

**“Art with poisonous honey stolen from France:”  
Oscar Wilde and Decadent Imitations between England and France**

by

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## Abstract

This thesis studies national conceptions of sexuality and the geo-politics of the Decadent movement in the writing and the literary afterlife of the Irish author and critic Oscar Wilde. In his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and his play *Salomé*, Wilde's French influences are immediately apparent, but their purpose demands critique. I argue Wilde's use of French Decadence functions as a code for types of art and sexuality that were not permissible to express in the social and legal environment of England in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. French Decadence exemplified contrasting and complementary ideas of beauty and perversity which Wilde incorporated into his own writing. From his engagement with French Decadent art arose an idealised vision of Paris as a region where individuals may practice unconventional types of art and sexuality with greater freedom in comparison to the oppressive moral atmosphere of England. In Wilde's works, modern Paris holds affinities with the Classical Mediterranean world not only through her literature, but through her law. After 1791, sodomy was no longer a criminal offense in France: this legal circumstance in combination with the unrestrained eroticism in French art produced a tempting fantasy of sexual tolerance in France at the *fin-de-siècle*.

## Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work of the author, Michaela Posthumus.

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## Introduction

Decadence challenged prevailing notions of masculinity and heteronormativity in England, and the implicit correlation between Decadent writing and perverse sexual practises became concrete in the minds of the English public when Wilde, the voice of Decadence in England, was tried and convicted for gross indecency at the height of his literary career in 1895. Wilde chose France as a place of exile after his prison term, but this cannot be dismissed a matter-of-course. The migration of English Decadent writers like Wilde to France should be understood in the context of the English reception of a French literary movement that produced the fantasy of 1880s to 90s Paris as a safe haven for types of writing and sexuality that were legally and socially condemned in England. In this study, Wilde emerges as a “French” writer just as French Decadence can appear “Wildean.” The suggestive title of Jacques de Langlade’s 1975 monograph *Oscar Wilde, écrivain français* reminds us of Oscar Wilde’s nebulous national identity. Irish by birth but identified abroad as the prototypical English dandy, Wilde further defied national categorizations through his adoption of French literary models. Wilde borrowed ideas and aesthetic theories from the literature of the French Decadents and incorporated them into his writings, most particularly in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/91). Moreover, Wilde embedded his art in the French literary tradition by writing his one-act play *Salomé* in French. Oscar Wilde’s ostensibly French identity is evident not only in his emulation of French Decadent writers but also in his reflections upon French society more broadly. In his essay “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” Wilde praises French audiences for their superior sense of discretion and their enhanced artistic cultivation which he contrasts with the hypocrisy of prudish English audiences. His Francophilia also manifested itself through his numerous visits to France during his literary career and his eventual removal to France after enduring a harsh prison sentence for gross indecency and

suffering under the harrowing laws and social prejudices of England. Wilde was not a French writer by birth, but his writings in French and about France create a vision of France as a nation vastly preferable for homosexual men to live in than England. Specifically, Wilde uses France and the French language as a code for artistic as well as sexual freedom.

French Decadent writing expressed concepts forbidden in England: it was obsessed with sickliness and decay in contrast to the healthy mental and physical ideals of mainstream English society; it flouted social taboos, especially those concerning sexuality and criminality, which could be one and the same in England and thus held a double-resonance for homosexual English readers. It is no coincidence that the 1893 pornographic novel *Teleny or The Reverse of the Medal*, attributed to Oscar Wilde and his circle, is set in France despite being written in English. When Wilde adopted French Decadence as the framework for *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and his play *Salomé*, he made a defiant statement against not only the morally conservative literature of England, but also the conservative social attitudes that forbade and criminalised the possibility of same-sex love. Wilde's French Decadence is not a pose, but a conceit through which he projects his desired France, but also his desired England; his France is one of artistic and social liberty which he critiques England for failing to resemble.

The reputation of Decadence rapidly declined after 1895 and artists and writers in England who once employed the morality-challenging "art for art's sake" ethos of Decadence were obliged to either abandon the theory or conceal their artistic preoccupations under another name. Arthur Symonds furnishes a clear example in his choice to distance himself and his previous work from the dangerous label of Decadence after 1895, exchanging 'Decadence' for 'Symbolism' in his critical works. While the lasting effects of Wilde's association with Decadence led English writers to dissociate themselves from the Decadent movement and its

foremost representatives, Wilde's English Decadent writing came to influence French literature through the novels of André Gide, demonstrating reciprocity between the English and French Decadent traditions. Wilde's conflation of French Decadence with sexual liberty bolsters the notion of Decadence as a homoerotically coded intertext: Wilde's writings further develop Decadence as a shorthand and a framework for expressing same-sex desire. Gide extends this code even more explicitly through his fiction and nonfiction works memorialising Wilde, and later through his Socratic defense of homosexuality, *Corydon* (1924). Here he overtly makes Wilde a part of a queer genealogy in the same way that Wilde invoked figures like Plato, Socrates, Michelangelo, and Shakespeare in both his short story "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." and in his famous speech from the dock during his second criminal trial.

Wilde enciphers homosexuality in his works not only through his imitation of French morality and art, but also through frequent invocations of Greek Antiquity. As Linda Dowling displays in her examination of Victorian Hellenism at Oxford, Ancient Greek philosophical ideals of mental and physical health dominated mainstream English society, but Greek philosophy also provided a homosexual counter-discourse through the tradition of *paidierastia* that lent an air of moral legitimacy to same-sex love. The stifling moral atmosphere of England prevented possibilities of same-sex love, in part through the intractable laws concerning sodomy and gross indecency under which Wilde later suffered. However, for Wilde, "the 'Greek life' involved a performative dimension" (Evangelista 126), which it was not possible to live out in England. In this view, France, with its more liberal penal codes and its homoerotic tradition of Decadent literature, emulated Greek life to a greater degree. France did not openly celebrate homosexual relationships, but neither did it punish them.



