

WILDE DISCOVERIES

TRADITIONS, HISTORIES, ARCHIVES

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Published by the University of Toronto Press in association with the
UCLA Center for Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Studies and
the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library

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www.utppublishing.com

Printed in Canada

ISBN 978-1-4426-4644-5



Printed on acid-free, 100% post-consumer recycled paper with vegetable-based inks.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the UCLA Center for Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Studies.

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial assistance to its publishing program of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.



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University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund for its publishing activities.

Wilde's French

WILLIAM A. COHEN

Salomé occupies an indisputable place not only in Oscar Wilde's oeuvre but in the wider history of fin-de-siècle and protomodernist literature as well. Yet one essential feature of the play has received relatively scant critical notice: namely, that it was written in French. When the critic William Archer reflected on the play shortly after its composition, he suggested just how unusual a situation it presents: "I am not aware that any one has ever produced work of the highest artistic excellence in a living language which was not his mother tongue. Here ... Mr. Wilde's talent is unique."¹ The fact that an Irish writer who spent most of his adult life in England wrote a play in French raises a host of questions, both in the abstract and in relation to this particular work. What fantasy does a writer hold about a foreign language? What fantasy of himself does that language facilitate? Who is the subject of a non-native or less-than-fluent utterance? To approach these larger questions about the psychological, philosophical, and political meanings of second-language composition, we must establish some key facts about the case at hand. While existing scholarship has examined at length the French (particularly Parisian) literary and artistic milieu in which Wilde composed the play, the essential question of his degree of competency in speaking, reading, and writing the French language has not been satisfactorily addressed. And while biographical sources have proposed a number of hypotheses to explain why Wilde wrote and published *Salomé* in French, the critical significance of this fact deserves more attention.

This chapter presents documentary evidence that can help to explain Wilde's use of and ideas about French. I propose that French serves for Wilde as an alternative to British and Irish nationality alike and, at the same time, as an alternative to nationality altogether. Because of the

connection, in his mind, between the French language and artistic creation, Wilde understands French as the very language of art; through the use of French, he can conceive of forms of identity and subjectivity organised not around national belonging or linguistic community but instead around aesthetics. He imagines French to be the paradoxical national language that reaches beyond nationality.

To begin, let us consider how Wilde might conditionally be called a French writer. His mother, Jane Francesca Wilde (who wrote under the pen name “Speranza”), although she is best known as an Irish nationalist and collector of Irish folklore, was also a translator of French, and she often brought the family to France for holidays. Wilde learned to speak French as a child and travelled there frequently as an adult. He had several extended stays in Paris, including his honeymoon in 1884. Upon his release from prison in 1897, Wilde went directly to the Continent, never to return to Britain. He died in Paris in 1900, and in 1909 his remains were reinterred in Père Lachaise. Arthur Ransome once called *The Picture of Dorian Gray* “the first French novel to be written in the English language,”² but Wilde really did write *Salomé* in French and in part while living in Paris in 1891.³ In this play, Wilde takes up and develops the New Testament story about the death of Saint John the Baptist. Held prisoner by the tetrarch Herod Antipas, John (or, as Wilde calls him, Iokanaan) is eventually executed when Herod’s stepdaughter Salomé demands the Baptist’s head in exchange for having performed an exotic dance. After Wilde composed the play, Sarah Bernhardt expressed interest in producing and performing in it in London, but the Lord Chamberlain’s office prevented a production from being mounted, citing an ancient prohibition against representing biblical figures on the English stage, and it was not publicly performed in England until 1931.⁴

To approach the question of why this play should be in French, let us recall how English speakers regarded France at the end of the nineteenth century and what it signified to Wilde in particular. In the most general terms, France has to be understood in two separate but overlapping social fields. In the English literary field (at least for avant-garde writers), France was regarded as sophisticated, urbane, and decadent – in short, as an object of desire. The contrast with the reputation of France among what Wilde calls the philistine English public could not be greater: the French, on this view, were degenerate, self-indulgent, and reprehensible – in short, the opposite of all things English. The power of France in the former regard was only enhanced by its disreputability in the latter. Seen from without, France represented an ideal to Anglophone literary

writers and Paris was viewed for many reasons as, in Pascale Casanova's characterisation, the capital of "the world republic of letters." Looking at a range of writers from around the globe, Casanova proposes that Paris occupied this unique position, particularly in the nineteenth century, because it combined democratic political ideals of freedom and liberty with a luxurious refinement of taste in the arts and in fashionable modes of living. She writes that "Paris was therefore at once the intellectual capital of the world, the arbiter of good taste, and (at least in the mythological account that later circulated throughout the entire world) the source of political democracy: an idealized city where artistic freedom could be proclaimed and lived."⁵ This image was to some extent cultivated by French writers, but it was only through its registration among foreigners that the idea took hold.

Wilde thoroughly subscribed – one might say succumbed – to this myth, and he contributed to making it a reality. In addition to seeing Paris as a utopian ideal of artistic freedom ("*la ville artiste*," as he says), Wilde also sought membership in, and helped to generate publicity for, contemporary literary and artistic vogues such as Symbolism, Decadence, and Aestheticism. Part of the appeal of these movements was that they announced themselves as worldwide fraternities of the arts – which, nonetheless, were based in Paris and employed French, the supposedly international language. Consequently, when attempting to fashion himself a literary celebrity in Paris, Wilde portrayed his vocation as a man of letters within a specifically French tradition. In an 1888 letter to W.E. Henley, for example, Wilde says of an article he had written:

[T]o learn how to write English prose I have studied the prose of France. I am charmed that *you* recognise it: that shows I have succeeded. I am also charmed that no one else does: that shows I have succeeded also.
Yes! Flaubert is my master.⁶

While Wilde did not hesitate to criticise English-language writers, he held French novelists and poets – especially Gustave Flaubert, Honoré de Balzac, Charles Baudelaire, and Paul Verlaine – in such high esteem that he found it impossible to fault them.⁷ In 1891, Wilde supplied a capsule history for a journalist who was preparing an article about him for a French paper. He self-consciously inserts himself into a French literary tradition, writing: "Just enter on page one: 'Son père, Sir William Wilde, était archéologue très célèbre et homme de lettres, et du côté de sa mère il est le petit-neveu de l'étrange romancier Maturin, l'ami de Goethe,

de Byron, et de Scott; l'auteur de Melmoth, that strange and wonderful book that so thrilled Balzac and Baudelaire, and was a part of the romantic movement in France in 1830."⁸ Just as the secret to writing English prose is studying the French, so the lineage he claims – at once a genetic and a literary filiation – is both literally and performatively bilingual, as he slides mid-sentence from French to English.

Wilde's infatuation with French life, literature, and language extends to his idea of the nation's literary establishment and its reading public. During the extended critical controversy over ethics and aesthetics that followed the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1890, Wilde expresses this idealised view in a letter printed in the *St. James's Gazette*.

Such an article as you have published really makes one despair of the possibility of any general culture in England. Were I a French author, and my book brought out in Paris, there is not a single literary critic in France, on any paper of high standing, who would think for a moment of criticising it from an ethical standpoint. If he did so, he would stultify himself, not merely in the eyes of all men of letters, but in the eyes of the majority of the public.⁹

This sentiment is echoed by a critic on the other side of the philistine divide who, in calling it "a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French *Décadents*," exemplifies a routine form of fin-de-siècle English Francophobia.¹⁰ While Wilde presents himself as an evangelist for French aesthetics and a French literary tradition, his English audience regards Decadence, Symbolism, and sexual nonconformity as odious French imports.

