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Emily Eells

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Wilde's French *Salomé*

Emily Eells

- 1 *Salomé* is Wilde's French play *par excellence*. He wrote the script directly in French, during a prolonged stay in Paris at the end of 1891. The play was first published by the *Librairie d'Art Indépendant* in Paris in early February 1893 and was distributed in England in its original French version by Elkin Matthews and John Lane. Plans for the play's première in London, with French actress Sarah Bernhardt in the title role, were brought to an abrupt halt when the Lord Chamberlain invoked legislation prohibiting the performance of biblical plays on stage. The play entered the canon of *fin-de-siècle* French art when it was first performed in Paris at the experimental *Théâtre de l'Œuvre*, on 11 February 1896.
- 2 There is clearly significance in Wilde's decision to use a foreign language to dramatize the polysemy of the word "word". Written with a capital "W", it refers to the intertextual source of the drama—the gospel—whose mainspring is the tetrarch's "word", or promise to Salomé that she can choose her reward for dancing. Wilde writes between the lines in his rewriting of the succinct versions of the narrative given in the New Testament.¹ He takes the daughter of Herodias away from her mother's shadow, gives her a name and puts her into the lime-light by casting her in the title role and endowing her with a mind and a voice of her own. Wilde opposes the symbolic language of prophecy and the law (embodied by St John and the tetrarch) to the rhythmic, physical language of Salomé's dance and her mother's gestures which signify the death sentence of St John the Baptist. The dance empowers Salomé and gives her the last word in her dialogue with the tetrarch.
- 3 As Wilde had already secured his reputation as a wordsmith excelling in repartees of pun and paradox in English, the first question to address is why he resorted to France for linguistic cover. For Wilde, French marks a double distance from his mother tongue of English and from his fatherland, Ireland. Wilde's *Salomé* can be classed as what Deleuze and Guattari define as "littérature mineure" in their case study of Kafka—namely the authoring of a text in a major language which is not the author's mother tongue. They draw a brief parallel between Kafka, Joyce and Beckett, but omit to include Wilde as a third Irishman who wrote a text in a foreign language. If the foreign language

corresponded to Kafka's political motivation, for Wilde it partook in a strategy of sexual politics.

- 4 Wilde's ambition to write a play in the vein of *fin-de-siècle* French aestheticism dictated its composition in French. As Anne Varty asserts: "French, in the cultural context of symbolism, is the only language in which the play could have been written" (Varty, 142). Wilde's French is a symbolic language which he likens to music in the dedication he addressed to Bram Stoker's wife: "Will you accept a copy of *Salomé*—my strange venture in a tongue that is not my own, but that I love as one loves an instrument of music on which one has not played before" (*Letters*, 552). He defines French as a musical instrument more explicitly in his dedication to Edmund Gosse: "Will you accept a copy of *Salomé*, my first venture to use for art that subtle instrument of music, the French tongue" (*Letters*, 553). As he explains in an interview with a French journalist, his motivations for writing in French were aesthetic: "*Votre belle langue française m'a séduit.*"² An English journalist present at the interview cites Wilde's objectives: "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" ("The Censure", *Pall Mall Budget*, 1892).
- 5 French offered Wilde new sonorities to work with, and the sombre tone of *Salomé* contrasts with the scintillating wit of his social comedies. As a foreigner writing in French, Wilde brought a strange accent to the language, as he explains in the same interview with the French journalist: "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 tongue. The same is true of Rossetti, who, though he wrote in English, was essentially Latin in temperament" ("The Censure", *Pall Mall Budget*, 1892). Wilde therefore creates a foreign language within the foreign language, a style of his own which marks his difference.
- 6 Wilde's play is one of the numerous variations on the Salomé theme composed by 19th century French writers and artists, including Flaubert's short story *Hérodias*, Mallarmé's poem "Hérodiade" and Gustave Moreau's numerous paintings depicting the subject. Wilde would have seen Moreau's *L'Apparition* at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877, as it was displayed in an exhibit which he reviewed in the *Dublin University Magazine* (July 1877). Wilde was also inspired by the passage of steamy, heady prose in *À Rebours* which constitutes Huysmans's ekphrasis of Moreau's paintings. Wilde's text reads as a response to the challenge issued by Huysmans that Salomé is "*incompréhensible pour tous les écrivains qui n'ont jamais pu rendre l'inquiétante exaltation de la danseuse, la grandeur raffinée de l'assassine*" (Huysmans, 148). His aesthetic agenda in writing *Salomé* was to produce a linguistic equivalent of Moreau's iconographic language in order to portray the oxymoronic "refined grandeur" of the "assassin". Moreau's "Salomé Tattooed" (1874, Moreau Museum, Paris) exemplifies the painter's use of a patterned, abstract language, detached from precise reference: it depicts Salomé at the end of her dance, naked but for a gauze-like veil decorated with enigmatic hieroglyphs which floats loosely in front of her. This tattoo design drawing on pure, arbitrary notation is comparable to Wilde's use of French as a symbolic language. His development of a non-representational, non-semantic language which vies with the abstraction of music issued him with the poetic