The work of scholars like Graham Robb and Matt Cook studying the culture of homosexuality in nineteenth century London and Paris informs the social context for my thesis. Studies of Wilde's relation to specific French writers and the transnational aspect of Decadence have been undertaken previously, as Wilde's affiliation with French authors was conspicuous in his own lifetime and after. The works of Emily Eells and Victoria Reid explore, respectively, the literary and biographical elements of Wilde's relationship to André Gide. The recent work of Matthew Potolsky describes the transnational element of Decadent writing as essential to understanding the cosmopolitan literary ideals held by Decadent writers, with a focus on the relationship between writers in England and France. Whereas traditional scholarship focuses on English reactions to Decadent art after Wilde's arrest and trial, and stylistic similarities between Wilde and his French influences, my study marries these concepts and focuses on the work and reception of Oscar Wilde as it relates to French Decadence and an imagined culture of sexual tolerance that was read into French literature and law during the period. Considerable research has been undertaken connecting Hellenism, homosexuality, and Decadence in studies by Robert Aldrich, Linda Dowling, and Stefano Evangelista, but my aim is to demonstrate how English Decadent writers conflated contemporary *fin-de-siècle* France with the Classical Mediterranean world. In this sense, *Le Parnasse contemporain* is more than the name of a French poetry collection featuring Gautier and Baudelaire; it is a phrase which may describe an imagined Paris in the minds of the English Decadents. In their view, France's lack of sodomy laws had less to do with the Penal Code and socio-legal outcomes of the French Revolution than with France's perceived proximity to the Hellenic past.

In England and in France, Decadence was perpetuated through imitation: prominent authors in each country reinscribed literary homoeroticism by emulating the aesthetic of the

other. Wilde used French Decadence to code homosexual love in his English writing, but after his infamous trials French writers could use Wildean theories or techniques for homoerotic expression. To study the works of Wilde through this lens is to understand how he imagined the reception of his work in two nations that were culturally in frequent correspondence and conflict with each other. Although imagined tolerance and social realities seldom matched, the homoerotic Decadent texts produced in England persisted in idealizing France.

“‘*Salome*’ has made the author’s name a household word wherever the English language is not spoken.”  
– Robert Ross<sup>1</sup>

## Chapter 1 | The English *homme de lettres*

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salomé*, Oscar Wilde, the prototypical English Decadent, constructs a version of France that favours his artistic preoccupations. It is possible to trace an idealized France that exists implicitly and explicitly in his critical and creative writings as well as in his conversations and interviews. Beginning with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, described by Arthur Ransome in 1912 as “the first French novel to be written in the English language,” (93) I will examine the key places where French language, culture, and attitudes are invoked by characters in the novel, how Wilde subverts English identity through an intellectually expatriate protagonist and how previous French Decadent works shape the novel’s theme and content. In particular, Wilde deliberately invokes the leading Decadent of his period, Joris-Karl Huysmans, whose 1884 novel *À Rebours* remains widely regarded as the pinnacle of Decadent prose. While the first part of this chapter examines how Wilde imagines and encodes Paris in his own idiom via his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the second part considers how Wilde adapts the French literary tradition not by imitating it, but by writing himself into it with his play *Salomé*. *Salomé* is French not only in language, but in origin and content. Borrowing from references to the *Salomé* narrative in French Decadent literature and art, Wilde created a Decadent heroine who was unpalatable to the English critics who regarded themselves as the arbiters of propriety. Although the production of the play was ultimately banned in England by the Lord Chamberlain

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<sup>1</sup> From “A Note on *Salome*” (xiii). This version omits the acute accent on the heroine’s name.

for its representation of Biblical characters, Wilde's decision to write the play in French presupposes that an appreciative audience was French or French-sympathizing. In turn this informs us of how he imagined the reception of his work in France where, according to Wilde's essay "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," the general population as well as the critics possessed artistically superior sensibilities. However, I will contrast the France that Wilde constructs in his works with France as perceived by her own artists and critics, in order to articulate how the English Decadent imagination produced a France that exhibited a greater artistic and social tolerance than could be found in England, the nation set up by contrast as a site of bigotry and hypocrisy.

### **Dorian Gray's French Heritage**

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the recurring mentions of Paris frequently concern differences in the conventions of morality between the English and the French. This is done explicitly in Lord Henry's glib response to Sybil Vane's death, as he justifies his desire to dissociate Dorian from the scandal of her suicide which could be a detriment to the young Dorian's reputation, saying, "Things like that make a man fashionable in Paris. But in London people are so prejudiced" (95). Lord Henry presents an alternative version of morality which, as with all things French, he considers intellectually superior to the presupposed English social standards he critiques. The morality of French society, or lack thereof, is also implicitly characterised by numerous figures in the novel when their references to scandalous sexual trysts use French vocabulary. The French language functions as a medium through which these characters may express concepts which are imagined to offend prudish English sensibilities and in this way language becomes a code where French is shorthand for the delightful and perverse. Lady Narborough, who "devoted herself now to the pleasures of French fiction, French cookery, and French *esprit* when she could get it,"

holds a party in which the narrative presents French innuendo in connection with Dorian and his reputed affairs (167). Narborough claims her chef Adolphe picked the “*menu*” especially for Dorian, aligning his ‘tastes’ with France gastronomically as well as culturally and sexually. Over the course of the dinner they discuss his latest love, the “*décolletée*”<sup>2</sup> Madame de Ferrol, who “when she is in a very smart gown looks like an *édition de luxe* of a bad French novel,” by which Lord Henry conflates Dorian’s love of French fiction with his somatic passions (169). The overt references to French literature are further complemented by mentions of the “*fin de siècle*,” transformed by Lady Narborough into “*fin de globe*,” illustrating the degenerative drive perceived in that literary and artistic movement.<sup>3</sup> By drawing our attention to the *fin de siècle* in this witty exchange, Wilde specifies implicitly which genre of French literature influences the personalities of Lady Narborough, Lord Henry, and Dorian: what is broadly “French” is really French Decadence.