Having glanced at this cultural milieu, we can consider the evidence that establishes Wilde's degree of competency in spoken and written French. Somewhat confusingly, his contemporaries' characterisations of his French conversation and writing fall along a wide spectrum, which ranges from fluent to clumsy. Some who knew him in Paris found him perfectly at home in French. Henri de Régnier, for instance, recalls a dinner at which Wilde held forth:

De cette conversation et de quelques autres, j'ai gardé un souvenir vif et durable. M. Wilde s'exprimait en français avec une éloquence et un tact peu communs. Sa phrase s'agrémentait d'un tri de mots judicieux ... Sa causerie était toute imaginative. C'était un incomparable conteur d'histoires; il en

savait des milliers qui s'enchaînaient l'une à l'autre. C'était sa façon de tout dire, une hypocrisie figurative de sa pensée.¹¹

Another witness states that he “s’exprimait en français sans le plus léger accent et avec une pureté, une correction déconcertantes.”¹² Prefacing a French letter of Wilde’s that appeared in the *Écho de Paris* in 1891, the editor writes: “M. O. Wilde s’y excuse de ne point parler suffisamment notre langue, on verra du moins qu’il l’écrit en toute élégance.”¹³ And in a review of an English translation of Balzac, Wilde is punctilious, even condescending, in pointing out others’ errors.¹⁴

This picture of the fluent French-speaking Irishman at his ease in Paris is more complicated, however. For others report that Wilde’s French was heavily accented, studied, or unnatural. G.T. Atkinson, for example, who knew Wilde at Oxford, recalls in 1929: “His ability to write ‘Salomé’ in French has often been questioned. I can remember him bringing a Frenchman in to hall dinner and talking French with him all the time. It was rather of the Stratford-ate-Bowe kind, very ‘staccato,’ but there was no doubt of his powers of carrying on a conversation.”¹⁵ William Rothenstein says that he “spoke a rather Ollendorffian French with a strong English accent.”¹⁶ Stuart Merrill, who (along with Adolphe Retté and Pierre Louÿs) was asked by Wilde to supply corrections to the manuscript of *Salomé*, writes: “Il écrivait le français comme il le parlait, c’est-à-dire avec une fantaisie qui, si elle était savoureuse dans la conversation, aurait produit, au théâtre, une déplorable impression.”¹⁷ Finally, and most damagingly, Ernest Raynaud relishes deflating the famed raconteur:

Wilde parlait imparfaitement notre langue. Le mot juste ne lui venait pas toujours qu’il remplaçait soit par le terme anglais, soit par un équivalent français, hasardé au petit bonheur, et dont le choix n’était pas toujours heureux. Ainsi le comique se glissait dans le sérieux de ses discours. Montaigne pressé de s’exprimer disait: «Si le français n’y va pas, que le gascon y aille!» Wilde y employait le nègre. Brouillé avec les genres et la syntaxe, il terminait, un jour, ainsi, l’exposé d’un conte: «A ce moment, la reine, il est mouru!»¹⁸

Observers’ assessments of Wilde’s linguistic abilities are inevitably self-interested and subjective, which makes it difficult to determine his knowledge of French definitively. The vagaries of second-language competency itself mean it is conceivable that both versions are true – that

he was, by turns, capable and risible, stylish and blundering. There are indeed some synthetic accounts, such as that of A.E.W. Mason, who splits the difference between spoken and written competence in his memoir: “*Salomé* was written in French by Wilde, who wrote the language with a classic accuracy but spoke it with an atrocious accent.”¹⁹ Most ingeniously, perhaps, André Gide provides an explanation that makes the blunders seem deliberate: “Il savait admirablement le français, mais feignait de chercher un peu les mots qu’il voulait faire attendre. Il n’avait presque pas d’accent, ou du moins que ce qu’il lui plaisait d’en garder, et qui pouvait donner aux mots un aspect parfois neuf et étrange.”²⁰ A series of fantasies about the French language starts to emerge, such as that it can make the speaker seem debonair and cultivated (qualities that would enhance Wilde’s self-advertised image as prophet of a new aesthetic and epigrammatic master of *causerie*). Yet the same fantasy contains a threat to humiliate and mortify the would-be Francophone who trips up, deflating him by making him appear mentally deficient or childish. With its intolerance of error, French terrorises non-native speakers, promising at once to elevate and to condemn those who attempt to master it.

Yet if the student of French strives against falling into childlike error, Wilde, in writing *Salomé*, cannily makes use of an incomplete linguistic mastery. However agile or inept his real French language skills, *Salomé* reads as the writing of someone whose knowledge of French is less than perfect, and this extrinsic relation to language, as we will see, contributes to the idea of a non-national aesthetic subjectivity. Critics have long noted the primitive quality of the play’s language. In his important early study of Wilde, for example, Ransome writes that “[*Salomé*,] Herod, Herodias and all their entourage, speak like children who have had a French nurse. Their speech is made of short sentences, direct assertions and negations.”²¹ Noting how the play’s Anglicised French makes it sound like naïve babble, Philippe Julian calls *Salomé*

une des plus célèbres et une des plus mauvaises parmi ses œuvres. Il l’écrit en symboliste, langage un peu enfantin, un peu biblique, mis au point par Maeterlinck ... Oscar écrit un français fleuri où les anglicismes sont les bienvenus, car ils donnent une vraie naïveté au babil de *Salomé* et une majesté bizarre au discours d’Hérode. Il faudrait jouer *Salomé* avec l’accent anglais, certains mots prendraient alors tout le relief que souhaitait l’auteur.²²

Julian points to Wilde’s stylistic borrowings from the work of his contemporary, the Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck. So does Frank

Harris, who, although generally unreliable, connects this style to Wilde's infelicity in French:

I regard "Salomé" as a student work, an outcome of Oscar's admiration for Flaubert and his "Herodias," on the one hand, and "Les Sept Princesses," of Maeterlinck on the other. He has borrowed the colour and Oriental cruelty with the banquet-scene from the Frenchman, and from the Fleming the simplicity of language and the haunting effect produced by the repetition of significant phrases ... I feel sure he copied Maeterlinck's simplicity of style because it served to disguise his imperfect knowledge of French and yet this very artlessness adds to the weird effect of the drama.²³

Whether characterised as incompetent posturing, mystical incantation, quasi-biblical intoning, or childlike simplicity – or indeed all of these – the play's style, as so often in Wilde, comprises a pastiche of many different sources and discourses, ranging from the ponderous thunderings of Revelation to banter that resembles dialogue in the Society comedies.

Without addressing its supposed childishness, Wilde himself speaks to the play's distinctively foreign style when discussing it in an interview published in the French newspaper *Le Gaulois*:

«Certes, j'ai certains tours de phrase, certaines expressions que n'emploierait pas un auteur français; mais il est des originalités qui, peut-être, donneront du relief au style. Maeterlinck n'a-t-il pas, lui aussi, des expressions à lui, à lui seul, qui produisent leur effet, l'effet que l'auteur ou l'écrivain veut atteindre?»

