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TEACHING “PROBLEMATIC” YEATS: RELEVANCE WITHOUT RECUPERATION

Carrie J. Preston

In the era of #MeToo and #SayHerName, internet “callout culture,”¹ Trumpism, Brexit, and an unprecedented global crisis of forced displacement—all abundantly represented in various forms of media—many college students are endlessly tuned-in to the most recent culture wars. Why and how do we teach W. B. Yeats today? I studied Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan” (1924) in college as a poem about myth, centered on an epistemological question: “Did she put on his knowledge with his power[...]?” My students today consider it a “rape poem.” We celebrate the centennial of Yeats’s even-more-famous “The Second Coming” (1919), a poem I studied as a prophetic revision of the Christian apocalypse for the post-World War I moment. My current students worry about Yeats being sacrilegious and exemplifying cultural appropriation with his use of stereotypical imagery of the Middle East. Did I even recognize that the poem was set in the Middle East when I was in college? I have long acknowledged that my students teach me as much as I teach them, and that literature’s power and relevance become evident as it impacts subsequent generations in different ways.

In this essay, I encourage scholars and teachers of Yeats to look anew at those works that are relevant to contemporary challenges in ways that strike many as *problematic* (a word my students and I overuse, but which I nonetheless embrace). The problematic category includes some of Yeats’s most famous and frequently taught poems, including “Leda and the Swan” and “The Second Coming.” Both can help us engage with students about contemporary concerns, particularly sexual misconduct, cultural appropriation, and migration. Yeats’s poems offer opportunities for nuanced and complex conversations that recognize many of our current challenges have a relevant history. Such conversations are all too absent from callout culture, and are not always encouraged by more so-called “politically correct” literary works. Our classroom conversations will be more productive if we work to suppress, to a certain extent, our recuperative strategies and tendencies. That is, we should not focus on excusing (“we can’t expect Yeats to adhere to our versions of political correctness”), historicizing (“it was a different time”), or sanitizing (“let’s look for underlying subversive currents”) Yeats. While such critical approaches are crucial for some analytical projects, they can feel disingenuous to students, and they effectively reduce the complexity of the classroom conversations about Yeats’s relevance to the contemporary challenges that are of utmost concern to our students.

LEDA AND THE #METOO MOVEMENT

Because of its vast historical vision and agonizing pantomime of passion and conflict, “Leda and the Swan” can justifiably be considered the greatest poem of the twentieth century.

—Camille Paglia, *Break Blow Burn* (2005)²

Camille Paglia’s excellent reading of “Leda and the Swan” was published before President Barak Obama’s administration provided guidance to universities regarding their enhanced Title IX responsibilities to fight sexual misconduct in a 2011 “Dear Colleague” memo.³ When those guidelines were rescinded in 2017 by President Donald Trump’s controversial Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos, protests from students erupted across the United States, especially on campuses wracked by high-profile sexual assault cases, including Michigan State University, Yale University, and Baylor University, among others. DeVos has been sued by Equal Rights Advocates and other groups working on behalf of American students. Paglia’s claim that “Leda and the Swan” is the “greatest poem of the twentieth century” was also published before the #MeToo movement was sparked in 2017 by a tweet from American actress Alyssa Milano. Just twenty-four hours later, over 500,000 had tweeted “me too” to indicate they had been sexually harassed or assaulted; in the following year, the hashtag was used 18 million times, while a backlash against the movement also surfaced.⁴ Discussing Yeats’s highly erotic and sensual description of the rape of Leda by Zeus in the guise of a swan provokes some different questions in the #MeToo era: Is it “problematic” to consider a poem about a rape the “greatest” of its century? What standards of greatness are we applying? What are the erotic and gendered implications of the poem? Are we prepared to answer students’ questions about why we are teaching “Leda and the Swan” when it might make some of our students uncomfortable or even be “triggering” to survivors of sexual assault?