Wilde’s portrayal of French art and culture through these characters also constructs an “English type” in opposition, embodying all that is conventional, healthy, and respectable.<sup>4</sup> English art is robust and wholesome and for these reasons entirely uninteresting to a figure like Lord Henry; its very wholesomeness and adherence to social codes prevents it from crossing any

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<sup>2</sup> “Low-cut” as with clothing low-cut at the neck, but also meaning “woman’s cleavage.”

<sup>3</sup> Although French Decadence and the “art for art’s sake” movement begin earlier than the 1880s and 1890s, Decadent ideas of perversity and degeneration in art were characteristically conventions of the *fin de siècle*.

<sup>4</sup> Matt Cook identifies some ideals of English ‘virtue’ found in newspaper responses to the Wilde trials in 1895: “*The Star*. . . claimed that ‘the literature of the decadence contains much which is admirable and something that will live’ but also noted that beside the ‘saner element’ ‘there has existed a parasite, an excrescence, an aberration which diligent advertisement has made more or less familiar to the public against its will.’ The piece concluded: ‘the ultimate effect of recent disclosures should be to strengthen health and right and reason—the kind of art which Plato had in mind when he spoke of the refreshing winds that blow from healthy regions.’ *The Telegraph*, finally, reiterated the French connection: ‘Everybody can see and read for himself, and every honest and wholesome-minded Englishman must grieve to notice, how largely this French and Pagan plague has filtered into the healthy fields of English life [undermining] the natural affections, the domestic joys, the sanctity and sweetness of the home.’ At a time of particular tension between France and England following the French alliance with Russia in 1894, such influences were especially threatening, and these commentators tended towards the promotion of a cleansing and tacitly pastoral Englishness. Decadence was the inverse: it was French, urban, excessive, contagious and parasitic, vampirically draining the nation’s life blood. It anarchically threatened a vaunted if illusory English domestic and social orderliness” (118).

boundaries or engaging in any new ideas, unlike the literature of France which constantly flouts artistic and moral boundaries. Throughout the novel English culture is largely defined by what it fails to do in the eyes of Lord Henry and Dorian. The morality-obsessed literature of England fails to comprehend the beauty of sickliness and decay, and fails to indulge in the extremes of decadence which the characters so admire in the French writing of the *fin de siècle*—a failure of nonconformity which exists not only in English writing, but in the English public as well. The use of French euphemisms to describe affairs where both participants are ostensibly English enforces a notion of moral permissibility that exists in their imagined France. In England, or more precisely, in English, affairs are not to be spoken of; couching these violations of sexual morality in French vocabulary not only distances them from the speaker and the subject, but superimposes new meaning informed by preconceptions of French proclivities. This chapter which alludes so frequently to France and degenerative French fiction ends with Dorian's decision to visit the opium dens, further connecting his habits with the subversive content associated with French Decadent writing.<sup>5</sup> In his tendency to present the most transgressive moments in his novel, here and elsewhere, using references to France, whether linguistically or culturally, Wilde insinuates that behaviour which would be transgressive in England would not be considered so in France. This premise is not unique to Wilde, as the idea of France, and especially Paris, as a site of potential corruption and degeneration permeated mainstream English preconceptions of their old enemy.<sup>6</sup> However, Wilde glorifies and glamorizes particular aspects of French Decadent transgression which the English public vilifies.

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<sup>5</sup> Opium and hashish use is prominent in Decadent fiction and among French Decadent writers, notably Baudelaire whose 1860 book *Les Paradis artificiels* was influenced by Thomas de Quincey's popular novel *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821).

<sup>6</sup> In the 1871 trial "The Queen v. Boulton and Others," Boulton's counsel takes up the rhetoric of national character and moral degeneracy: "I call upon you to do something which will be of greater utility, and that is to pronounce by your verdict that they libel the morality and character of this country who say that plague exists... I trust your verdict

Although Dorian is a fashionable young dandy in London, he resists a wholly “English” identity. His name associates him with the ancient Greeks, as does Basil’s frequent artistic portrayal of him in ancient scenes or as a figure from Greek mythology. The Hellenistic aspect of his character is important but no less essential is the way in which Wilde presents Dorian as an innately French individual, even if he is an Englishman. In relating the details of Dorian’s origin to his nephew, Lord Fermor tells Lord Henry that Dorian’s mother was named Margaret Devereux, a surname that suggests some trace of French ancestry. Bloodlines and genealogy play a significant role in Dorian’s imagination and self-understanding, especially in grappling with what inspired him to make his fatal wish and in consideration of whether his vanity and immorality is genetic. In a moment which mirrors the opening of *À Rebours*, where des Esseintes examines the portraits of his ancestors, Dorian wanders the portrait gallery of his country house and speculates whether it is possible that “some strange poisonous germ crept from body to body till it reached his own” (137). That Dorian’s striking appearance comes directly from his mother emphasizes his genetic connection to France and reiterates the correlations made between France and the ideals of beauty and art, especially when that beauty becomes tinged with danger.

Dorian’s French heritage is subtle, but it primes him for the behaviours and interests that make Dorian more French than English in nature. He models his tastes after the Francophile Lord Henry, in whose library he notes a copy of “‘Les Cent Nouvelles,’ bought for Margaret of Valois by Clovis Eve,” lies next to “a statue by Clodion” (45). While he waits there, Dorian peruses a copy of the controversial and salacious French novella ‘Manon Lescaut’ (45). Dorian

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will establish the moral atmosphere of England is not yet tainted with the impurities of Continental cities and that, free as we are from our island position, we are insulated from the crimes to which you had had allusion made, and you will pronounce by your verdict on this case at all events with regard to these facts that London is not cursed with the sins of Sodom, or Westminster tainted with the vices of Gomorrah” (qtd. in Cohen 97). Boulton and Park were notorious cross-dressers who caused a great sensation when their case appeared in the London courts. They were originally charged with conspiring and inciting persons to commit an unnatural offence, but both were ultimately acquitted.