«En Angleterre, Rosetti [*sic*], le poète que tout le monde littéraire admire, a des expressions qu'aucun auteur anglais n'oserait employer et qui, cependant, ont à la fois et une force et une grâce particulières qui frappent les Anglais eux-mêmes.»²⁴

Wilde claims this off-angle relation to French as a point of interest and a virtue, productively recuperating a potential liability as a stylistic flourish. Speaking here in French – though for the benefit of both French and English papers – Wilde considers the impression his play will make on French audiences, rather than discussing the relative (though by no means unprecedented) oddity of producing a French play in England.²⁵

So why, then, did Wilde write *Salomé* in French? Critics have variously proposed that it was a strategy for attempting to evade the English censor, that it was intended as a vehicle specifically for Sarah Bernhardt, or

that it formed part of his effort to imitate and ingratiate himself with artists in the French Symbolist movement, especially Stéphane Mallarmé.²⁶ The play belongs to a *fin de siècle* rage for the Salomé story among many artists and writers. Wilde's sources and immediate influences include Joris-Karl Huysmans, who melodramatically describes one of the Salomé paintings by Gustave Moreau in *À Rebours* (1884), as well as Flaubert, Mallarmé, and Maeterlinck, who all wrote versions of the Salomé story. But during the *contretemps* that followed the censor's prohibition of the Bernhardt production, Wilde stated in an interview published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*: "My idea of writing the play was simply this: I have one instrument that I know I can command, and that is the English language. There was another instrument to which I had listened all my life, and I wanted once to touch this new instrument to see whether I could make any beautiful thing out of it."²⁷ This idea of language as a tool that the artist manipulates is familiar in Wilde's writing. In "The Critic as Artist," for example, Wilde's spokesman, Gilbert, explains: "The real artist is he who proceeds, not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion. He does not first conceive an idea, and then say to himself, 'I will put my idea into a complex metre of fourteen lines,' but, realizing the beauty of the sonnet-scheme, he conceives certain modes of music and methods of rhyme, and the mere form suggests what is to fill it and make it intellectually and emotionally complete."²⁸ Wilde, we may conjecture, having chosen to write in French, found that the language suggested the subject matter – that French, being in his mind the medium of art, served as a constraining form that permitted him to write about precisely the topic of aesthetic creation. For while the play focuses thematically on a lurid concatenation of desire and death in a biblical setting, its incantatory, hieratic style makes language something other than transparent communication: the sonorous repetition of words and phrases, and the distribution of images across different characters' lines, turns language itself into an object, as an artist's "instrument" or medium.

This is not to say that English could not also serve as such a medium, especially when restrictions of literary form were imposed – the rhyming and metrical structure of a sonnet, say, or the dramatic requirements of a Society comedy. But with the particular relation that Wilde had to French – compounded of idealisation, aspiration, and partial knowledge – he would always regard it as the aesthetic medium *en soi*. A letter that Wilde wrote around the time he was working on *Salomé* supports the idea that, for him, use of the French language by definition generates a reflexive meditation on Symbolist image making: "I am at present in

Paris, studying the curious and fascinating development of Art in France, which, I am glad to say, is in the direction of a richer Romanticism, with subtleties of new colour and strange music and extended subject matter. An artist gains his best, his truest inspiration, from the material he uses, and the transformation of the French language, in the hands of the leaders of the new schools, is one of the most interesting and attractive things to watch and wonder at."²⁹

Through *Salomé*, then, Wilde does not simply shift from a derogated English to a glorified French; although French could signify an alternative site of national belonging for him, it also, and more profoundly, represents a fantasy of an alternative *to* national belonging. Wilde runs to France not just to embrace a new nationality and a new language in opposition to the old one but because he understands French, as the very language of aesthetic creation, as something unlike a national language, with its attendant national identity, *tout court*. In another letter he writes that "Flaubert did not write French prose, but the prose of a great artist who happened to be French."³⁰ Such an idea of art is not only non-national but denationalising; more than an alternative nationality or a transcendence of it, this formulation appeals to a different form of truth that makes national belonging irrelevant. By writing in French, Wilde develops the fantasy of an artistic subjectivity that obviates other kinds of identification.

French is universal in Wilde's fantasy not in the ordinary nineteenth-century sense – as the international language of diplomacy – but rather because he considers it the true language of art and thus not a national language at all. It is extraterritorial with respect to English, perhaps especially a form of English that, as we will see, he describes as having been imposed by colonial rule. Yet the fantasy of an alternative *to* national language is itself also extraterritorial with respect to France, available only from without. Given the fierce loyalty of the French to their own language – as well as their colonial appetite and rivalry with the British for imperial domination at the end of the nineteenth century – no one whose *langue maternelle* was French could think of it as non-national. But because *Salomé* had to be translated into the writer's own native tongue, it provides a particularly instructive case for investigating the possibility of a writing practice constituted outside a national language.

How the English text arose is thus an important question, for in coming into the author's own language, *Salomé* returns English to the reader in an altered form. The composition and publication histories of both versions of *Salomé* remain matters of dispute, but the documentary

evidence of three extant manuscripts suggests that Wilde composed the French version first – and genuinely wrote it in French, however imperfectly – and that he revised it repeatedly, before submitting it for minor corrections to a number of expert French writers. (This story of origins contradicts the myth which, according to some sources, Wilde promulgated: that the play came to him in a flash and that he wrote it out in French in a white heat.³¹) Yet it is worth pausing over two accounts that dispute his writing practice – self-serving or mendacious though they may be – for what they suggest about Wilde’s linguistic nationality. The first is that of Alfred Douglas, whom Wilde asked to prepare the English translation after publication of the play in French in 1893. In a memoir, Douglas supplies this description:

I translated *Salomé* at Oscar’s request while I was still at Oxford ... Oscar used my translation, making a few alterations. Really I believe he originally wrote the play in English and translated it into French with the assistance of Pierre Louÿs and André Gide. So that to get anyone at all to “translate” it was a rather ridiculous pose. At the time Oscar wrote this play he did not know French well enough to write a play in the language, and André Gide told me later that Oscar’s first draft was a mass of blunders and misspelling. Pierre Louÿs and he knocked it into shape, and when it came to a translation into English, Oscar just put it back more or less into his own original language, altering my translation where it differed from his own words.³²

Douglas’s story is unreliable, for there is no evidence that Gide contributed to *Salomé*, and while Pierre Louÿs made some grammatical corrections, manuscript evidence indicates that Wilde declined to accept any of his substantive suggestions.³³ Some commentators have conjectured that Douglas’s narrative is a wounded response to the lines Wilde wrote him while in prison about the inadequacy of his effort: “You must by this time be a fair enough French scholar to know that the translation was as unworthy of you, as an ordinary Oxonian, as it was of the work it sought to render.”³⁴

Although Douglas’s assertion that Wilde originally wrote the play in English is unsupported, it is also hard to shake, for it rests on the assumption that no author can truly write in a language not his own. This sentiment is reinforced in another odd place: the *Salomé* forgeries. Arthur Cravan (alias Fabian Lloyd), who was the nephew of Wilde’s wife, prepared and peddled a number of forged manuscripts and letters, selling them to collectors and rare book dealers.³⁵ The manuscripts of

Salomé that Cravan seems to have forged subscribe to a fantasy of Wilde's compositional practice as moving freely between French and English in a way that the genuine manuscripts do not. A comparison between the forgeries and the first holograph manuscript (available in a facsimile reproduction) shows that Cravan worked backwards, copying out some speeches in both languages, as if Wilde needed to write them in English and then translate them into French. The authenticated first manuscript (which Cravan would not have seen) shows Wilde composing in French, in a rougher form and with many errors, which are corrected by the time it goes into print. Wilde's French is better than Cravan presumes, or at least Wilde is more willing to take his chances in French – to play, however out of tune, on that new instrument, rather than, as Cravan and Douglas both imagine, to write things out in English that he could not express in French. Cravan's version is a lie, but a telling one: it speaks to the *wish* for Wilde to write in English, and it relies on a different fantasy than Wilde's of how a writer uses a language in which he is not fluent, resorting at crucial moments to English for what cannot be said in French.