I believe that teachers and scholars of Yeats can discuss these difficult questions openly with students, and that people might arrive at different answers. While the particular answer is less important than the process of discussion, my students are not generally satisfied by the logic that “Yeats is famous; the poem is famous; you need to know it if you wish to be a cultured, literate person, English major, Modernist, etc.” A prevalent but easily disputed set of claims, this line of thinking does a disservice to the impact of humanistic inquiry; it fails to address the biases inherent in standards of “famous,” “cultured,” and “literate” as well as the presumptions underlying what any literate person “needs to know”—which has changed dramatically over time and is not consistent across contemporary cultures.

My answer to the question of why we study “Leda and the Swan” is that it can help us explore the problematic sexual politics of our time, including rape culture, as well as the role of myth and biased standards of greatness in creating those politics. I tell my students early in the semester that I believe learning is not, and should not, always be easy or comfortable, and that we need to have very uncomfortable conversations about topics such as rape if we wish to change our culture. In classroom conversation, I work to prepare students to read and discuss challenging texts, some of which should make them uncomfortable, and I explain why I do not include “trigger warnings” on my syllabi. Those campaigning for trigger warnings in higher education have suggested that students should not be held responsible for engaging with course materials they might find troubling or problematic, particularly representations of sexual violence. I believe that approach, however well-intentioned, actually contributes to the tendency to avoid confronting the huge problem of rape culture on college campuses. The term trigger warning, as it is used and debated in higher education, implies that professors could anticipate “triggering” content for every student, despite the diversity of college populations. Triggers are defined in behavioral health literature as “any sensory reminder of the traumatic event: a noise, smell, temperature, other physical sensation, or visual scene.”⁵ Highly individualized and specific to any traumatic experience, triggering stimuli are not often correlated to the *content* of a discussion or reading. Mental health professionals have suggested that the goal of healing is not advanced when survivors avoid conversations related to trauma, and studies have found that trigger warnings do not alleviate student discomfort.⁶ Critics also point out that demands for trigger warnings focus on representations of rape and sexual misconduct but ignore other traumas, especially those attending race, poverty, and ethnicity or the damage done when the experiences of minorities are systematically avoided in classrooms.⁷

When I discuss “Leda and the Swan” with students in the #MeToo era, I begin by acknowledging that the poem is a literary representation of a mythic rape. I emphasize aspects of the poem that do not adhere to contemporary standards for discussing sexual assault, including the principle that Leda, as a survivor, should be represented with dignity and without complicity. I also share with students my impulse toward recuperative readings (probably a professional liability) and tell them I hope to avoid any simple version of recuperation. At the same time, I ask students to examine the multiple meanings and complexity of even the most “problematic” lines. Many of the images in the first two stanzas of the poem suggest the violence of the attack and the suffering of Leda, alongside the “pantomime of passion and conflict.”⁹ The “sudden blow” in the first line of the poem is an image of violence, a “blow” to Leda’s body, as well as a reference to the blowing air from the “great wings beating still” (*VP*

441, l 1). The “dark webs” that “caressed” Leda’s thighs refer to the webbed feet of the swan but also suggest a web of entrapment. The “nape” or back of her neck is “caught in his bill,” and she is “helpless” (l 3–4). The two questions that compose the second stanza might be read both as rhetorical and literal:

How can those terrified vague fingers push
 The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
 And how can body, laid in that white rush,
 But feel the strange heart beating where it lies? (VP 441, ll 5–8)

The rhetorical reading of the first question implies that she could not have pushed away Zeus in the form of a swan, even if her “fingers” were less “vague” in response to the attack. Similarly, a rhetorical reading would suggest that she could in no way have *avoided feeling* his “strange heart.” If we read the questions literally, they ask if Leda could have avoided the rape or could have avoided feeling the attack. Many survivors of rape question how they might have prevented the assault, and many feel numb or disassociated during and after the trauma. Many also feel confused and even guilty about the complex physical experiences of the trauma, characterized in this poem by references to “that white rush” and “strange heart beating.” Classroom conversations must make space for students to discuss how certain lines of the poem present Leda as complicit (“loosening thighs”) and glorify rape with reference to Zeus’s “feathered glory,” even if professors think that is not the main point of Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan.”