has already read and is familiar with the work of Théophile Gautier and “the French school of *Symbolistes*”<sup>7</sup> before Lord Henry lends him the “poisonous book” which so significantly shapes his artistic predilections. In his tastes as a collector Dorian rarely chooses art of English origin and instead has a marked preference for what is French, Roman Catholic, or Oriental in style. Dorian Gray’s French identity is important not only for tying him to the French literary tradition, but also for situating him as a foreigner in England. Wilde makes Dorian un-English, even anti-English, situated opposite to the homogeneous and heteronormative ideals of English masculinity and morality. In *London and the Culture of Homosexuality*, Matt Cook notes how English papers and the English public were keen to present homosexuality as something outside of the English national constitution; according to Cook, “foreigners were consistently blamed for bringing the ‘vice’ to England. . . . [The *Morning Chronicle*] suggested that the vice, which was ‘horrible to the nature of Englishmen’, had insinuated itself into the country through the influence of foreign soldiers on our own troops” (11). When sodomy cases taken to trial were published in newspapers, the press emphasized the origins of the accused: “nationality and accent were frequently noted in the papers, and it is certainly possible that police xenophobia made foreigners more vulnerable to arrest” and that even the London male prostitute Jack Saul, although a Londoner, “was said by *Reynolds* [*Weekly Newspaper*] to ‘speak with a foreign accent’” (62). This correlation between foreign nationality and homosexuality is at play in the presentation of Dorian as an anti-English character, even when all events in the novel take place in England.

Just as French vocabulary encapsulates and encodes indecent sexual affairs, foreignness operates as a code for homosexuality, especially when it is placed in conjunction with other references that bind together multifaceted conceptions of sexual deviance. To ask if a young man

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<sup>7</sup> “Decadents” in the *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* version of the novel published a year earlier in 1890, demonstrating, as I argue later, how dangerous some found this artistic term.



was “musical” was one of the many common code-phrases for homosexuality at the time (Robb 150). Dorian’s musicality is another signifier that distances him from an English identity, as Lady Henry, speaking of the allure of pianists, supposes that their attraction lies in that “they are foreigners. They all are, ain’t they? Even those that are born in England become foreign after a time” (46).<sup>8</sup> While Dorian does not play professionally, he is a proficient pianist and the reader knows of his musical ability before Dorian makes his first appearance. Lady Brandon, when introducing Basil to Dorian, finds no occupation to remark upon concerning Dorian until she remembers his skill on the piano. Lord Henry recollects that he had heard Dorian’s name before in connection to his Aunt Agatha, who had told him of Dorian’s musicality. The reader and Lord Henry have their first sight of Dorian as he sits at a piano asking about musical pieces. Wilde constructs and reinforces a musical inclination as part of Dorian’s foreign affiliation, consciously placing him at a further remove from English culture.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde repeatedly constructs France, and more specifically Paris, as an idealized location for the artist and for those who can appreciate art. Wilde’s characters perceive the English public as Philistines whose gravest fault is to attempt to tie morality to art—a mistake the French do not make according to their line of argument—a fault exacerbated by the moral hypocrisy of the English. Dorian describes England as the “native land of the hypocrite” and even Basil, aspiring moral compass in Dorian’s social circle, agrees that “England is bad enough I know, and English society is all wrong” (145). Wilde critiques the desire to judge art on a moral basis from the first page of the novel, where his preface insists that no art is moral or immoral, anticipating precisely how critics and the public would react to his

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<sup>8</sup> René Teleny, in the pornographic novel *Teleny* (1893) persistently attributed to Wilde, neatly fulfills this stereotype; he is a pianist, a foreigner, and a bisexual man, explicitly embodying the qualities which are encoded here.

novel in England. Like “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” *The Picture of Dorian Gray* demonstrates how Wilde believes that art and beauty are better appreciated and understood in France without any irritating search for a moral. Dorian’s French identity justifies why the portrait and the secret it holds never leave Dorian’s home. It is a piece of art that moralizing English audiences could never understand. Moreover, Dorian’s chambers become a miniature Paris, a territory made French by Dorian’s presence and ownership, his numerous French possessions, and even his French valet. His guests are those that sympathize with his refined French tastes without questioning the morality of his unconventional artistic interests and eccentric passions. Basil’s intent to exhibit Dorian’s portrait in Paris reinforces the presupposed differences concerning art and moral spectatorship between the two nations.

Wilde demonstrates French society’s superior artistic discernment and taste in Basil’s notion of taking Dorian’s portrait to Paris for a month to exhibit it, and further to make it “the principal thing” in his exhibition (111). It is a work of art he previously believed he had “put too much of [him]self in,” and he swore never to exhibit the painting publicly for fear of exposing his adoration for Dorian (111). Once out of the portrait’s intoxicating presence, he decides he was “foolish in imagining” that his secret love for Dorian was revealed in it. Dorian and Basil speak of different hidden messages, each dreading that his own soul might be dangerously on display and open him up to complete condemnation. Basil does not yet learn that Dorian has actually discovered that the portrait reflects the sins that never appear on his own form, but Basil is unsurprised when Dorian simply agrees that the only message is Basil’s adoration and that “there was nothing else to see” (112). Basil’s choice to exhibit the painting and risk exposing his feelings for Dorian is more complex than merely dismissing his original impression as a foolish

imagining. Basil desires to exhibit the painting in Paris exclusively; he promises Dorian it will only be “away for a month or so” after which it will return directly back to Dorian’s apartments.

By extension, Paris is the place where it is safe for an Englishman to risk sexual self-disclosure through his art. Basil presupposes that the offer for a special exhibition in the Rue de Sèze includes an appreciative Parisian audience who will judge the painting on its quality. While they might understand the ‘hidden message’ within it, Basil will not suffer social, legal, or professional consequences. With a judgemental English audience the hidden meanings that are so apparent in the portrait could lead to Basil’s condemnation. Ultimately the painting is fit for Paris but it is not fit for London. If France is the only appropriate place to exhibit the painting, the presence of the portrait in Dorian’s chambers corroborates Dorian’s French identity and makes his chambers represent a French territory within London. His home is a conduit to Paris, for his Decadent portrait, imbued with homoeroticism, is meant to travel from his home to Paris and then immediately back. In this sense, although the portrait never enters Paris, it also never leaves.