The effects that Wilde sought to achieve in *Salomé* he thus understood himself able to accomplish only in French, and the decision to adhere strictly to French composition must have demanded a considerable effort. Although Wilde was presumably involved in the English translation of *Salomé*, little is known about the extent to which he oversaw the first printed English version.³⁶ Many commentators have presumed, on the basis of Wilde's sneering comments to Douglas about "the school-boy faults of [his] attempted translation" that the first English edition is Douglas's poor apprentice work; this edition's stylistic affectations and its lack of fidelity to the French original are taken to be at variance with Wilde's intentions.³⁷ But the evidence suggests that Wilde took a strong hand in the translation. Had he not been so committed to publishing an English edition he could approve, one wonders why he would have endured a row with Douglas over it; it is clear that Douglas's name came off the title page as translator because Wilde made changes that Douglas would not countenance. Joseph Donohue writes that the question of "[w]hy Wilde never translated his play himself remains a poignant mystery, and there are some who still live in hope that a heretofore unknown manuscript, his own English rendering of *Salomé*, may someday turn up."³⁸ A simpler answer might be that the *soi-disant* Douglas version is in fact the translation Wilde sought; even if he did not write it himself, he may well have gotten what he wanted. Given Wilde's scrupulous efforts at seeing his works through press, it seems unlikelier that he permitted

a version that did not meet his standards to be published. Although he condemns Douglas's efforts in *De Profundis* (a letter that is itself notoriously unreliable), we have no way of knowing whether that "unworthy" translation is the same version that was printed in the English edition of 1894.

The lack of direct evidence for Wilde's role in producing the English *Salomé* leaves us with some uncertainties, but we do have testimony about a complementary practice, for Henry-David Davray, who worked closely with Wilde to translate *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* into French, wrote extensively about the experience. Through his remarks, we can see both the care Wilde took in moving between the two languages and the difficulty he encountered in mastering French. According to Davray, Wilde resisted his plans to translate the poem – "Le mérite du poème réside pour une grande part dans sa forme," Wilde objected, "et sans la musique du vers il n'en restera rien"³⁹ – until Davray assured him that he would not render it in verse: to capture its spirit, it had to be in prose, as if the difference between the two languages must be widened and marked formally. Like any writer involved in a translation of his own work, Wilde was particular, as Davray describes his interventions: "Chaque mot fut soupesé, chaque terme fut discuté, chaque phrase fut lue, relue, scandée, avec toutes les intonations possibles."⁴⁰ At each stage in Davray's recounting, Wilde's attention to the process of translation reflects his sensitivity to fine sonic distinctions as well as broader aesthetic considerations:

La conversation reprit sur l'impossibilité de traduire la poésie, puisque la seule différence des mots, la dissemblance du son et de l'accentuation des syllabes suffisent pour faire disparaître l'aspect de l'original et ce qui constitue une grande part de sa beauté. Wilde fut singulièrement brillant, il éleva le sujet jusqu'à une discussion des buts de l'art et de la conception de l'œuvre artistique.⁴¹

For all this aesthetic nuance, however, the practical difficulties of French continued to plague Wilde, suggesting all the more powerfully the strong motives that must have been at work for him to compose *Salomé* in French: "Malgré sa remarquable connaissance du français, Wilde proposait parfois des mots impropres, inexacts, et même impossiblement prosaïques, et j'éprouvais beaucoup de peine à lui démontrer que ces termes s'éloignaient de sa pensée."⁴² There is a substantial difference between working with a translator to put an English poem into French

prose and composing an original drama in French; the simplicity of the play's language comes to seem a necessity as well as a productive constraint – one that, as Harris intimates, makes its aesthetic effects possible.

This movement between the two languages is represented graphically in the first French version of the *Ballad* in 1898, which was in fact a facing-page bilingual edition.⁴³ The ontological difference between French and English versions – as well as its physical incarnation – is even starker in the case of *Salomé*, as Nicholas Frankel has shown, given the distinction between the two printed books, particularly with the addition of Aubrey Beardsley's lavish illustrations to the English edition.⁴⁴ This fundamental untranslatability is likewise borne out in a lack of comprehension that operates in both directions, which Wilde experienced in his frustrated dependence on Davray's own incomplete mastery of English. Davray reprints a letter of Wilde's from April 1898 in French, on his draft translation of the *Ballad*, which corrects individual words and phrases, proposes improvements, and explains his meanings.⁴⁵ Wilde writes to Ross complaining about the work: "I saw Davray's translation of *Reading Gaol* yesterday, and went over part of it with him. It is a very difficult thing to translate, as, unluckily and oddly, Davray has never been in prison, so knows nothing of prison-terms. 'We banged the tins' appeared as '*On battait le fer blanc*'! I shall have to work for days over it."⁴⁶ In the same period, Ross writes to Smithers: "I met Davray at dinner with Frank Harris. He understands every other thing that Oscar says."⁴⁷ Just as, in writing *Salomé* and collaborating on the translation of the *Ballad*, Wilde tries to navigate a French language that he has not mastered, so Davray appears at sea in English. Bilingualism, let alone translation, remains a remote ideal; as Walter Benjamin would suggest, the commerce between two languages results less in a falling away from a phantasmatic origin than in a new form of language that takes on a life of its own.

If this evidence goes to prove both the impossibility of translation and the inherent necessity of French to *Salomé*, then what happens when the play comes into English? Like the *Ballad*, whose form had to shift from verse to prose when translated, *Salomé* had somehow to remain foreign even in English. Perhaps a work by an English-speaking playwright will, translated *into* English, always sound foreign by virtue of its journey. In any event, to render the pared-down quality of the French original in English, the language of the translated *Salomé* is made equally strange: it employs a mannered English, unlike that of any of Wilde's other dramas, which is largely a stylised form of King James biblical diction. Here, for example, is Herod speaking to Salomé: "When thou hast danced for me,

forget not to ask of me whatsoever thou hast a mind to ask. Whatsoever thou shalt desire I will give it thee, even to the half of my kingdom.”⁴⁸ The French original reads: “Après que vous aurez dansé n’oubliez pas de me demander tout ce que vous voudrez. Tout ce que vous voudrez je vous le donnerai, fût-ce la moitié de mon royaume.”⁴⁹ This has none of the heightened diction, syntactic inversion, or archaism characteristic of the first English edition. Like the estrangement for English readers and audiences of encountering a drama in French, the English translation into antiquated diction has a defamiliarising effect. If one accepts that Wilde at least approved the English translation that was published, then this effect would seem to be deliberate.

The peculiar style does not entirely explain the alienation of the English *Salomé*, however, for by Wilde’s own account – at some crucial moments in discussing the play and the French language more generally – he draws attention to the ways in which Irishness sets him in a doubly displaced relation to both English and the language of art. In concluding, I want to suggest that Wilde could in fact achieve the effects he sought in an English *Salomé*, in part through its modulated biblical diction, but even more powerfully through what he would designate as a form of language that is the preserve of art – a special category of English that can produce the aesthetic qualities which he imagines to be inherent in French. In considering Wilde’s efforts to decouple identity from national allegiance and to reconceive subjectivity through a relation to art making, I have thus far dwelt on the unique function of French and suspended a consideration of Wilde’s original nationality, Irish. In recent years, there has been an explosion of scholarship claiming Wilde as Irish, reading him as both descendant and progenitor of Irish folk and literary traditions. These works range in their critical orientations, some straightforwardly asserting that Wilde was Irish and tracing the Irish elements in his writing, others using his work to interrogate concepts such as nationality, identity, and colonial domination.⁵⁰ Overall, the evidence, as so often with Wilde, is mixed: on some occasions he presents himself as an Irish nationalist, on others he distances himself through a form of suave cosmopolitanism. The contradiction might best be summed up by his countryman George Bernard Shaw, who said: “It must not be forgotten that though by culture Wilde was a citizen of all civilized capitals, he was at root a very Irish Irishman, and, as such, a foreigner everywhere but in Ireland.”⁵¹ This is an appealing formulation, yet the idea of Wilde the cosmopolite – a true Irishman at home in the world – is problematic

to the extent that it presumes the meaning of Irishness to be coherent and self-evident.