I encourage students to consider the ways the form of the poem troubles any seemingly simplistic celebration of the mythic rape. The true, simple, even mundane rhymes in the first stanza (“still” and “bill”) give way, in the second stanza, to rhymes that are less true (“push” and “rush”). In the third stanza, the rhymed quatrain form breaks down into a sextet with a broken third line, an ABC/DABD rhyme scheme, and a closing off-rhyme in “up” and “drop.” The simplicity of the opening stanza and its rhymes are gone, replaced by broken lines and rhymes, uncertainty before history, and more questions: “Did she put on his knowledge with his power/ Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” (VP 441, ll 13–14). Beyond suggesting that Leda “put on” anything in the moment of assault, the knowledge that she might have gained from Zeus is that the rape “engenders” Leda’s daughter Helen, and through her, the Trojan War that would leave “Agamemnon dead” and destroy Troy. As Yeats’s “No Second Troy” (1912) indicates, one of the Helens he imagined was largely responsible for the devastating war between the Trojans and Greeks, removing blame from Paris, the Trojan prince who took her to Troy, Menelaus, her vengeful husband, or the Greek king Agamemnon, who may have used the flight/abduction of

Helen as an excuse to plunder Troy: “Why, what could she have done, being what she is? / Was there another Troy for her to burn?” (VP 256–57, ll 11–12). “No Second Troy” provides another example of Yeats’s tendency to pair questions, the second one limiting the reading of the first to: “She” (widely believed to refer to Yeats’s beloved Maude Gonne) did what she did because of “what she is,” and she is the kind of woman who burns a kingdom. “Leda and the Swan” offers a very different interpretation of responsibility for (the Trojan) war. Leda was “mastered by the brute blood of the air,” as Zeus is described, and he was “indifferent” both to her terror and to the future devastation his assault “engenders.” The language of “mastery,” in relation to rape, is undeniably problematic. But, in relation to a god as indifferent brute, the language in the later poem emphasizes Zeus’s responsibility, partially through the assault on a mortal woman, for a long chain of suffering.

The reading of “Leda and the Swan” I learned—the one that considers the poem an exploration of the relationship between power, metaphorically represented by sexual power, and knowledge—is not wrong. With that reading in mind, the “rape poem” label could be considered misguided and ahistorical, in that it might appear to ignore the poem’s broader mythic implications as well as the fact that rape has been defined differently throughout history and across cultures. Yet, if we discuss the rape poem framework with our students, as uncomfortable as it might be for all, we can use “Leda and the Swan” to facilitate an important and challenging conversation that may help students recognize how their historical moment and its conceptions of rape influence their reading—as well as the relevance of poetry to their lives. While Yeats’s works will not advance the gender politics many prefer in the #MeToo era—and we cannot expect them to—we can recognize that our gender politics are just as widely contested as they were during Yeats’s time. Yeats’s poems, layered as they are with classical myths and autobiographical details, help us understand the pervasiveness of cultural tropes, like the raped woman who gains knowledge or insight from her powerful rapist, or the beautiful woman who cannot help but cause battles between men.

**“SLOUCHES TOWARD” (INSERT ANY REGION
OF THE GLOBE’S) REFUGEE CRISIS**

“Is Germany Slouching Toward Weimar Again?: No. Today’s immigration problem is much more limited than the social ills of the interwar period.”