Dorian’s taste for French literature appears at its purest in the form of the “yellow book,” the poisonous bible which Lord Henry passes on to Dorian. The book goes unnamed but can be recognised immediately as a thinly-disguised *À Rebours*,<sup>9</sup>

a novel without a plot and with only one character, being, indeed, simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own . . . The style in which it was written was that

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<sup>9</sup> Wilde denied that the book was unequivocally *À Rebours* in his trial, but it would have been compromising for him to confirm this during the trial. Wilde deliberately altered some particulars and referred to chapters that do not exist in *À Rebours*, but in its singular description the influence of Huysmans is clear. See Appendix A.

curious jewelled style, vivid and obscure at once, full of *argot* and of archaisms, of technical expressions and of elaborate paraphrases, that characterizes the work of some of the finest artists of the French school of *Symbolistes*. (120-121)

Dorian recognises elements of himself in the main character, who we can take for Des Esseintes: “the wonderful young Parisian, in whom the romantic and scientific temperaments were so strangely blended, became to him a kind of prefiguring type of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the whole of his life, written before he had lived it” (123). Des Esseintes is a pre-eminent Decadent collector of beautiful things, be they art, perfumes, or flowers. He is far sicker in body than the robust and forever youthful Dorian, an aspect that Dorian considers the only point which separates him from the book’s “fantastic hero” (123). In an example of life imitating art, Dorian imagines himself as French literary character and perceives his existence as one which is built on the foundation of this novel. His actions throughout the eleventh chapter, which describes his admiration for the novel and the course his life takes after reading it, mirror Des Esseintes’ as Wilde describes the beautiful items which Dorian collects. Written as an extended catalogue which eschews traditional narrative impetus and resists questions of morality, the chapter is a microcosm of Huysmans’ novel.

The two novels differ in execution of their themes but are aligned through the aesthetic alienation of their protagonists. Huysmans codified the Decadent protagonist in *À Rebours*. The figure of Des Esseintes appears not only in Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*, but also the eponymous character of Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). Pater sought to bypass Decadent interests in decay and corruption through his aesthetic, but ascetic, hero, and criticised *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for failing to represent a true Epicurean philosophy which “aims at a complete though harmonious development of man’s whole organism” by dwelling too much in

excess (“A Novel by Mr Oscar Wilde” 87). Wilde, in contrast to Pater, elected to revive many of the morally subversive elements of French Decadent writing. Lord Henry unwittingly tells Dorian of how he would like to know a murderer as he can think of nothing more psychologically interesting, unaware of the blood already staining Dorian’s hands. This intellectual interest in crime, which Wilde also explores in “Pen, Pencil, and Poison” and “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime,” finds its precedent in *À Rebours* when Des Esseintes attempts to make a murderer out of a boy he meets on the street as a psychological experiment.<sup>10</sup> The idea that crime could hold real psychological value and set Decadent anti-heroes apart from the rest of society appears within French Decadent fiction that explores the notion of allegedly ‘refined’ crimes—those committed with no motive other than to experience high intellectual sensations.<sup>11</sup> Dorian justifies his own crime as necessary once Basil knows his secret, but Dorian also stages Basil’s murder before it became a true necessity. He invites Basil to view his portrait although he knows that he can never let Basil leave alive once he has seen it. His consciousness that the murder will follow makes his crime into what Lord Henry would describe as “a method for procuring extraordinary sensations” (203).

Typical of the Decadent anti-hero, Dorian seeks to surpass the crimes of his predecessor. Des Esseintes is guilty only of attempting to orchestrate murder at another’s hand, but Dorian succeeds where Des Esseintes failed and enjoys the extraordinary and terrible aesthetic sensation of murder by his own hands while never suffering legal repercussions for it. In the end Des

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<sup>10</sup> Des Esseintes pays for a lower-class boy he meets at random to visit a brothel with the aim to spoil him through pleasure he cannot afford. Des Esseintes secretly pays the madam to allow the boy to return regularly for a preordained period. When Des Esseintes’ money is used up the boy will have a taste for pleasure, but, having no money of his own, he will turn to theft and eventually murder, or so Des Esseintes theorises. He never hears of any result and is not sure if the experiment was compromised or whether his hypothesis was incorrect.

<sup>11</sup> Villiers de L’Isle Adam’s short story “Le désir d’être un homme” involves one such character, a man who commits arson to experience the intellectual satisfaction of getting away with crime, but suffers from never being able to boast of it.

Esseintes does help to create a murderer, but that murderer is Dorian. In this sense, Dorian Gray is a spiritual successor to Des Esseintes in art and in crime.

It is no surprise that Arthur Ransome described the novel as “the first French novel to be written in the English language” (93); Wilde draws so deeply from French Decadence that his novel obliquely takes part in it. By refusing to name Dorian’s “poisonous bible” as *À Rebours*, Wilde allows *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to become the very book it describes: it is written in “that curious jewelled style, vivid and obscure at once” with “metaphors as monstrous as orchids and as subtle in colour,” “a poisonous book” to its readers, and certainly thought of as dangerous by numerous conservative critics at the time (121). An anonymous review in the *Daily Chronicle* considered the original publication of the story in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* in 1890<sup>12</sup> as “a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French *Décadents*—a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction” (73). Dorian’s description of “the young Parisian” of the novel possessing a mixture of “romantic and scientific temperaments” anticipates a scathing review in the *Scots Observer* which decries the text as “medico-legal” in nature, referring both to the amateur psychological exploration of a morally corrupt individual and the homoerotic undertones present throughout the novel (74). Suitable only for “outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph-boys” (a reference to the infamous Cleveland Street Scandal of 1889),<sup>13</sup> a reviewer for the *Christian Leader* saw in it “horrors that carry us back to the worst incidents in the history of Ancient Rome” (219). Those aspects which made the novel unpalatable to an English audience—or, at least, to the reviewers who perceived themselves as duty-bound to act as moral safeguards for an innocent public—

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<sup>12</sup> This version is several chapters shorter, but was perceived as more blatantly homoerotic.