Rather than seeking to stabilise or transcend his Irish origins, Wilde uses Irish identity, as he uses French awkwardness, in *strategic* ways – and this is particularly so in the controversy over the French experiment of *Salomé*. One key instance of such a strategy arises during the interview in the *Pall Mall Gazette* from which I have already quoted, at which a French journalist was also present. After speaking, in English, of how eager he was to “touch this new instrument” of the French language, Wilde switches to French and says (in the *Gazette's* rendering): “If the Censure [*sic*] refuses ‘Salomé’ ... I shall leave England and settle in France, where I will take out letters of naturalization. I will not consent to call myself a citizen of a country that shows such narrow mindedness in its artistic judgments ... I am not English, I’m Irish, which is quite another thing.” Wilde takes the censorship of his French play as the occasion for threatening to renounce his British nationality, and in one sense it seems like a straightforward exchange: he will cast off English citizenship and take up French. Yet even as he invokes “letters of naturalization,” Wilde’s gambit is again something different than this. For what he gives up is a claim of national belonging specifically to a culture of “narrow mindedness in its artistic judgments,” instead pledging allegiance to artistic freedom: national reassignment works in the service of a politics of aesthetics. Calling himself Irish provides leverage on his flimsy loyalty to England, and the triangular relation makes explicit the contingency of national belonging. While Wilde might seem to identify himself definitively here by saying “I’m Irish,” such an identification is inherently unstable, both because of its political subordination to English and because of the multiplicity of Wilde’s own forms of national subjectivity. The meaning of Wilde’s Irishness is anything but obvious, not least because he came from an elite Protestant Anglo-Irish family. Invoking Irishness in this context does less to pin him down than to show up the security of national identity as such; it demonstrates that the English citizenship he throws off was never genuinely or naturally in his possession. Both Wilde’s Irish past and his French future provide forms of refuge from the long middle stretch of his life among the English, whose sanctimonious and hypocritical values disgusted him. Like his Irishness, his Frenchness is “quite another thing,” but in itself a different thing from being Irish.

The statement of Wilde’s that I have quoted is the one that appears in the *Pall Mall Gazette* and it has been widely reproduced, both among

his contemporaries and in later studies. But the version of the interview that appears in the French paper – and that may therefore be nearer to what he actually said than is the *Gazette's* free translation – is somewhat different:

M. Oscar Wilde répond à cet acte quelque peu *sommaire* en déclarant qu'il va se faire naturaliser Français ...

– Oui, ma résolution est bien prise. Puisque, en Angleterre, il est impossible de faire jouer une œuvre d'art, je vais entrer dans une nouvelle patrie que j'aime déjà depuis longtemps. Il n'y a qu'un Paris, voyez-vous, et Paris est en France; c'est la ville des artistes, je dirais volontiers: c'est la ville ... artiste.

... – Je ne suis pas d'ailleurs, à l'heure où je vous parle, Anglais, je suis encore *Irlandais*, ce qui n'est pas du tout la même chose. Certes, j'ai des amis anglais que j'aime beaucoup. Mais je n'aime pas la *race anglaise*.

... Comme lui, je trouve inique la décision de la censure, mais le résultat produit n'est pas pour me déplaire. C'est Paris qui, le premier, applaudira *Salomé*, qui sera pour M. Oscar Wilde, je l'espère, la meilleure lettre de naturalisation.⁵²

In the French version, the “letters of naturalization” are introduced as a literary jest by the reporter; Wilde himself says, “je vais entrer dans une nouvelle patrie,” as if his capacity for “naturally” belonging to France were already available to him. Articulating (in French) that he is in an important sense already French indicates that allegiance to this particular nationality is, if not wholly elective, then earned by demonstration of one's aesthetic bona fides: to be a real artist is to be presumptively French. No native Francophone could subscribe to such a formula, which can only be sustained in the imaginary realm of a foreigner – or perhaps one who is doubly foreign.

The response of the press to Wilde's hyperbolic renunciation of England is mockery and hilarity. Like those nationalists who would claim Wilde as genuinely Irish – if such a national identity were fully knowable – the hostile English press never forgets his Irish origins: they use the charge of Irishness against him, attempting to fix him in this identity at every opportunity. And with the assertion of the coloniser's privilege, they recognise that his idea of France is phantasmatic. Their view, by contrast, is one of national recognition: France is every bit a place of rival national belonging, and so they emphasise the military and political dimensions of the move Wilde proposes. Capitalising on the idea that, were he actually to become a French citizen, Wilde would be compelled

A WILDE IDEA.
OR, MORE INJUSTICE TO IRELAND!



THE licence for the production of his French Play of *Salomé*, accepted by SARAH B., having been refused by the Saxon Licenser of Plays, THE O'SCAR, dreams of becoming a French Citizen, but doesn't quite "see himself," at the beginning of his career, as a conscript in the French Army, and so, to adapt the Gilbertian lines, probably—

"In spite of great temptation
 To French na-tu-ra-li-sa-tion,
 He'll remain an Irishman!"

Figure 9.1: J. Bernard Partridge, "A Wilde Idea. Or, More Injustice to Ireland!" *Punch* 103 (9 July 1892): 1. Reproduced by kind permission of the Punch Cartoon Library.

to serve in the military, *Punch* supplies a telling image and some doggerel on the subject under the front-page headline, "A WILDE IDEA. OR, MORE INJUSTICE TO IRELAND!" The cartoon shows Wilde dressed in the classic uniform of a French conscript, a louche cigarette in one hand and a copy of *Salomé* hanging out of his bag (Figure 9.1). Even as Wilde disavows England, the press ridicules him for imagining that he might ever have been sufficiently English to renounce his allegiance.

If Irish is an oppositional and subjugated form of nationality with respect to English, then French, as I have suggested, provides Wilde the fantasy of eluding identification altogether through the routes it opens to forms of aesthetic subjectivity. This manoeuvre of counter-citizenship appears tellingly on one last occasion. In 1891, during one of Wilde's sojourns in Paris, the *Écho de Paris* published an excerpt from the journal of Edmond de Goncourt recalling a previous visit of Wilde's during which he supposedly said scurrilous things about Swinburne. Wilde sent a letter back, in French, which was published in the same paper, graciously apologising and insisting that he must have been misunderstood as a result of his linguistic infelicity. In the course of the explanation, he states: "On peut adorer une langue sans bien la parler, comme on peut aimer une femme sans la connaître. Français de sympathie, je suis Irlandais de race, et les Anglais m'ont condamné à parler le langage de Shakespeare."⁵³ Here again is a triangulation of nationalities, and Wilde once more asserts a putatively natural relation to Ireland – a birthright – and an explicitly elective one to France. This formulation has the edge of Caliban's *ressentiment* insofar as the English have "condemned" him to speak their language. But rather than a wholesale repudiation of English, as in the previous case, he here appropriates an element of it to himself, giving the name Shakespeare to the most artistically exalted aspect of the language. The allusion to colonial subjugation and English language hegemony serves as a barb to the English at the same time that it allows him to claim for himself (and for "art") England's denationalised national author. Finally, Wilde compares French – the language of aesthetics that he has mastered imperfectly – to a woman loved from afar. Both are objects of desire to which the subject has an imaginary or fantasy relation. Though he strikes a pose of aloof, urbane heterosexuality, it may be so distant and mediated as to advertise its artificiality. In *Salomé*, too, Wilde puts on a French discourse that is superficially heterosexual – insofar as it portrays the love of men and women for each other – but it is so convoluted, in its psychic dimensions as well as its linguistic formulation, as to challenge any *idées reçues* of sexual norms. In the letter, as in the play, Wilde's idea of French subordinates national identity to aesthetic

production, marking it as explicitly imaginary ("On peut adorer ..."). By his account, French is less a nationality than another name for art. Like himself, he demonstrates, Shakespeare too is French.