—Joseph Joffe, *Wall Street Journal* (Sep. 23, 2018)⁹

One hundred years after Yeats wrote “The Second Coming” (1919), it is one of the most widely-quoted poems in English, so widely quoted that its phrase,

“slouches toward _____,” can apparently be used without attribution in discussions of recent political events.¹⁰ The phrase has characterized the presidency of Donald Trump (“America is slouching toward autocracy”),¹¹ Great Britain’s departure from the European Union (“Slouching Toward Brexit”),¹² and the refugee crisis impacting Europe and beyond (“Slouching Toward Ankara: The EU-Turkey Migration Deal”).¹³ Josef Joffe asked “Is Germany Slouching Toward Weimar Again?” after demonstrators brandished Nazi symbols in protest of the Merkel government’s refugee policies, leaving one dead and many wounded in Chemnitz on August 27, 2018. With a resounding “No,” Joffe pointed to dramatic differences between Weimar Germany in the 1920s and the current strength of the German democracy, which, he claims, “suffers from only one serious ailment: uncontrolled immigration through its porous borders.”¹⁴ Joffe is no friend to the right-wing neo-Nazi demonstrators with signs reading “Refugees Not Welcome,” but he, like many others throughout history, lays all the blame on migrants and refugees. Ironically, by alluding to Yeats’s “The Second Coming” (without attribution), Joffe implicitly connects our current moment to the birth of the doomed Weimar Republic in 1919 (a centennial the world is not celebrating), the year Yeats composed the poem.

Writing in the wake of the First World War, Yeats saw “loosed upon the world,” as he writes, “Mere anarchy” and “The blood-dimmed tide” (*VP* 401–02, *ll* 4–5). The immediate context for “The Second Coming” was the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, which ended the war, imposed punishing sanctions on Germany, and doomed the fledgling Weimar Republic. The Irish War of Independence was ripping apart Yeats’s native Ireland, the Russian Revolution put Lenin in power, and armed conflict raged in Greece, Syria, Turkey, Mexico, Poland, and Afghanistan, among other places. Assigning “The Second Coming” on college syllabi today will not produce calls for trigger warnings and will be less immediately alarming than “Leda and the Swan.” To help students understand the international relevance of the poem, as well as its misinterpretations, I share articles like Joffe’s “Is Germany Slouching Toward Weimar Again?” or most recently, Jeet Heer’s “The Centrists Did Not Hold,” a report on the Democratic primary debates on July 30, 2019 that concluded: “All in all, the debate evoked the reverse of the famous lines from W. B. Yeats’s poem ‘The Second Coming’; this time, the best were full of passionate intensity, while the worst lacked all conviction. The centrists did not hold.”¹⁵

Some of my students describe “The Second Coming” as problematic for reasons that I initially found surprising: specifically, for its representations of Christianity and the Middle East. The poem’s second stanza adapts the promise of the future return of Jesus Christ from the New Testament, particularly the Revelation to John and the Gospels (Matthew 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21:5–26; John 14:25–29). In the book of Revelation, the second coming of Christ will

give rise to a resurrection of the faithful or elect, and inaugurate a millennial Kingdom on earth. After the millennium, there will be full resurrection and last judgment, leading to the creation of a new heaven and Earth and a new Jerusalem. Expectations of an imminent second coming were common in early Christianity and have emerged again during cataclysmic times, such as wars, epidemics, or natural disasters—or 1919, in the view of Yeats. Believing that the city of Jerusalem will be the site of Christ's return and location of his kingdom, Christians have traveled to Palestine so as to be present for the second coming. Whether via Crusades, missions, immigration, or tourism, Christian journeys to Palestine have contributed to the suffering and exploitation of non-Christian, Arab, Muslim, and Jewish populations.