licence to portray what his lover Lord Alfred Douglas called “the love that dare not speak its name”.³

- 7 For Wilde, writing in a foreign language was like swimming across the Channel, against the tide of British prudishness but carried by the current of French symbolism Wilde took refuge in Paris, where he was received with open-minded tolerance: “*Paris est une ville où je me plais beaucoup. Tandis qu’à Londres on cache tout, à Paris on montre tout. On peut aller où l’on veut et personne ne songe à vous critiquer.*”⁴ French language and Parisian culture allowed Wilde to bring the unspeakable out into the open, without running the risk of criticism or censorship. When Wilde singles out French and Greek as his two preferred languages, he excludes English and marks distance from England by insisting on his origins: “To me there are only two languages in the world: French and Greek. . . . I am not English. I’m an Irishman, which is quite another thing” (“The Censure”, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1892). Wilde’s use of a foreign language to pen his literary portrait of homosexuality anticipates the element of affect Theodor Adorno identifies in his “Words from Abroad”:

. . . since language is erotically charged in its words, at least for the kind of person who is capable of expression, love drives us to foreign words. . . . The early craving for foreign words is like the craving for foreign and if possible exotic girls; what lures us is a kind of exogamy of language, which would like to escape from the sphere of what is always the same, the spell of what one is and knows anyway. At that time foreign words made us blush, like saying the name of a secret love. (Adorno, I, 187)

- 8 Before drafting on an entire text in French, Wilde had used a French word to encode the homosexual subtext of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. As Christopher Craft points out in his article “Alias Bunbury”, the French word “uraniste” is a close homophone of the name Ernest which John Gambriel Nicholson had already used in the bilingual pun of the title of his volume of poetry, *Love in Earnest*. The refrain of his poem “Of Boys’ Names”—“Tis Ernest sets my heart a-flame”—is resonant with Uranian love (Nicholson, 61-2).
- 9 Wilde invested the foreign language with the function of obscuring the immoral and the indecent. The distancing effect experienced when using a foreign language served the transgressive programme of *Salomé*. Although speaking a foreign language can be inhibiting, paradoxically it can also be a means of lifting inhibitions and instilling one with the courage to say what one dares not say in one’s own language. Like children who repeat signifiers for the sheer pleasure of the way they sound and feel in the mouth, but with no comprehension of what they mean, so a foreigner can articulate a foreign word without understanding its meaning or connotations. The signifier is set free from the signified: it is liberated from semantic and cultural constraint and is appreciated for its aesthetic value alone. As Julia Kristeva puts it in her essay *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*, learning a foreign language is synonymous with gaining freedom; it is a kind of rebirth or acquisition of a new sex: “*Vous vous perfectionnez dans un autre instrument, comme on s’exprime avec l’algèbre ou le violon. Vous pouvez devenir virtuose avec ce nouvel artifice qui vous procure d’ailleurs un nouveau corps, tout aussi artificiel, sublimé—certains disent sublime. Vous avez le sentiment que la nouvelle langue est votre résurrection: nouvelle peau, nouveau sexe*” (Kristeva, 27).
- 10 Writing in French served Wilde’s double agenda of portraying the taboo and creating an aesthetic language comparable to music. He therefore subscribes to the central tenet of Pater’s aesthetic theory—“all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music” (Pater, 55)—and used foreign words as if they were musical notes evoking sound before meaning. The use of French enabled Wilde to invent a new language, a musical language