NOTES

"Research for this chapter was supported in part by a short-term fellowship at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library."

- 1 William Archer, "Mr. Oscar Wilde and the Censorship," letter to the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1 July 1892, 3, in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 532n. My quotation preserves the original wording in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which is not entirely accurate in *Complete Letters*.
- 2 Arthur Ransome, *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1912), 95.
- 3 Commentators have disputed whether Wilde wrote the play while living in Paris or whether it was substantially finished before he got there late in 1891. See Nicholas Frankel, "On the Dates of Composition and Completion for Wilde's *Salomé* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*," *Notes and Queries* 52, no. 4 (2005): 488–90.
- 4 While the play has an extensive performance history, Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, in *Oscar Wilde's Profession: Writing and the Culture Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), argue that Wilde did not initially conceive of *Salomé* for the stage, but instead as a printed book; they make this case on the basis of the publishing scheme he adopted for the work, by comparison with his English plays, which were circulated as theatrical prompt copies and developed in production well before they were printed. "This information points inescapably to the conclusion that *Salomé* is a genuine exception in Wilde's dramatic *oeuvre*, and that its success ought to be explained in terms of Wilde's dealings with [publishers] Mathews and Lane rather than with theatrical institutions" (113). The most complete discussion of the development, composition, and printing of the play is in Nicholas Frankel, *Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), chap. 2. Joseph Donohue supplies helpful discussions of the background, sources, and contexts for *Salomé* in two articles: "Distance, Death and Desire in *Salome*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 118–42; and "Salome and the Wildean Art of Symbolist Theatre," *Modern Drama* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 84–103. Further on the French background in particular, see

- Christa Satzinger, *The French Influences on Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray and Salome* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1994). Studies of the play's performance history and cultural legacies include: William Tydeman and Steven Price, *Wilde: Salome (Plays in Production)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Philip Hoare, *Oscar Wilde's Last Stand: Decadence, Conspiracy, and the Most Outrageous Trial of the Century* (New York: Arcade, 1998); Michael Kettle, *Salome's Last Veil: The Libel Case of the Century* (London: Hart-Davis, 1977); and Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).
- 5 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 24.
 - 6 Wilde, "To W. E. Henley," December 1888, in *Complete Letters*, 372.
 - 7 On Flaubert, see the letter immediately above to Henley. Of Balzac, Wilde writes, for example, "I can't travel without Balzac and Gautier, and they take up so much room" ("To Julia Ward Howe," 6 July 1882, in *Complete Letters*, 175). On Baudelaire, he states, "If I spend my future life reading Baudelaire in a *café* I shall be leading a more natural life than if I take to hedger's work or plant cacao in mud-swamps" ("To Robert Ross," 6 April 1897, in *Complete Letters*, 790). He states that Verlaine led one "of the most perfect lives I have come across ... [he is] the one Christian poet since Dante" ("To Lord Alfred Douglas," January–March 1897, in *Complete Letters*, 754). See also Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Random House, 1988), 289.
 - 8 Wilde, "To R.H. Sherard," December 1891, in *Complete Letters*, 504. "His father, Sir William Wilde, was a highly celebrated archeologist and man of letters, and on his mother's side he was the grand-nephew of the mysterious novelist Maturin, the friend of Goethe, Byron, and Scott, and author of *Melmoth*."
 - 9 Wilde, "To the Editor of the *St. James's Gazette*," 27 June 1890, in *Complete Letters*, 432.
 - 10 Unsigned review, *Daily Chronicle*, 30 June 1890, in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 72.
 - 11 Henri de Régner, "Souvenirs sur Oscar Wilde," *Figures et caractères* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1901), 203. "I have kept a vivid and lasting remembrance of this conversation and several others. Mr. Wilde expressed himself in French with uncommon eloquence and tact. His discourse was embellished with judiciously selected words ... His small talk was purely imaginative. He was an incomparable teller of tales; he knew thousands of them, which were linked one to another. This was his way of saying everything, through a figurative hypocrisy of his thought."
 - 12 Gustave Le Rouge, *Verlainiens et Décadents* (1928), quoted by Paul Selver in *Saturday Review*, 1 December 1928. He "expressed himself in French without the slightest accent and with a purity, a disconcerting correctness."

- 13 *Écho de Paris*, 19 December 1891, 1. "Mr. Wilde excuses himself for not speaking our language well, but the following demonstrates that at least he writes it quite elegantly."
- 14 Wilde, "Balzac in English," *Pall Mall Gazette* (13 September 1886), in Oscar Wilde, *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Robert Ross, 14 vols (London: Methuen, 1908), 13: 77–81; for example, "It is well printed and nicely bound; but his translators do not understand French" (81).
- 15 In E.H. Mikhail, ed., *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections*, 2 vols (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979), 1: 18. The allusion is to Chaucer's Prioress, whose Cockney pronunciation of demotic French is mocked in the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*: "After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe, / For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe" (*The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987], 25 [ll. 125–6]).
- 16 In Mikhail, *Interviews and Recollections*, 1: 160. The reference is to a system of language instruction based on repetition originated by German grammarian Heinrich Gottfried Ollendorff.
- 17 In Wilde, *Complete Letters*, 506n. "He wrote French as he spoke it, that is, with a fantasy which, pleasant enough in conversation, would have produced a deplorable impression in the theatre."
- 18 Ernest Raynaud, *La Mêlée Symboliste (1890–1900): Portraits et Souvenirs*, 2 vols (Paris: La Renaissance du Livre, 1920), 2: 135. "Wilde spoke our language imperfectly. The right word did not always occur to him so, guessing at random, he would substitute either the English term or a French equivalent, the choice of which was not always felicitous, and so the comic blended with the serious in his conversation. When Montaigne had trouble expressing himself, he would say, 'If French won't work, use Gascon!' Wilde used black slang. Hazy on gender and syntax, he was telling a story one day, which he ended, 'At this moment, the queen, he deaded!'"
- 19 A.E.W. Mason, *Sir George Alexander and the St. James' Theatre* (1935; New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969), 91.
- 20 André Gide, *Oscar Wilde: In Memoriam (Souvenirs)*, De Profundis (Paris: Mercure de France, 1910), 15. "He knew French admirably, but he pretended to hunt about a bit for the words which he wanted to keep [in] waiting. He had almost no accent, or at least only such as it pleased him to retain and which might give the words a sometimes new and strange aspect" (trans. Bernard Frechtman [New York: Philosophical Library, 1949], 2).
- 21 Ransome, *Oscar Wilde*, 148. In "Oscar Wilde in Paris," *The Bookman* 33, no. 3 (1911): 268–73, Ransome discusses the revisions that Wilde's French friends made to the text and notes (partly relying on Merrill): "*Salomé* was written in Paris in French, but not in the French that now stands as the text ... The French of *Salomé* is not the language of a Frenchman, but it is better than