The second stanza of "The Second Coming" draws on this complex of Christian beliefs in the end-of-times, but instead of a Christly figure, Yeats invokes "A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun" (*VP* 401–02, *ll* 14–15). Contrary to the many declarative invocations of "slouching toward [Brexit, autocracy, Ankara, etc.]," the famous final lines of the poem present a question: "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" (*VP* 401–02, *ll* 21–22). Yeats does not give an answer, but the beast is certainly not establishing an earthly kingdom of the righteous and a New Jerusalem. Several of my students have worried that this treatment of biblical material is disrespectful, and offensive to Christians. Yeats's speaker claims to have realized, of the time since the birth of Jesus, "That twenty centuries of stony sleep / Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle..." (*VP* 401, *ll* 19–20). Suggesting that the cradle belongs to Jesus and that Christian time is a "nightmare," or at best, "a stony sleep," Yeats presents a very bleak vision of Christianity that troubles some students—both those who identify as Christian and those who worry that Christians would be offended by this representation and revision of the second coming of Christ.

Similarly, some of my students have been concerned that Yeats commits "cultural appropriation" in his representation of the Middle East. They point to images that portray the region in a negative and stereotypical manner—and that academics might call "orientalist" with reference to Edward Said's famous formulation.¹⁶ Yeats locates his "rough beast" in biblical Palestine/contemporary Israel with a direct reference to Bethlehem—the birthplace of Jesus, near the presumed location of the New Jerusalem. Images such as the "sands of the desert" and "desert birds," along with the "pitiless" sun, present the landscape as deserts, a stereotype of the Middle East belied by the fact that parts of the region feature a mild Mediterranean climate that supports agriculture, particularly the growth of olives, oranges, pomegranates, barley, wheat, and lentils. Jerusalem and Bethlehem are in the Judean Hills, which are cooler than the deserts of the south and the Dead Sea region. The bleak expanse of desert,

“shadows,” “darkness,” and “nightmare,” all suggest a negative representation of the Middle East, and the Sphinx-like “rough beast” can be read as a particularly Orientalist image. Although many cultures have imagined chimeric creatures, Yeats invokes Egypt and the Great Sphinx of Giza for most readers when he describes, “somewhere in sands of the desert / A shape with lion body and the head of a man.” The line might suggest that one place in the vast and complex “Orient” (Palestine) is interchangeable for another (Egypt), a quintessentially problematic and common habit of thought in a field that imagines “the Orient” as a coherent and uniform object of study.

Yeats’s poetry and plays regularly invoke other cultures, from ancient Greece to the Middle and Far East, in ways that seem problematic to students raised to identify and “callout” instances of cultural appropriation and misrepresentation. While I want to affirm my students’ social consciousness and cultural sensitivity (which has advanced hugely since my college years), I also hope to complicate their assumptions, which can sometimes tip from sensitivity to a less productive piety and “gotcha” mentality. I encourage my students to recognize that myths, legends, and other cultural materials are constantly being adapted, translated, and rewritten by artists. Cultures are alive, changing, and incoherent, not static and sacrosanct. Considering “Leda and the Swan” alongside “The Second Coming” allows me to pose some challenging questions that point to the tensions and contradictions in our understanding of cultural appropriation: Why do we seem to be less concerned about Yeats’s appropriation of Greek myth in “Leda and the Swan” than with his invocations of that other Mediterranean country and culture, Palestine, although it is typically considered more Middle Eastern than Mediterranean? Why are many of us concerned that the revision of Christian myth in “The Second Coming” is offensive, even as we want Yeats’s treatment of Greek myth to be more overtly critical of the rape in “Leda and the Swan”? A crucial part of the answer to these questions is that Palestine and the Middle East more generally are the site of devastating conflicts and asymmetrical power relations with deep roots in European imperialism. For many students, the identity positions of authors are relevant to whether or not they have a “right” to represent, much less critique, a culture or religion. Yeats, as a white Anglo-Irish man, was part of the British colonial system that carved up the Middle East, brokered power between countries and non-governmental actors, and took advantage of the colonies’ natural resources and native labor. Yet Yeats was also a member of a colonized population, born into a country that was under British rule and suffered a devastating war for independence, and a civil war that resulted in a partitioned Ireland. While from one perspective Yeats’s European identity would not give him the authority to represent the Middle East, he is an example of how complicated identity politics can be. Born into a Protestant Irish family, Yeats might

be considered to have a “right” to critique Christianity through his revision of the second coming. But Christianity, unlike Greek myth, is a contemporary, widely-practiced religion presented by some, particularly American conservatives, as “under attack” and therefore considered in need of protection. As few people worship the ancient Greek pantheon today, the myth of Zeus and Leda is thought to need no such deference.

