Annual» 17, 2007, pp. 3-35 (<[http://www.yeatsvision.com/Mann.Yeats and Vegetable Phoenix.pdf](http://www.yeatsvision.com/Mann.Yeats%20and%20Vegetable%20Phoenix.pdf)>).

² Henceforth the two editions will be indicated as *A Vision A* (1925) and *A Vision B* (1937).

³ See Arianna Antonielli, *Shaping the New English Literature? An Interview with Web-Author C. Kilian, OA Publisher F. Pinter, and Academic Web-Reader C. M. Bajetta*, «Textus», 22, 2009, pp. 419-420.

⁴ *Transferred Illusions: Digital Technology and the Forms of Print*, Ashgate, Farnham-Burlington 2009, p. 14.

⁵ S. Saxby, *Introductory Note* to C. Sullivan, *Digital Identity*, University of Adelaide Press, Adelaide 2011.

⁶ He wrote to his first publisher, T. Werner Laurie, about the difficulty of dealing with «purely technical portions which cannot have literary value» and thought about putting «these portions into a different kind of type» so that readers «would know when to expect beauty of form, or my attempt at it, and when to expect mere explanation» (11 September 1924), see J.

Kelly (ed.), *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, Oxford UP (Intelex Electronic Edition), Oxford 2002, accession number 4649, held in the W.B. Yeats Collection, in the Special Collections of the Robert W. Woodruff Library at Emory University, Atlanta GA.

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