- the French of Wilde, whose fantasy in conversation would have earned harder names in print" (271).
- 22 Philippe Julian, *Oscar Wilde* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1967), 252–3. "[O]ne of the most famous and one of the worst of his works. He wrote it in the symbolist idiom, in slightly childish language, a little Biblical, put into form by Maeterlinck ... Oscar wrote a flowery French in which the anglicisms were acceptable as they gave a real ingenuousness to the babbling of Salomé and a strange majesty to Herod's speeches. In order that certain words should stand out as the author intended, Salomé has to be acted with an English accent." Trans. Violet Wyndham (London: Constable, 1969), 247. Julian draws in part from Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, 2nd ed., trans. Angus Davidson (London: Oxford University Press, 1951): "It was, in fact, from the plays of Maeterlinck ... that Oscar Wilde derived the childish prattle employed by the characters in his *Salomé* ... which reduces the voluptuous Orient of Flaubert's *Tentation* to the level of a nursery tale. It is childish, but it is also humoristic, with a humour which one can with difficulty believe to be unintentional, so much does Wilde's play resemble a parody of the whole of the material used by the Decadents and of the stammering mannerism of Maeterlinck's dramas – and, as parody, *Salomé* comes very near to being a masterpiece. Yet it seems that Wilde was not quite aiming at this" (298).
- 23 Frank Harris, *Oscar Wilde* (1918; London: Constable, 1938), 94.
- 24 "La 'Salomé' de M. Oscar Wilde: conversation avec l'auteur," *Le Gaulois*, 29 June 1892, 1. This interview was conducted jointly by Maurice Sisley for the French newspaper and by an anonymous correspondent for the *Pall Mall Gazette* of the same date. (Ellmann states that Robert Ross was the English interviewer [*Oscar Wilde*, 372], but Horst Schroeder disputes this claim, finding no evidence for it; *Additions and Corrections to Richard Ellmann's Oscar Wilde*, 2nd ed. [Braunschweig: Privately printed, 2002], 129.) The *Gazette* reads: "Of course there are modes of expression that a French man of letters would not have used, but they give a certain relief or colour to the play. A great deal of the curious effect that Maeterlinck produces comes from the fact that he, a Flamand by race, writes in an alien language. The same thing is true of Rossetti, who, though he wrote in English, was essentially Latin in temperament." The report goes on to note: "During this part of our interview the correspondent of the *Gaulois* was present. The conversation was consequently carried on in French, and my colleague remarked on the admirable way that Mr. Wilde spoke that language. This elicited from him a splendid tribute to Paris, 'the centre of art, the artistic capital of the world.'" A more literal translation of the French column would be: "Of course I use certain turns of phrase, certain expressions that a French writer would not; but it is these originalities that, perhaps, will set the style in relief. Doesn't

Maeterlinck also have expressions that are his and his alone, which produce their effect, the effect that the author or writer wants to achieve? In England, Rossetti, the poet whom all the literary world admires, uses expressions that no English author would dare employ, and yet they have at once a power and a peculiar grace that strike the English themselves." In a letter from July 1892 to William Rothenstein, Wilde writes, "My dear Will, The *Gaulois*, the *Écho de Paris*, and the *Pall Mall* have all had interviews. I hardly know what new thing there is to say" (*Complete Letters*, 531). The article by Henry Bauer that appears in *L'Écho de Paris* on 3 July 1892 reads, in part: "Il a secoué la poussière de ses souliers sur l'Angleterre et m'a déclaré qu'il allait se faire naturaliser Français ... La mystification est devenue un procédé littéraire de quelque ragout et l'excentricité semble, au pays de lord Byron, comme un défi jeté à une société de pharisiens, une pierre lancée aux vitraux du tabernacle des préjugés stupides et des conventionnelles servitudes." ("He has shaken the dust of England off his shoes and has told me that he is going to be naturalized in France ... Mystification has become a somewhat tempting literary procedure and eccentricity seems, in the land of Lord Byron, like a challenge thrown before a society of pharisees, a stone cast at the windows of the temple of stupid prejudice and servile conventions.")

- 25 See Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), on French productions in the English theatre.
- 26 Powell provides evidence for the former view, showing both that Wilde had good reason to believe that the censor would show more leniency toward a play in French and that, despite Wilde's protestations that he did not compose the play with Bernhardt in mind, the language comports with her idiosyncratic style of recitation. For the latter view, see Beth Tashery Shannon, "Viewing *Salomé* Symbolically," in *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Philip E. Smith II (New York: MLA, 2008), 163–70: "Writing (and reading) a foreign language foregrounds the sounds of the words, and word music was important to the symbolist poets ... The indications are strong that he intended *Salomé* as a bid to enter an international circle he had long esteemed, that of the French symbolists ... For Huysmans, only Moreau's paintings captured the essence of *Salomé*; the unattainable dancer had eluded the pen ... The question I now pose ... is whether the ambitious Wilde might have taken Huysmans's assertion as a challenge" (166, 168).
- 27 "The Censure and 'Salome,' an Interview with Mr. Oscar Wilde," *Pall Mall Gazette*, 29 June 1892.
- 28 "The Critic as Artist," in *Intentions*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, vol. 4, ed. Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 195.
- 29 "To an Unidentified Correspondent," November–December 1891, in *Complete Letters*, 499.

- 30 "To W.E. Henley," December 1888, in *Complete Letters*, 372.
- 31 See Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 343–4, drawing on Vincent O'Sullivan, *Aspects of Wilde* (New York: Henry Holt, 1936), 24–5. Clyde de L. Ryals, "Oscar Wilde's 'Salomé,'" *Notes and Queries* 204 (1959): 56–7, provides a brief, clear exposition of the myths about and evidence for the play's composition. A fuller account is in Frankel, *Wilde's Decorated Books*, 50–4.
- 32 Lord Alfred Douglas, *Autobiography* (London: Martin Secker, 1929), 160n. In a letter from Douglas's undergraduate days at Oxford, dated 31 August 1893, he writes to the editor C. Kains-Jackson, "I have just finished translating Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*. It is to be published in October" (Clark Library, Wilde D733L K135 1893). There is no suggestion that he is putting the play *back* into English here, nor is there again, much later, when he writes to A.J.A. Symons on 11 March 1939: "As to *Salomé* Oscar certainly wrote it in Paris. I remember going to see Sarah Bernhardt in *London* with Oscar two or three times when she was going to do it. I translated it after that, after the production had been stopped by the censor. I expect Oscar's interview when he says in June 1892 he wrote it 'some six months ago in Paris' is correct. So it was written either in December 1891 or Jan.–Feb. 1892. I see on reference to *The Spirit Lamp* that I wrote an 'appreciation' of *Salomé* in May 1893 and it was as the result of this appreciation that Oscar asked me to translate it. I did so I think in the summer vac of 1893" (Clark Library, Wilde D733L S988 Bound).
- 33 See Ryals, "Wilde's 'Salomé.'"
- 34 "To Lord Alfred Douglas," January–March 1897 ("*De Profundis*"), in *Complete Letters*, 692.
- 35 Owen Dudley Edwards, "The Wilde Goose Chase," *American Book Collector* 7, no. 5 (January 1957): 3–14, tells the story of one set of manuscripts, which Cravan, posing as André Gide, attempted to sell. A similar scheme is revealed in the correspondence (photocopies held at the Clark) between London booksellers Maggs Brothers and someone (presumably Cravan) posing as Pierre Louÿs, along with a copy of the forged manuscript of *Salomé* (Wilde W6721M2 S171). A different *Salomé* forgery in the same hand is in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. The best sources on Cravan are essays by Roger L. Conover in *4 Dada Suicides*, eds. Conover et al. (London: Atlas, 1995), 14–31, and in *Arthur Cravan: Poète et boxeur* (Paris: Terrain vague et Galerie 1900–2000, 1992), 25–37.
- 36 Joost Daalder attempts to sort out the textual history of the English translations in "Which Is the Most Authoritative Early Translation of Wilde's *Salomé*?" *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature* 85, no. 1 (2004): 47–52, and in "Confusion and Misattribution Concerning the Two Earliest English Translations of *Salomé*," *The Oscholars* 3, no. 2 (2003):

<http://www.irishdiaspora.net/> (accessed 10 November 2010). Daalder proposes that Ross significantly revised and corrected the 1894 version (attributed to Douglas) in editions of 1906 and 1912. Although he acknowledges that Wilde may have endorsed the 1894 translation, Daalder argues that the later editions are preferable for their fidelity to the French original.