Who ultimately “owns” a cultural tradition, and who has the right to adapt it? Are we satisfied with the judgment that only those born into a tradition may use or be inspired by it? This culture-of-birth-determinism poorly accommodates migrants, immigrants, refugees, adoptees, and other mobile and/or displaced persons. That includes a lot of people in our increasingly migratory world, where 70.8 million people have been forcibly displaced by wars and persecution, the highest levels of displacement ever recorded.¹⁷ Yeats’s “The Second Coming” has been hailed as “prophetic” of nearly every crisis and catastrophe since its publication. Paglia claims the poem “has gained in prophetic power with each decade of the twentieth and now twenty-first century, from the rise of fascism and nuclear warfare to the proliferation of international terrorism.”¹⁸ Today, I find “The Second Coming” prophetic in relation to the crisis of forced displacement and the political debates over immigration that are raging around the world.

One way to read “The Second Coming” in relation to the global crisis of forced displacement is to bring in data about the current municipality of Bethlehem, and to set that picture next to the biblical Bethlehem of Christ’s birth and the early-twentieth-century Bethlehem at the time of Yeats’s composition. Throughout history, Bethlehem has been both a refugee town and a site of pilgrimage. Jesus was born in a manger in Bethlehem, according to Luke 2:1, because Mary and Joseph had to travel there to be registered for a census. When Yeats was writing “The Second Coming,” Bethlehem took in Armenians and other minorities who were fleeing genocidal violence at the birth of the state of Turkey—a country which now hosts the world’s largest number of refugees, approximately 3.5 million displaced people.¹⁹

Today, the Bethlehem toward which Yeats’s “rough beast” “slouches” has been described as an “open-air prison” for Palestinians displaced by the creation of the Israeli state.²⁰ Bethlehem has long been the site of an important aquifer that dispenses water to the roughly equal number of Israelis and Palestinians now living in the area. A wall separates Bethlehem from the Israeli settlements surrounding the town, and Palestinian workers wait behind bars at “Checkpoint 300” for passage to jobs on the other side.²¹ There are three refugee camps in the municipality of Bethlehem—Aida, Beit Jibrin, and Dheisheh—that host over 19,000 of the approximately 5.4 million Palestinian refugees registered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).²² Discussing this

data may be considered problematic by students and others who equate attention to Palestinian suffering with anti-Semitism, although the equation is not logical. The controversy provides an opportunity for a challenging classroom discussion about the relationship between protesting institutionalized racism—whether in Israel or the USA—and anti-Semitism or anti-Zionism, terms which also require differentiation and careful definition.

If the second stanza of “The Second Coming” seems to prophesy the suffering of refugees in Bethlehem and around the world, the first stanza describes polarizing political discourse, characteristic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as global debates about immigration and the crisis of forced displacement: “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity” (VP 401, ll 7–8). Those who genuinely want to alleviate the suffering of refugees and migrants “lack conviction” about how to do so, whereas the anti-migration messages are characterized by passion, “intensity,” and often, bigotry. As an example of the latter, I might bring to class discussion the recent “send her back” chant that emerged at a rally for President Trump in North Carolina on July 17, 2019, inspired by Trump’s tweeted claim three days earlier that four congresswomen of color should “go back” to their countries (three were born in the USA, and all are US citizens).²³ Paglia writes of the heated political rhetoric, as described in “The Second Coming,” “neither consensus nor compromise is possible. Public debate shifts to the extremes or is overtaken by violence, which blocks incremental movement toward reciprocity and conciliation.”²⁴ True as this may be for politics, Yeats’s poem does not advocate for moderation or centrist politics with its “rough beast” in the desert and its suggestion that the “nightmare” of modern Christian time is coming to an end. Rather than looking for political or social answers to the troubled historical moment it invokes in the first stanza, “The Second Coming” turns to the language of vision, spiritualism (“*Spiritus Mundi*” means World Spirit), and apocalypse.