fitting the aesthetic programme he outlined in "The Critic as Artist": "[music is] the perfect type of art. Music can never reveal its ultimate secret" (*Works*, 1031). Wilde assessed his own achievement in composing "refrains whose recurring *motifs* make *Salome* so like a piece of music and bind it together as a ballad" (*Letters*, 740). Anticipating Strauss's opera based on his text, Wilde made *Salomé* into a tone poem, a nightmarish nocturne of heresy and incestuous desire lit by the moon. French allowed Wilde to pit himself against the doxa of Victorian convention and constraint and to rewrite the Biblical story casting it in the lurid light—or rather darkness—of obsession and murder. His ambitious aspirations are gently mocked by Ernest La Jeunesse who underscores Wilde's cosmopolitanism in his portrait of the artist: "Irlandais d'origine, Italien d'inclination, Grec de culture, Parisien de paradoxe et même de blague..."⁵ Wilde wrote "against the grain" (to quote the translation of the title of Huysmans's *À Rebours*), making the paradox into a studied stand against narrow-minded hypocrisy, though La Jeunesse put Wilde's use of paradox on the same level as the joke. Indeed, Wilde's aesthetic project was necessarily undermined by his imperfect and idiosyncratic French, which is inflected by his British accent, or as Marie-Dominique Garnier playfully puts it, *Salomé* was written in FLE (*français langue étrangère*) (Garnier, 17).

- 11 Wilde's lofty objective to compose a work in the French aesthetic mode is mocked in Aubrey Beardsley's caricature entitled *Oscar Wilde at Work*.⁶ Beardsley depicts Wilde as a student of French language and literature surrounded by piles of books. The caricature sends up the humoristic discrepancy between *Salomé*'s dysfunctional family and the suggestion of a Victorian family gathered piously around their Bible. Beardsley emphasizes Wilde's immersion in French culture by placing a copy of the French translation of Flavius Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* on his desk, rather than the corresponding English translation. The French intertextuality underpinning Wilde's work is also evident in the presence of Flaubert's *Les Trois Contes* (containing "Herodias" which inspired Wilde in his composition) and the volume by Théophile Gautier, whose manifesto of art for art's sake prefaces *Mademoiselle de Maupin* and whose poem "Contralto" Wilde cites in reference to homosexuality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The manuscript caption annotating the caricature illustrates the point made by Chris Snodgrass: "The Francophile Beardsley always thought of Wilde's *Salome* in its original French version, invariably spelling it *Salomé*. . ." (Snodgrass, 110). It rewrites a repeated citation from the play—"Il ne faut pas la regarder"—in the masculine form: "Il ne faut pas le regarder." That caption is presented typographically as if it were twice removed (by the speech marks and by the parentheses), as if Beardsley were marking a distance in order to mock Wilde's French. According to Chris Snodgrass, the legend "lampoons Wilde's boast that in writing *Salomé* in French he never had to look anything up" (Snodgrass, 118). The French phrase "Il ne faut pas le regarder" does not mean "no need to consult", but "no need to look at him", so either Beardsley is deliberately mocking Wilde's imperfect French or he is trying to be more clever than his own proficiency in the language allows. Beardsley's references to 19th century French manuals include Dr Ahn's French course and Auguste Beljame's *French Genders and Verbs at a Glance*, published in 1864. Beardsley's abbreviation of Beljame's title is significant, as he deletes the reference to French genders. By erasing one of the greatest challenges an English speaker faces when learning French, Beardsley might be subtly suggesting that Wilde's agenda is to add another gender to the language. He uses French as a means of portraying the third sex, the man-woman, the in-between who hides behind the French neutral pronoun "on".