<sup>13</sup> The highly public scandal involved several notable politicians and noblemen who paid for sex with working-class telegraph boys who doubled as prostitutes in a house in London’s Cleveland Street (Cook 50).

were largely those which contained a French referent. The implicit foreign origin of the title character—in part genetic but more significantly artistic—likewise contributed to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s reception as an active moral threat to English society.

The reception of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* mirrors themes present in the novel where the French influences and references shock and insult English propriety. The character of these reviews also confirms many of Wilde's preconceptions regarding English moral censure in regards to art and artists. Upon the novel's publication Wilde responded to the original backlash with the criticism that in France the public would be more attentive to his novel's artistry rather than its perceived lack of moral content, which would not factor into its evaluation. In "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" Wilde expounds at length on English censure of truly great art and the adverse effects that it has on the artist. To demand moral art is to limit the artist, and worse, such demands create thoroughly uninteresting art. Thus, "[w]e have been able to have fine poetry in England because the public do not read it, and consequently do not influence it" (271).

Incorporating moral themes comes at the expense of individual expression, and focusing on the morality or immorality of the author is a singularly English mistake, in Wilde's view. He assigns the fault to the English press, which focuses too much on the artist and never on the art:

The tyranny that [journalism] proposes to exercise over people's private lives seems to me to be quite extraordinary. *The fact is, that the public have an insatiable curiosity to know everything, except what is worth knowing.*

Journalism, conscious of this, and having tradesman-like habits, supplies their demands. . . . The private lives of men and women should not be told to the public. The public have nothing to do with them at all. In France they manage these things better. There they do not allow the details of the trials that take place

in the divorce courts to be published for the amusement or criticism of the public. All that the public are allowed to know is that the divorce has taken place and was granted on petition of one or other or both of the married parties concerned. In France, in fact, they limit the journalist, and allow the artist almost perfect freedom. *Here we allow absolute freedom to the journalist, and entirely limit the artist.* English public opinion, that is to say, tries to constrain and impede and warp the man who makes things that are beautiful in effect, and compels the journalist to retail things that are ugly, or disgusting, or revolting in fact, so that we have the most serious journalists in the world, and the most indecent newspapers. [Wilde's italics.] (276-277)

Wilde deals here with a topic which artists face in his fiction and which he faced repeatedly in his life. The hypocrisy of the English, a theme Wilde satirizes across his works, has much to do with their reception of art. Wilde repeatedly retaliates against accusations of immorality in his art by indicating that whatever sins are found in his writing are brought there by the reader: "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors" he warns in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (4). English Philistines, as Wilde perceives them, claim to be horrified by the moral scandals discovered in the artist's personal life, but they also create the demand for the publication of those scandals. They are pruriently fascinated by subjects they claim repulse them and they fail to see the art because they are so caught up in scrutinizing the sins of the artist. To the artist this is akin to torture: "In old days men had the rack. Now they have the press" (276). The artist does not have the perfect freedom to create beautiful art in England, and certainly Wilde felt this way after receiving negative reviews of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which were



entirely focused on the morality of the novel and how the subversive and decadent content must reflect on the dangerous moral character of the author himself.

### **Oscar Wilde's French Play**

Wilde corrected the error of writing a French novel in English by writing his similarly subversive play *Salomé* entirely in French.<sup>14</sup> As with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the art and writing of the French Decadents were a clear inspiration. Robert Ross, Wilde's friend and literary executor, noted in his introduction to the text that "[i]ts sources are obvious; particularly Flaubert and Maeterlinck, in whose peculiar and original style it is an essay" (Ross xvii). *Salomé* was a popular figure among nineteenth-century French artists; although a minor Biblical figure with limited canonical description, she was a common subject in visual and literary mediums during the period. Petra Dierkes-Thrun cites various French works which clearly inspired Wilde's play, including Gustave Flaubert's short story "Hérodiade" from *Trois Contes* and his novel *Salammbô*, as well as Stéphane Mallarmé's *Hérodiade*.<sup>15</sup> *Salomé* also appears in *À Rebours*, and for Des Esseintes "the character of *Salomé*, a figure with a haunting fascination for artists and poets, had been an obsession with him for years" and he collects two paintings of *Salomé* by Gustave Moreau, the artist he most admires (52).<sup>16</sup> Part of *Salomé*'s appeal for Des Esseintes is the dearth of information about her, which allows for artistic expansion of her character to explain her subversive behaviour: "But neither St Matthew, nor St Mark, nor St Luke, nor any of the other sacred writers had enlarged on the maddening charm and potent depravity of the dancer. . . . In

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<sup>14</sup> Although published in 1893 and not performed until 1896 in Paris and 1931 in England, Wilde wrote *Salomé* in 1891 and circulated the play among his young literary French friends to both correct and admire.

<sup>15</sup> Mallarmé's work was unfinished at the time of his death, but he circulated fragments of the poem among his friends. The section "La Scène: La Nourrice—Hérodiade," which Dierkes-Thrun claims is the most important influence on Wilde's configuration of *Salomé* "as an existentially lonely, misunderstood lover of ideal beauty" (16), appeared in the second collection of *Le Parnasse contemporain* in 1871.

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix B for Gustave Moreau's "The Apparition," one of many versions of *Salomé* that Moreau painted.

