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## Book review of: Noreen Doody. *The Influence of Oscar Wilde on W. B. Yeats*. London, Palgrave, 2018

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# THE OSCHOLARS

## THE CRITIC AS CRITIC



**'After we have discussed some Chambertin and a few ortolans,  
we will pass on to the question of the critic considered in the light of the interpreter'**

Music's Echo

Review by Yann Tholoniati

Noreen Doody: *The Influence of Oscar Wilde on W. B. Yeats: "An Echo of Someone Else's Music"*. Cham, Palgrave, 2018.

Noreen Doody, a former Senior Lecturer at the School of English, Dublin City University, wrote her doctoral thesis on Wilde and Yeats, and *The Influence of Oscar Wilde on W. B. Yeats. "An Echo of Someone Else's Music"* may therefore appear as a synthesis of her thoughts on the matter. The book is organised around three sections: "Influence and Identity", "Mask and Image", and "*Salomé*: Symbolism, Dance and Theories of Being".

The first section starts with the Introduction as chapter 1, which takes up as its title the subtitle of the book, "An Echo of Someone Else's Music" (3). This is a quotation from chapter 2 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Noreen Doody focuses on the various aspects of Wilde (1854-1900)'s influence on the aesthetic preoccupations of his younger Irish fellow (1865-1939). In her introduction, she posits Yeats as a suggestible youth who incurred Wilde's influence, from their first meeting in London in 1888 to his death. Of course, she acknowledges that Wilde is just one among many sources that contributed to Yeats's *oeuvre* (p. 10). She also acknowledges a number of predecessors in the task of assessing the Wildean influences on Yeats, such as Richard Ellman's books on both writers. Of course the final bibliography is a vast one. (What I found a bit odd is that, in addition to the notes, there is a bibliographical section at the end of each chapter, and all the items are referenced again in the final bibliography.) In the introduction / chapter 1, Doody explains her project and the outline of the book. She discusses the notion of "literary influence"

after Harold Bloom's 1973 *The Anxiety of Influence* and its critical aftermath. She passes swiftly through the net of French theory (Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva are mentioned briefly about intertextuality), and there follows my only grudge: the work of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly *Les règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris, 1992), might have been a nice springboard to add another facet to Doody's fascinating study. According to Bourdieu, literary influence is never neutral: from a sociological perspective, an author always *chooses* (albeit unconsciously) to accept or refuse the influence of another author (or other authors). Not only does this choice situate him or her in a literary tradition, it *ipso facto* posits the said author in a sociological network within literature – which is, to put it in very simple terms, the socio-literary version of “you will be judged by the company you keep”. Setting oneself in the wake of Oscar Wilde, rather than, let us say, George Bernard Shaw, has obviously different implications in the way the literati perceive you. In her book, Noreen Doody gathers all the data that could have unearthed those sociological resonances. Coming back to *The Influence of Oscar Wilde on W. B. Yeats*, let me hasten to say that not only does Noreen Doody's book gather a wealth of data contributing to shed light on this particular aspect, but it also has a ring of its own (“an echo of someone else's music”) in its ability to map Wilde's influence on Yeats.

Chapter 2 (“Establishing Influence”) sets the stage and describes how Wilde and Yeats first met and got to know and appreciate each other (1888-1895). The importance of this first period is obviously character-defining, as Yeats confesses in his *Autobiographies*: “My first meeting with Oscar Wilde was an astonishment” (p. 31). The topics that emerge in this first period are Irish history and national identity, religion and poetry – topics which were going to be explored and nuanced at greater length by Yeats, and by Noreen Doody in the next chapter. Chapter 3, “‘A Provincial Like Myself’: Yeats, Wilde, and the Politics of Identity” (p. 63), evokes the part played by London in the revelation of Irish authors. She also astutely describes the strategies of subversion and dissimulation “through which the colonized Irish [...] dealt with the incongruities of a colonial identity” (p. 72), commenting on Wilde and Yeats's interests in “individual identity, racial heritage and historic community” from a postcolonial perspective (p. 86).

In Section II (“Mask and image”), chapter 4, “Metaphysics and the Mask” (1908-1917), delineates Yeats's fascination for the mask as a creative and literary device, and how his “philosophical musings” were “informed by Wilde's ideas on mask” (p. 109). She studies more specifically the case of *The Player Queen*, the various drafts of which testify to a “complex creative engagement with Wilde” (p. 135), an engagement also palpable in Yeats's essay *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, read in connection with Wilde's *De Profundis* (chapter 5, “The Idea Incarnate: Mask and Image (1915-1917)”).

Section III (“*Salomé*: Symbolism, Dance and Theories of Being”) starts by stressing the importance of French symbolism for both writers (chapter 6: “‘Surface and Symbol’: Wilde's *Salomé*, French Symbolism and Yeats (1891-1906)”), before tackling the development of this twofold influence (French and Wildean) on some of Yeats's plays (chapter 7: “Yeats's Creative Use of Wilde's *Salomé* in his Revisions of *The Shadowy Waters*, *On Baile's Strand* and *Deirdre*). Chapter 8 (“‘Drama as Personal as a Lyric’”) studies: “The Centrality of Wilde's Concepts of Dance, Desire

and Image to Yeats's Developing Aesthetic (1916-1921)", as the dance is "perhaps the most effective symbol [Yeats] makes use of to express his metaphysical thought" (p. 241). Dance dramatizes "the nature of desire" (p. 242) and provides Yeats with "a composite image" (p. 253). The last chapter (chapter 9: "'There Must Be Severed Heads': Yeats's Final Transumption of Oscar Wilde (1923-1939)" follows Yeats's subtle negotiation with Wilde's influence as he composes *The King of the Great Clock Tower* and *A Full Moon in March*. The short but pithy conclusion recalls that Wilde certainly was "a rich seam of influence" (p. 309) for Yeats, who was "receptive to Wilde's conceptual alignment of the senses and the spiritual in pursuit of transcendent knowledge" (p. 310). The book concludes with a general bibliography gathering all the references set at the end of each chapter, and a useful index. All in all, Noreen Doody deftly alternates close textual analyses and historical perspective with diplomacy and insight. The book is a wide-ranging exploration of the artistic relationship between two extraordinary Irish writers.



**Yann THOLONIAT** is Professor of British and Irish literature and arts at the University of Lorraine in Metz. He wrote *'Tongue's Imperial Fiat': les polyphonies dans l'œuvre poétique de Robert Browning* (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2009) and he has taught a number of Irish authors (Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, Louis MacNeice, Samuel Beckett and Seamus Heaney), some of whom were the objects of academic talks and publications.



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