Oscar Wilde at Work by Aubrey Beardsley



- 12 When Wilde feared that the Lord Chamberlain would impose a ban on his play, he explained that he would flee the narrow-minded hypocrisy of late Victorian England and seek cultural asylum in France. The caricaturist John Bernard Partridge was quick to pick up on Wilde's following statement: "If the Censure refuses *Salomé*," said Mr Wilde [. . .], "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 judgements." ("The Censure", *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1892: 1). A fortnight after that statement went to press, Partridge's cartoon depicting Wilde in French army uniform, with a copy of *Salomé* tucked into his pocket, appeared in *Punch*.⁷ His portrayal of Wilde is ironic as it suggests that the price of freedom of speech is conscription and military discipline. The caption to the caricature adds a Gaelic twist to the opposed characteristics of English intolerance and French openness, as the title specifies that Wilde's exile to France is "more injustice to Ireland."
- 13 Although the caricaturists had reason to mock Wilde's pose as a Frenchman, his faulty use of the French language nevertheless succeeded in creating a unique poetic effect. Wilde drafted his play directly in French, in a notebook purchased from a Parisian stationer.⁸ A study of his work in progress reveals the extent of Wilde's knowledge of French, and the way the language served his aesthetic agenda. Deciphering his handwriting indicates how he combined his love of both French and Greek, as the "e"s and "a"s of his French words imitate the Greek epsilon and the lower case alpha. A salient feature of the first draft of the play⁹ is that Wilde presents the lines of the dialogue without ascribing them to a particular character, making the text into a kind of polyphony of harmonious and discordant voices.

- 14 The errors in Wilde's manuscript versions of the play are telling, as an involuntary slip of the pen can be charged with covert meaning. One such significant error occurs in the stage directions on the first folio of the Rosenbach manuscript and serves as an indication of how English is just below the surface of the French. It could be dismissed as simply a spelling mistake when Wilde refers to the background with the phrase "au font" written with a "t" rather than with a "d", but given that he is indicating St John the Baptist's position on the set—that is, hidden in a cistern at the back—, the mistake can be read as a Freudian slip. Wilde inadvertently sets the decadent tone here by inverting values in his transformation of St John's place of death—the fateful cistern "*au fond*"—into a baptismal font where birth is celebrated. The cross-shaped letter "t" ending Wilde's word graphically foreshadows John the Baptist's death. Wilde's misspelling of the French word "*fond*" can also be read as the English word "font", a term referring to typography which highlights the materiality of the foreign language.
- 15 It is evident from the manuscript drafts that Wilde did not know the subjunctive form in French or its use in the context of imagination, doubt or fear which are all modes he constructs in his play. What is undoubtedly just a limitation in his knowledge of the language (his training in French apparently did not reach the level where the subjunctive is taught) curiously contributes to the creation of the atmosphere of his drama. He did not use the subjunctive precisely because he wanted to stage the intangible which the subjunctive conveys. One such example can be found in the first draft of the manuscript, where Wilde gives the first soldier the following line in response to Salomé's request to speak to Iokanaan: "*J'ai peur que c'est impossible*" (Martin Bodmer, folio 13). That form was corrected in the final manuscript version to: "*J'ai peur que ce soit impossible*" (Rosenbach, folio 23), although the solecism of Wilde's first draft conveys in its grammatical transgression the hint that the tetrarch's imposed rules can—and will—be broken.
- 16 One of the recurrent corrections in his manuscript is the deletion of his overly frequent use of "*enfin*", as his friend Stuart Merrill recalls: "*Je me rappelle que la plupart des tirades de ses personnages commençaient par l'explétif: enfin! En ai-je assez biffé, des enfin!*" (Merrill, 111-112). The script nevertheless retains a good number of "*enfin*" which modulate with meaning, as can be seen in the different uses made by the tetrarch when he pleads to Salomé to accept the gifts on offer. He begins by marking impatience: "*Enfin, écoutez-moi,*" (*Salomé*, 153)¹⁰ and progresses to exasperation: "*Enfin, que veux-tu, Salomé?*" (*Salomé*, 155). Wilde also uses "*enfin*" to reinforce what precedes, in the sense of "indeed" or "in truth", for example in the culmination of the tetrarch's outrage: "*Elle est monstrueuse, ta fille, elle est tout à fait monstrueuse. Enfin, ce qu'elle a fait est un grand crime.*" (*Salomé*, 163). Wilde thus makes the five lettered French word into a sign which he invests with different shades of meaning according to the context.
- 17 Despite—or perhaps on account of—Wilde's imperfect French, his poetic achievement was praised by Mallarmé: "*J'admire que tout étant exprimé par de perpétuels traits éblouissants, en votre Salomé, il se dégage, aussi, à chaque page, de l'indicible et le songe*" (Mallarmé, 60).¹¹ The final version of the play is eloquent proof that Wilde succeeded in creating his own mode of French. His particular style is characterized by the incessant refrain "*on dirait*", which uses the French impersonal pronoun "*on*" coupled with the conditional form of the verb "*dire*". Given that "*on*" blurs together the singular and the plural, the masculine and the feminine, as well as the first, second and third persons, the voice behind the pronoun remains unidentified and detached. The actor's lines formulated in the conditional are merely the outline of a potential performance. The language floats as in a dream and the