While some students might consider the lack of real-world solutions in “The Second Coming” to be a problematic deferral, discussing the refugee crisis can also help them realize the complexity of global challenges and the lack of obvious solutions, or even the necessity of imaginative approaches. Yeats’s images of “mere anarchy” and the “blood-dimmed tide” can be associated with the lack of effective administration and deadly conditions faced by immigrants and refugees. Media provide devastating images of drowned refugees, from the body of Aylan Shenu, a three-year-old Syrian boy, washed up on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey in 2015 to the photo from this past summer of the drowned El Salvadoran father, Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez, and his 23-month-old daughter, Valeria, floating near the bank of the Rio Grande on the US-Mexico border.²⁵ “The ceremony of innocence is drowned.” Using classroom discussions to bring these images and the refugee crisis more generally to a poem

written a hundred years ago, I risk a reading that is presentist and even ahistorical. Yet again, I believe it is possible to discuss with students both the historical context of the poem and its relevance to contemporary readers and events without reducing or recuperating the text.

Just as I acknowledge in class that “Leda and the Swan” can be read as a rape poem, I recognize that teaching “The Second Coming” in relation to the global challenge of forced displacement and alongside images of drowned refugees can make students uncomfortable. I want to be sensitive to the disturbing nature of this material and prepare students to receive it. As with “Leda,” I would not use a so-called trigger warning, partially because, as I mentioned above, research has demonstrated that they do not alleviate student distress. Additionally, trigger warnings have become so closely associated with sexual misconduct that issuing them for the drowning of refugees or other violent images and content confuses students. Works of art that include a murder, suicide, and other violence will only be criticized for not offering a trigger warning about the rape, as if those affected by other forms of violence, say forms associated with race, ethnicity, poverty, and displacement, should be of less concern.²⁶ This is a problematic assumption that clarifies cultural biases and priorities.

Many of Yeats’s works will strike students, and perhaps scholars and teachers of Yeats, as problematic in relation to contemporary social movements like #MeToo, concerns about representation and appropriation of cultures and religions, and global challenges like the crisis of forced displacement. The laudable social consciousness and cultural sensitivity of college students, as well as their version of identity politics, can sometimes make it feel that any choice professors make when constructing a syllabus is potentially problematic: Yeats might appear particularly out of step with our cultural moment as a white, male poet who was famously ambivalent about the Irish War of Independence, spent a good deal of time in London, served as a Senator in Ireland’s first post-colonial government (1922–28) where he eloquently but unsuccessfully battled divorce and censorship bills, and was later drawn to fascism, amongst other political positions that are widely considered problematic today.²⁷ I choose to acknowledge and embrace the problematic Yeats in my classroom, openly discussing why I find works like “Leda and the Swan” and “The Second Coming” relevant to our contemporary moment. These poems help us discuss the historical foundations of systems of gender and geopolitics as well as the contradictions inherent in many of our perspectives today. The problematic, relevant, unrecuperated Yeats generates more questions than answers, calling attention to the many questions in his poems. By teaching the problematic Yeats, we help our students confront the complexity of challenges we can only hope they will, compared to previous generations, address more compassionately and effectively.