Gustave Moreau's work, which went in conception far beyond the data supplied by the New Testament, Des Esseintes saw realized at last the weird and superhuman Salomé of his dreams" (52). According to Richard Ellmann, Wilde "complained of the docility of the Biblical Salomé, who simply obeys Herodias, and, once she receives the head, conveys it to her mother. The inadequacy of this account, Wilde said, 'has made it necessary for the centuries to heap up dreams and visions at her feet so as to convert her into the cardinal flower of the perverse garden'" (*Oscar Wilde* 325).<sup>17</sup>

Beyond Wilde's self-acknowledged stylistic resemblance to the Flemish author Maeterlinck, for whom French was likewise a second language,<sup>18</sup> Huysmans continues to influence *Salomé* in structure as well as in content. The important role that catalogues perform in Decadent writing plays a prominent part in the work's peculiar style; Ross noted that "A critic, for whom I have a greater regard than many of his contemporaries, says that 'Salome' is only a catalogue" (Ross xvii). Like *À Rebours*, Wilde's play includes lengthy descriptions of articles of great beauty, although those articles are often unconventional or perverse in some aspect. The importance of Decadent catalogues lies in how they overturn conservative orthodoxy through their appropriation of the familiar form of the canon, as decadent collections purposefully "mirror the literary and artistic canons compiled for nationalist purposes by scholars, editors, and schoolmasters throughout the nineteenth century" (Potolsky 71). But Potolsky suggests that

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<sup>17</sup> The image of the perverse garden recurs in Decadent literary works, where rare and poisonous or carnivorous hothouse flowers are admired for their dangerous beauty. Wilde's turn of phrase encapsulates Salomé's character in a turn-of-phrase reminiscent of Baudelaire's Decadent masterwork *Les fleurs du mal*, and of Des Esseintes' collection of exotic and dangerous flowers in *À Rebours*.

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Wilde self-reflexively praises Maeterlinck's style in his interview with the *Pall Mall Gazette*: "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 grace, writes in an alien language" ("The Censure and *Salomé*" 188).

decadent collections do something distinct with these cultural materials. . . . [They hold] up certain books and objects as the epitome of decadence, illuminating the normally effaced continuity between personal collections and public canons.

While personal collections typically reflect the private taste and experiences of the collector, decadent collections deliberately mimic the public form and function of canons, bringing together books and objects selected according not just to individual interest but also to communally recognized and specifically articulated (if hardly traditional) criteria of excellence. The decadent library shuns conventional classics but includes the classically erotic or subversive; decadent collections are made up of objects gathered for their singularity or their supreme embodiment of some rare perversity. (74)

That Salomé is one such collector further connects her to the type of Decadent anti-hero embodied by Des Esseintes, participating in a rebellion against conservative bourgeois paradigms. When she rhapsodizes on the beauty of Iokanaan, she is the aspiring collector and asks that Iokanaan suffer her to touch his beautiful body, then hair, then mouth. Denied these, she ultimately collects his head.

Salomé's obsessive nature mirrors that of Des Esseintes, seeking the keenest pleasures despite how those desires exceed the boundaries of convention or propriety, or perhaps more precisely because they do.<sup>19</sup> Her adoration of Iokanaan, the disciple condemned by her

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<sup>19</sup> Dierkes-Thrun notes another mirror of Des Esseintes in the character of Herod: "Not only does Huysmans prepare the way for Wilde's outrageously decadent, vampiric, necrophilic female by making his Salome figure the iconic, seductive fin de siècle femme fatale, but he also introduces as her foil a quintessentially weak, pathetic, dependent male counterpart who lusts after her. Des Esseintes can be seen as an important model for Wilde's superstitious, insecure, deeply unhappy Herod, who, like Des Esseintes, is constantly on the lookout for something or someone else who could give him a stronger sense of self. There are several obvious parallels between the weakly aristocrat and the confused, insecure, vulnerable ruler of Judea, but the most important of these is each male's overwhelming wish to unite himself (physically and mentally) with Salomé, to become happy and whole by the proxy of her

oppressive family, embodies a mode of anarchy. She rebels not only against the order established by her stepfather's rule, where the Christian disciple is an enemy of the kingdom, but also against the order to which her adored belongs, where premarital lust is forbidden and, especially in women, condemned. Salomé's adoration is not related to his religious convictions but rather to his physical attributes, and her desire is an erotic rather than a spiritual one. She thereby transgresses the tenets of the ascetic Christian faith that he embodies. The beauty she perceives in him is the greatest she has beheld and becomes something she must possess, arguably because he himself is a forbidden object socially and spiritually, and is meant to be unattainable. Like Dorian Gray, Salomé will only be satisfied by what is rare and beautiful; the elements of danger and decay inherent in desiring a doomed disciple enhance Iokanaan's beauty further. Wilde's Salomé is the expanded form of Des Esseintes' dream Salomé. She is a "weird and superhuman" Decadent heroine and Iokanaan is the beautiful object she invests herself in joyfully and fatally. Wilde's Salomé is, like Dorian, essentially French in origin and character, and in his portrayal she exceeds the perverseness of Wilde's French sources. Although "compared to Flaubert, Mallarmé, and other literary predecessors, Huysmans intensifies the aura of perversity and evil surrounding the dancer, developing Salomé into a flagship of decadent sublimity and moving her even further away from the innocent, obedient, nameless daughter of the gospel accounts" (Dierkes-Thrun 35), Salomé as she appears in *À Rebours* is only a study. Wilde composes a complete portrait, enhancing his vision through the lenses of Huysmans and Moreau.

Wilde's decision to write *Salomé* in French cannot be dismissed as a linguistic exercise; the content of the play demanded the use of the French language in order for Wilde to produce it.

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alluring femininity and independence. In fact, Des Esseintes and Herod willingly seek to subjugate themselves to Salomé's overpowering sensual femininity, her irresistible power and awe-inspiring independence; they wish not to be healed or changed by her but, instead, to drown themselves in her hypersensuality and quasi-divine being, as if in a powerful flood that can wash away all their unfulfilled desires and existential doubts." (39)

As when in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde encodes immoderate behaviour in French terminology, in *Salomé* too he uses the French language as a distancing mechanism to convey what is inexpressible in English. The linguistic remove stands in for a social or cultural remove; even if the play were performed in London, the English audience could theoretically assure themselves that they were not witnessing an assault on English propriety. The play remains French, and therefore its decadent excesses are unsurprising and easily dismissed. However, if this cultural-linguistic legerdemain sought to distract the Censor from the transgressive subject matter of the play and secure its performance, then the tactic was unsuccessful. Any performance of the play was officially prohibited in England by the Lord Chamberlain's licenser, due to restrictions placed on the portrayal of religious characters on stage. Although the ban officially cited a sixteenth-century law, loosely applied until this point (Dierkes-Thrun 5), the Examiner Edward Pigott recorded in a letter that the sexual morality in the play crossed the boundaries of comfort for English audiences:

It is a miracle of impudence; . . . [Salomé's] love turns to fury because John will not let her kiss him *in the mouth*—and in the last scene, where she brings in his head—if you please—on a “charger”—she *does* kiss his mouth, in a paroxysm of sexual despair.