incantatory “*on dirait*” refrain creates the impression that it is moored to neither enunciator nor enunciation. The opening use of the “*on dirait*” formula sets the tone of the play: “*La lune a l’air très étrange. On dirait une femme qui sort d’un tombeau. Elle ressemble à une femme morte. On dirait qu’elle cherche des morts*” (*Salomé*, 45). The translations of these lines reveal the limitations of English, which cannot express the collective, impersonal voice of “*on*”. Lord Alfred Douglas, who is named as the translator in the dedication of the first English edition of Wilde’s play published in 1894, ascribes the “*on dirait*” phrase to the speaker and has him formulate it as a comparison: “she is like a woman rising from a tomb” (*Salomé*, 44). The English version thus retains the sense that the language is virtual, but the image is actually put into words by the speaker. Lord Alfred Douglas’s translation of the second “*on*” uses the closest English equivalent, the awkward pronoun “*one*”: “one might fancy she was looking for dead things” (*Salomé*, 44). That translation is unidiomatic and stilted, but at least the verb “to fancy” has the merit of calling on the imagination to picture the image. Neither of these translations manages to capture the elusiveness of the “*on dirait*” refrain which gives the French version its oneiric quality. Robert Ross’s translation of 1906 transposes the “*on*” into a “*you*”—“You would fancy she was looking for dead things”¹²—, whereas Vyvyan Holland’s translation of 1957 makes both uses of “*on*” into simple comparisons, stated by the speaker and not associated with a collective voice: “Look at the moon. She has a strange look about her. She looks like a woman rising from the grave. She is like a dead woman, a woman seeking the dead” (*Salomé*, trans. Holland, 13).

- 18 The poetic conceit of making the moon feminine in English successfully translates the engendered discourse in the opening dialogue of Wilde’s text, but further suggestive play in the use of gender in French is untranslatable. The predominant use of French feminine nouns in Salomé’s eulogy of Iokanaan’s body carries a hint of homoeroticism: “. . . *il ressemble à une mince image d’ivoire. On dirait une image d’argent. Je suis sûre qu’il est chaste, autant que la lune. Il ressemble à un rayon d’argent. Sa chair doit être très froide, comme de l’ivoire*” (*Salomé*, 77). Lord Alfred Douglas’s English version deletes the sexual ambiguity in Wilde’s original text, not only because it erases the feminine gender of the nouns, but also because it outlines a phallic image through its choice of words like “thin ivory statue” and “shaft”: “He is like a thin ivory statue. He is like an image of silver. I am sure he is chaste, as the moon is. He is like a moon-beam, like a shaft of silver. His flesh must be very cold, cold as ivory” (*Salomé*, 76).
- 19 Wilde was inconsistent in his use of the French informal and formal second person pronouns, sliding from “*tu*” to “*vous*” in a confusion of registers. These incongruities¹³ are not simple errors, but reflect the tension Wilde felt between trying to chime in with the Biblical tone of the story while at the same time making it more accessible to a contemporary audience. He might have felt that the formal “*vous*” form was closer to the archaic “thee, thou, thy” forms of the King James version of the Bible than the informal “*tu*”. Wilde’s incoherent use of the form of address produces a subtle modulation in tone reflecting one character’s attitude to another. For example, although Iokanaan begins by addressing Salomé with “*vous*” to mark distance, he immediately lapses into the “*tu*” form to intensify the expression of his contempt for her: “*Arrière! Fille de Babylone! N’approchez pas de l’ élu du Seigneur. Ta mère a rempli la terre du vin de ses iniquités. . .*” (*Salomé*, 77–81). Iokanaan operates a reverse modulation in his form of address when he tries to convert Salomé into a follower of Christ. His scornful use of “*tu*” gives way to the grace of “*vous*” when he intones his spiritual plea: “*Fille d’adultère, il n’y a qu’un homme qui puisse te sauver.*”

C'est celui dont je t'ai parlé. Allez le chercher. Il est dans un bateau sur la mer de Galilée, et il parle à ses disciples. Agenouillez-vous au bord de la mer, et appelez-le par son nom. Quand il viendra vers vous, et il vient vers tous ceux qui l'appellent, prosternez-vous à ses pieds et demandez-lui la rémission de vos péchés" (Salomé, 89). This controlled use of the "tu" and "vous" forms reflects Wilde's creative use of French to translate the complex relationships between his characters.