NOTES

1. Conor Friedersdor, "The Destructiveness of Call-Out Culture on Campus: Reflections from Undergraduates of the Social Media Era," *The Atlantic*, May 8, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/call-out-culture-is-stressing-out-college-students/524679/>; Julian Vigo, "Call-Out Culture: Technological-Made Intolerance," *Forbes*, Jan. 31, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/julianvigo/2019/01/31/call-out-culture-technological-made-intolerance/#63f6e3947653>.
2. Camille Paglia, *Break Blow Burn* (New York: Pantheon, 2005), 117.
3. Full letter available at <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201104.html>.
4. "Measuring the #MeToo Backlash," *The Economist*, Oct. 20, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2018/10/20/measuring-the-metoo-backlash>.
5. US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Sciences*, Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) series 57 (Rockville, Md.: HHS Publications, 2014), 68.
6. Mevagh Sanson, Deryn Strange, and Maryanne Garry, "Trigger Warnings Do Little to Reduce People's Distress, Research Shows," *Association for Psychological Science*, Mar. 19, 2019, <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/releases/trigger-warnings-distress.html>. Susan P. Robbins, "Sticks and Stones: Trigger Warnings, Microaggressions, and Political Correctness," *Journal of Social Work Education* 52, no. 1 (2016), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10437797.2016.1116850?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.
7. Jack Halberstam writes, "The trigger-happy folks, on the other hand, fail to account for vast discrepancies within and among student bodies, and they mark sexual violence in particular as the most damaging and the most common cause of trauma among students. Both sides ignore the differences between and among students, and all fail to account for the differences that race and class make to experiences with trauma, expectations around protection, and exposure to troubling materials" (539). Halberstam, "Trigger Happy: From Content Warnings to Censorship," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 535–42.
8. Paglia, *Break, Blow, Burn*, 117.
9. Joseph Joffe, "Is Germany Slouching Toward Weimar Again?: No. Today's Immigration Problem is Much More Limited than the Social ills of the Interwar Period," *Wall Street Journal*, September 23, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/is-germany-slouching-toward-weimar-again-1537723883>.
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24. Paglia, *Break, Blow, Burn*, 111.
25. Siobhán O'Grady and Rick Noack, "Photo of Drowned Migrant Child Recalls an Image that Shocked the World in 2015," *The Washington Post*, June 26, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/06/26/photo-drowned-migrant-child-recalls-an-image-that-shocked-world/?utm_term=.e0e0592948ad.
26. Trigger warnings related to, for example, murder, suicide, racial violence, racial microaggressions, or accidental death are rarely demanded, although these forms of violence are also ubiquitous in our culture and have an inordinate impact on people of color. This discrepant treatment of forms of violence is evident in a recent essay by Charlene Smith, which offers strategies for "Staging Sexual Assault Responsibly," HowlRound Theatre Commons, July 10, 2019, <https://howlround.com/staging-sexual-assault-responsibly#block-comments>. Smith discusses her remarkable "feminist version" of Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *The Changeling*, a play from the 1620s in which the noblewoman Beatrice-Joanna hires a man to murder her fiancé after she falls in love with another man. The servant she hires "forces her to pay him with her virginity." Although murder and suicide are devastating forms of violence in the play, the essay does not discuss how to responsibly and ethically stage those scenes; nor does the "note about content" issued for the play warn about murder and suicide: "Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *The Changeling*" Brave Spirits Theatre, Oct. 18–Nov. 18, 2018, <http://www.bravespiritstheatre.com/portfolio/the-changeling/>.

27. For Yeats's Senate speeches, see Donald R. Pearce, "The Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats" (London: Faber and Faber, 1961). Conor Cruise O'Brien in 1965 gave his famous verdict that Yeats was "as near to being a Fascist as the conditions of his country permitted." O'Brien, "Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics of W. B. Yeats," reprinted in O'Brien, *Passion and Cunning: Essays on Nationalism, Terrorism, and Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 8–61. Yeats followed different and conflicting political positions over his lifetime, and these positions do not easily translate into the centrist, liberal, and conservative designations operating today; any discussion of Yeats's politics must be rooted in a careful analysis of a particular text and its specific political moment. See also Peter Liebrechts and Peter van de Kamp, eds., *Tumult of Image: Essays on W. B. Yeats and Politics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995) and Jonathan Allison, *Yeats's Political Identities: Selected Essays* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).