- 37 "To Lord Alfred Douglas," January–March 1897 ("*De Profundis*"), in *Complete Letters*, 692.
- 38 Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: A Tragedy in One Act*, trans. Joseph Donohue (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), xxvii. Donohue writes: "Evidently the author remained dissatisfied with the quality of his young friend's contribution, and yet between Wilde's release from prison in 1897 and his death in November 1900 it seems he either felt no inclination or found no opportunity to repair the situation. In 1906 and 1907, and again in 1912, the Douglas version was republished, in each case after some substantive improvements (the handiwork of the indefatigable Ross), under the imprint of Wilde's old publisher, John Lane. In one version or another (more often than not the Douglas original), it continued to remain in print" (xvii).
- 39 Henry-D. Davray, *Oscar Wilde: La Tragédie finale: suivi de Épisodes et Souvenirs et des Apocryphes* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1928), 90. "A poem's merit resides largely in its form, and without the music of verse nothing of it will remain."
- 40 Davray, *Oscar Wilde*, 94–5. "Each word was weighed, each term debated, each phrase read, reread, and scanned, with all possible intonations."
- 41 Davray, *Oscar Wilde*, 107. "The conversation returned to the impossibility of translating poetry, since the only difference among words, the dissimilarity of sound and accentuation of syllables, suffices to make the qualities of the original disappear, which constitute a great part of its beauty. Wilde was singularly brilliant, and he raised the subject to a discussion of the goals of art and the conception of the artistic work."
- 42 Davray, *Oscar Wilde*, 108. "Despite his remarkable knowledge of French, Wilde would sometimes propose inappropriate, inexact, or even impossibly prosaic words, and I found it very painful to convince him that these terms detracted from his ideas."
- 43 Davray states: "La version française seule parut dans le *Mercure*. Mais à la suggestion d'Alfred Vallette, le texte anglais fut placé en regard de la traduction dans le volume qui fut mis en vente quelques semaines plus tard. La principale raison de cette adjonction était, je le crains bien, non pas tant de donner au lecteur français l'occasion de comparer les textes, mais de lui offrir un nombre de pages raisonnable pour l'argent qu'il déboursait" (*Oscar Wilde*, 111). "The French version alone appeared in the *Mercure [de France]*. But at Alfred Vallette's suggestion, the English text was printed facing the translation in the volume that went on sale several weeks later. The

- principal reason for this addition was, I truly believe, not to give the French reader an opportunity for comparing the texts, but to supply a reasonable number of pages for the price he paid." It is true that the printed volume manages to expand to 105 pages the poem that occupied 15 pages in the magazine version of May 1898. See also Wilde's letter reassuring Smithers that this dual-language version will not cut into sales in the English market ("To Leonard Smithers," 20 May 1898, in *Complete Letters*, 1069).
- 44 Frankel, *Wilde's Decorated Books*, demonstrates how the French version would have been read by contemporaries as a document of the Symbolist movement, whereas the English version – both the verbal artefact of the text and the physical object as a book – was read in a substantially different context as an exemplar of Decadence. He writes of "the transformation *Salomé* underwent in 1892 from a pseudo-symbolist work to one in the mainstream of English decadence" (54) and states that "we must distinguish a French symbolist audience from an English theatergoing one. Whereas in 1891 [before it was published] *Salomé* had been read by an extremely localized group of Parisian writers – and read, moreover, under the sign of 'poetry' rather than 'theater' simply by virtue of Mallarmé's proximity – Bernhardt brought the work to a readership distinguishable on account of its size, nationality, and expectations" (53).
- 45 "To Henry D. David," April 1898, in *Complete Letters*, 1053–4.
- 46 "To Robert Ross," ca 30 March 1898, in *Complete Letters*, 1051–2; the printed version reads "I still have to work," but the holograph at the Clark shows "shall." Instead of "On battait le fer blanc," the published French translation reads "on heurtait les gamelles" ("Ballade de la geôle de Reading," trans. Henry-D. Davray [Paris: Société du Mercure de France, 1898], 41).
- 47 Robert Ross to Leonard Smithers, 17 April 1898, in Wilde, *Complete Letters*, 1054n2.
- 48 Wilde, *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act: Translated from the French of Oscar Wilde: Pictured by Aubrey Beardsley* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1894), 52. This is the original translation, which is admittedly the most formal and affected version, reprinted in Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*, intro. Sylviane Messerli (Paris: Fondation Martin Bodmer and Presses Universitaires de France, 2008); this volume contains a facsimile compilation of the first holograph manuscript (1891), the first French edition (1893), and the first English edition (1894). The revised Ross translation of 1906 is somewhat less mannered: "When you have danced for me, forget not to ask of me whatsoever you wish. Whatsoever you wish I will give it you, even unto the half of my kingdom" (*Salome: A Tragedy in One Act Translated from the French of Oscar Wilde* [London: John Lane, 1906], 51). Compare Mark 6:22–3 in the King

- James Bible: "‘Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee.’ And he sware unto her, ‘Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom.’" And in the Louis Segond standard French Bible: "‘Demande-moi ce que tu voudras, et je te le donnerai.’ Il ajouta avec serment: ‘Ce que tu me demanderas, je te le donnerai, fût-ce la moitié de mon royaume.’" In "A Source Victorian or Biblical?: The Integration of Biblical Diction and Symbolism in Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*," *Victorian Newsletter* 89 (1996): 14–18, Jason P. Mitchell argues that Wilde borrows the incantatory repetition of phrases from Maeterlinck as well as from several Old Testament sources, such as the Song of Songs.
- 49 Wilde, *Salomé: Drame en un acte* (Paris: Librairie de l'art indépendant et Londres: Elkin Mathews et John Lane, 1893; reprinted in Fondation Martin Bodmer edition), 66–7.
- 50 For example, Richard Pine, *Oscar Wilde* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983); Davis Coakley, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* (Dublin: Town House, 1994); Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); *Wilde the Irishman*, ed. Jerusha McCormack (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). For an overview, see Noreen Doody, "Oscar Wilde: Nation and Empire," in *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. Frederick S. Roden (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 246–66.
- 51 George Bernard Shaw, preface to Frank Harris, *Oscar Wilde* (1938), xlviii.
- 52 *Le Gaulois*, 29 June 1892, 1. "Mr. Wilde responds to this somewhat summary action [the censorship] by declaring that he will be naturalized as a Frenchman ... 'Yes, I have made my resolution. Since it is impossible to have a work of art performed in England, I shall transfer myself to a new fatherland, which I have loved for a long time. There is but one Paris, you see, and Paris is in France; it is the city of artists, I would say gladly: it is the ... artistic city ... Moreover, I am not, at the present time, English, I am yet Irish, which is not at all the same thing. Admittedly, I have English friends whom I love dearly. But I do not love the English race' ... Like him, I find the censor's decision unjust, but the result does not displease me. For Paris will be the first to welcome *Salomé*, which will, I hope, be the best letter of naturalization for Mr. Wilde." "To Edmond Goncourt," 17 December 1891, in *Complete Letters*, 505.
- 53 ("One can adore a language without speaking it well, just as one can love a woman without knowing her. French in my sympathies, I am Irish by birth, and the English have condemned me to speak the language of Shakespeare.") See Nancy Erber, "The French Trials of Oscar Wilde," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6, no. 4 (1996): 549–88.