- 20 Wilde's inventive use of French drew on its specific sound patterns to create a symbolist language analogous to music. This is illustrated in Salomé's declaration which uses anagrammatic assonance to link *amour* and *mort*, and thus to fuse and confuse the figures of Eros and Thanatos: "*le mystère de l'amour est plus grand que le mystère de la mort. Il ne faut regarder que l'amour*" (Salomé, 163). The verbal echoing in French is completely lost in the English translation of the words: love and death. Wilde also used the sonority of the French language to suggestive effect in Salomé's next speech, which further expresses her vampire-like lust. Her words and deeds are so "against the grain" that Wilde has plunged the stage in darkness to dissociate them from a visible image. Salomé's voice is heard but she is not seen performing the act of necrophilia. Her simple statement of fact: "*j'ai baisé ta bouche, Iokanaan*" is horrific in the context, as the mouth she has kissed is on a severed head dripping with blood, but Wilde manages to voice the taboo thanks to the alienation involved when using a foreign language. In addition, the phrase is repeated incessantly and obsessively, thus dulling its impact and muting its semantic value. In Salomé's concluding lines, Wilde adds an alliterative play on the letter "s" to create a sense of satanic sensuality: "*j'ai baisé ta bouche, Iokanaan, j'ai baisé ta bouche. Il y avait une âcre saveur sur tes lèvres. Était-ce la saveur du sang?*" (Salomé, 165). The English translation proposed by Lord Alfred Douglas loses the "s" alliteration and changes the tonality of the passage in its use of the cutting consonant "k" in "kiss" and the plosives "b" and "t" in "bitter", "taste" and "blood": "I have kissed thy mouth, Iokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth. There was a bitter taste on thy lips. Was it the taste of blood?" (Salomé, 164).
- 21 Wilde's script is like a musical score which the playwright hands over to the actors, as an invitation for them to interpret it. Here again the manuscript versions are eloquent, as Wilde's correctors proposed specific instructions on how to deliver the lines. For instance, on folio 33 of the Rosenbach manuscript, one of the correctors indicates that the actress playing Salomé should pronounce her reaction to Iokanaan with fear and trembling in her voice: "*Salomé [effrayée]: Mais il est terrible, il est terrible.*" On the same folio, the corrector spells out how and to whom—"vivement aux soldats"—Salomé should address her line: "*Pensez-vous qu'il parlera encore?*" Wilde crossed out both these stage directions, giving the actress *carte blanche* to deliver her speeches according to her own interpretation. His composition therefore has the quality of a musical *Urtext* which contains no dynamic markings, in other words no indication about how to play the notes. The most striking example of minimal—or absent—stage directions is Salomé's dance. In the first draft of the play, Wilde makes no verbal reference to it, but represents it iconographically with a curved line (Martin Bodmer, folio 47). In the second draft, Wilde simply indicates and underlines: "*Salomé danse*", which he reduces even further to a pronominal form in the third version: "*Elle danse*" (Rosenbach, folio 97). It is not until the typescript stage that he specifies: "*Salomé danse la danse des sept voiles.*" Wilde's sketchy annotations have given rise to the most elaborate and extended choreographic and orchestral interpretations.

- 22 The manuscript versions show how Wilde invents a typographical system to mark time, with a measured use of suspension points. He varies the number of suspension points as if to indicate the duration of the silence or pause. For example, in the Rosenbach manuscript, Herod's gift list to *Salomé* is rhythmized by the number of suspension points (folios 111r^o and 110v^o): his offer of a bracelet with jewels "*qui viennent de la ville d'Euphrate. . .*" is followed by five dots. At the end of his speech, his final—sacrilegious—suggestion is followed by a silence marked by six dots: "*Je te donnerai le voile du sanctuaire. . .*" On the folio opposite, Wilde inserted the beginning of a sentence in which Herod makes a desperate final offer, truncated by the insertion of no fewer than eight dots: "*Je te donnerai. . .*" This quasi musical notation disappears in the printed version of the text, which transforms Wilde's manuscript dots into a uniform series of three, sometimes even replacing them with a single full stop.
- 23 The musical quality of Wilde's script was perceptively—and prophetically—recognized by one of the first critics to review its publication, Richard Le Gallienne: "It seems to me built to music. Its gradual growth is exactly like the development of a theme in music." (*Letters*, 552). James Joyce also underscored the play's musical features when he referred to it as an "opera—a polyphonic variation on the rapport of art and nature, but at the same time a revelation of his own psyche—his brilliant books sparkling with epigrams. . . , these are now divided booty" (Joyce, 205).
- 24 Wilde's *Salomé* is "divided booty", but such artistic pillagers as Aubrey Beardsley and Richard Strauss engaged in preserving the play's specific Frenchness. Beardsley's illustration "The Climax", which appeared in *The Studio* the year before the English translation was printed,¹⁴ quotes the original French version in the caption: "*j'ai baisé ta bouche, Iokanaan, j'ai baisé ta bouche.*" Beardsley draws—or, to cite the title page of the English translation, he "pictures"—the transgressive, making a visual representation of what Wilde had left in the dark and using the immunity of the foreign language to articulate the unspeakable. Beardsley was at pains to maintain the French context of Wilde's play, as can be seen in the two versions of the "*Toilette de Salomé*". The first version of the drawing—containing nudity and a graphic representation of masturbation—was censored, and when reworking the picture, Beardsley changed *Salomé*'s reading matter. The copies of Zola's *La Terre* and Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* in the first version were replaced in the second version by Zola's narrative of the courtesan *Nana* and a volume by the Marquis de Sade. Beardsley therefore used French literature to convey his message, letting the words stand in for the image.
- 25 The reception history of *Salomé* confirms beyond any doubt that Wilde's text is best known as the libretto for Richard Strauss's opera, first performed in 1905. Strauss immediately grasped the play's musical potential, and he reportedly commented after seeing it performed that it was simply calling out for music. Although Strauss composed his opera using a German libretto written by Hedwig Lachmann, he was attuned to the French quality of Wilde's text. He therefore undertook the painstaking task of rewriting the vocal line of his opera to adapt it to Wilde's original French version, explaining to Romain Rolland: "*Comme le texte original de la Salomé de Wilde est en français, je voudrais réaliser une édition française de mon opéra tout à fait spéciale, qui ne donne pas l'impression d'une traduction, mais d'une véritable composition de l'original. Voulez-vous m'y aider?*" (Rolland-Strauss, 62). The first performance of Strauss's French version of the opera at the *Théâtre de la Monnaie* in Brussels in March 1907 was followed the next month by a private performance in Paris, directed by Jacques Isnardon, with his wife Lucy Isnardon singing

the title role, and probably using a piano reduction of the orchestral score. Despite the enormous amount of time and effort Strauss had spent in creating a French version of his opera, he conducted from the German score for the French première of the opera at the *Théâtre du Châtelet* in Paris in May 1907. One can only deduce that the German language gave him more scope for invention and adventure than French; whatever the reason, the German version quickly became established as the standard version of the opera.¹⁵

- 26 Both Beardsley in his drawings and Strauss in his French version of the opera echoed the French tonality of Wilde's work. The two most creative "pillagers" of Wilde's work clearly recognized that its originality was indivisible from its use of the French language. Wilde's French text therefore illustrates the thesis put forward by Adorno in "On the Use of Foreign Words":

Foreign words become the bearers of subjective contents: of the nuances. The meanings in one's own language may well correspond to the meanings of the foreign words in every case; but they cannot be arbitrarily replaced by them because the expression of subjectivity cannot simply be dissolved in meaning. Mood, atmosphere, the music of language, all the postulates of Verlaine's *art poétique* on which the differential principle of nuance is based, tend to harden the individual's claim to his rational indissolubility in language in that they demonstrate this claim through untranslatability.

(Adorno, II: 287)

- 27 Wilde's *Salomé* is a French princess, and the substance of his text is inextricable from the language of its composition. As he boasts in the dedication of the copy of the play he gave to Charles Ricketts, who had done the stage design for the aborted London production of *Salomé*: "You do not know that since we last met I have become a famous French author" (Ellmann, 353).

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NOTES

1. Matthew XIV, 3–11, Mark VI, 17–26.
2. Reported by Maurice SISLEY in *Le Gaulois*, 29 June 1892, p. 1.
3. See the concluding line of his poem "Two Loves" published in *The Chameleon I: I* (London, Gay and Bird, 1894), p. 28.
4. See the interview reported by Jacques DAURELLE in *L'Écho de Paris*, 6 December 1891, p. 2.
5. See Ernest LA JEUNESSE, "Notes sur l'auteur" in Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*, Paris, G. Crès, 1917, p. 21.
6. See *Oscar Wilde at Work* by Aubrey Beardsley.
7. See *Punch*, July 9 1892, p. 1.

8. For a detailed presentation of the manuscript versions of the play, see Rodney SHEWAN, *Oscar Wilde's Salomé: A Critical Variorum Edition*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Reading, 1982, 2 vol.
9. There are three manuscript versions of the play: the first rough draft now belongs to the *Fondation Martin Bodmer*, housed in Cologne, near Geneva. It is reproduced in the edition of Wilde's *Salomé* by the *Presses universitaires de France* (Paris, 2008). The second manuscript version of the play is in the *Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre* at the University of Texas in Austin. The third and final version is in the *Rosenbach Collection* in Philadelphia. It contains four different handwritings: the entire script written out by Wilde is amended and corrected in turn by the bilingual American poet Stuart Merrill, the Symbolist poet Adolphe Retté and Pierre Louÿs, to whom Wilde dedicated the French edition of the text. The Rosenbach manuscript served as the basis for the typescript of the play. Marcel Schwob intervened at the final stage and corrected the proofs.
10. The printed text of *Salomé* is cited from the bi-lingual edition by Pascal AQUIEN (Paris, Flammarion, 1993), which presents the first English translation—by Lord Alfred Douglas, revised by Wilde—on the page opposite the French version.
11. Letter dated March 1893.
12. Robert Ross does not sign his translation, which was first published in 1906, and then again in 1912. The citation is from the first page of the script. See Joost DAADLER, "What is the most authoritative early translation of Wilde's *Salomé*?", *English Studies*, 2004, I, p. 47–52.
13. On the subject of incongruities in *Salomé*, see Robert SCHWEIK, "Congruous Incongruities: The Wilde-Beardsley 'Collaboration'", *English Literature in Transition*, vol. 37 n°1 (1994), p. 9–26.
14. See the illustration on p. 19, accompanying the article by Joseph PENNELL, "A New Illustrator: Aubrey Beardsley", *The Studio*, vol. I, April 1893.
15. Strauss's French *Salomé* was revived by Kent Nagano in a performance and recording at the *Opéra de Lyon* in 1990.
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ABSTRACTS

This paper focuses on Wilde's use of French in his dramatization of the Biblical story, *Salomé*. It argues that Wilde adopted the foreign language as a strategy for representing the taboo of incestuous and homoerotic desire, murder and necrophilia. His aesthetic objective was to produce a work belonging to the school of French decadentism and adhering to its principles of symbolism. He uses the French language as if it were a system of signs divorced from their semantic meaning, creating as pure a musical notation as verbal language can allow. A study of the manuscript versions of his play reveals his limited knowledge of French, though this paper interprets the mistakes as key to his poetic achievement. Wilde's play is untranslatable: both the illustrator Aubrey Beardsley and the composer Richard Strauss recognized the quintessential French quality of the script, and respected it in their creative translations into another artistic genre.

AUTHOR

EMILY EELLS

Université de Paris Ouest — Nanterre.

Emily Eells est professeur d'anglais à l'Université de Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense et spécialiste de la littérature et de l'art britanniques du XIX^e siècle. Depuis la publication de son livre *Proust's Cup of Tea: Homoeroticism and Victorian Culture* (Ashgate, 2002), elle s'intéresse aux questions de « l'interlinguistique », c'est-à-dire l'emprunt et l'empreinte d'une langue étrangère dans un texte d'une autre langue. Ses travaux récents comprennent une étude de la réception de *Dorian Gray* et *Salomé* qui figure dans le volume sur Wilde dans la collection *The Reception of British Authors in Europe*, ainsi qu'un essai sur Proust et Wilde. Rivendale Press publie son volume présentant les textes de l'adaptation théâtrale que Cocteau a faite du *Picture of Dorian Gray* accompagné d'un essai analytique sur Wilde d'un ami de Cocteau nommé Raymond Laurent, critique inconnu et précoce, mort à Venise à l'âge de 21 ans.