The piece is written in French—half Biblical, half pornographic—by Oscar Wilde himself.

Imagine the average British public's reception of it. (qtd. in Stephens 112)

Pigott's criticisms confirm many of Wilde's own fears concerning how the English Philistine might perceive his more transgressive works. Conflating Wilde's use of the French language

with pornography illustrates perceptions of French sexual attitudes as well as the French literary tradition.

Although employing a foreign language did not enable the play to bypass the Censor, Wilde's decision to write in French was more than an attempt to insinuate himself into the French canon. Rather, it exhibits how Wilde perceived both the French literary tradition and dramatic permissibility in France. Salomé's unbridled sexual desire for Iokanaan, the implicit love between the Young Syrian and the Page of Herodias, Herod's borderline incestuous lust for Salomé, and the murderous impulses and actions of Herodias and Salomé make the content of the play thoroughly subversive. Even if the figures had not been Biblical, the play contained a great deal that Wilde knew might offend the "moral" English public. Writing the play in French indicated to the English critics that he considered their straitlaced sensibilities inartistic by inferring that the French critics and public could openly receive an unadulterated version of the play in their own language in a way that the English critics could not. In addition to this, in his letters and interviews Wilde repeatedly privileged the French language over English based on a hierarchy of inherent poetic beauty that he imagined. Wilde protected the artistic integrity of his play through his prediction of the potentially censorious reactions of English critics: he combated their lack of appreciation for his play by enforcing his hierarchy of language and culture. If English audiences do not appreciate his play it is not because they do not possess the necessary language skills, it is because they do not possess the critical refinement of French audiences; their failure to 'understand' *Salomé* is an artistic rather than a linguistic failure.

Wilde joked after the ban on *Salomé* that he would move to Paris where his art would be given due praise, a joke which many caricaturists in England capitalized on. In his note on the play, Ross indicates that Wilde never meant this seriously, and quotes Wilde in a letter to *The*

*Times* where he languorously claims that “[t]he opinions of English critics on a French work of mine have, of course, little, if any, interest for me” (xiv). He characterises his work as French despite intending its debut in London, and he implicitly places it in the domain of French critics. French critics did not necessarily have a high opinion of the play. In truth, many found it derivative and typical of the English aesthete’s attempt to shock his audiences, but in his dismissal Wilde gave his work to the French.<sup>20</sup> That Wilde considered French a superior language for art is clear; speaking of an English translation of Théophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* he praises the ability of the translator to “pour the wine from the golden to the silver chalice” (*Butterfly Quarterly* 7). While Wilde’s explanation for writing *Salomé* in French was his desire to experiment with the beauty of a language he felt was superior to English, it is clear that his motives were not only artistic, but that they had also always been aimed towards the eventual reception of the play. Although it was to be staged in London<sup>21</sup> and would not see a public performance until the period of Wilde’s imprisonment Wilde created this play for French audiences not only through its language, but through its content and artistic experimentation.

Wilde’s declaration that he would take the play to France where it might be appreciated mirrors the journey on which Basil Hallward proposes to take Dorian’s portrait. One newspaper cartoon depicts Wilde voyaging to France with a copy of *Salomé* to serve for his enlistment papers.<sup>22</sup> In this case, life imitates art; in the figure of Basil, Wilde anticipates his own status as an artist whose work cannot be appreciated in his own country. Wilde appears to have prepared for this moment: in an interview with the *Pall Mall Gazette* after the Lord Chamberlain’s decision to ban any performance of *Salomé* in London, Wilde proposes to leave the country and

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<sup>20</sup> The neutral response of French writers to *Salomé* is elaborated upon in the following chapter.

<sup>21</sup> With Sarah Bernhardt (by then 47) in the role of the young Salomé. The theatre company was already in rehearsals when the production was banned, despite Bernhardt’s fame and her support for the play.

<sup>22</sup> *Punch* keenly noted that the mandatory military service for French citizens was unlikely to appeal to a man of Wilde’s temperament. See Appendix B for their caricature of Wilde.

make a new fatherland of Paris where he will take out “letters of naturalization” (*Interviews and Recollections* 188). Wilde calls Paris “the centre of art, the artistic capital of the world . . . Paris, where the actor is appreciated and the stage is regarded as an artistic medium” and aspires to stage his play there. He states that writers enjoy greater liberty in France than in England, and declares that he “will not consent to call [him]self a citizen of a country that shows such narrow-mindedness in its artistic judgments” (188). However, Wilde’s statements here are more concerned with rejecting England than embracing France, and contradict the realities of dramatic censorship in France, as the *Pall Mall Gazette*’s interviewer points out: “in Paris the Censure is applied more frequently than in London, and I have no hesitation in saying that in nine cases out of ten the prohibitive measure is a mistaken policy” (*Interviews and Recollections* 186). Indeed, numerous responses from French writers and critics to the widespread censure against *Salomé* in England claimed that, although the use of Biblical characters would not be grounds for censorship in France, French playwrights faced far greater restrictions in their subject matter. In her article concerning the French reception of Oscar Wilde’s trials, Nancy Erber cites the French critic Henry Bauer, who, in 1892, “announced the banning of *Salomé* from the London stage . . . He explained to his readers that unlike in France (where sexual and political content brought on the ire of the censors), in England ‘this land of liberty, there is censorship which is even more ridiculous and intractable than ours because it is founded on religious principles’” (560). However, in a comment made during Wilde’s visit to Paris in 1891, the French author Hughes Le Roux contradicted English perceptions of French artistic liberty. Le Roux thought Wilde would feel pity rather than envy “if he knew the sorry conditions of the artist in France, despite our apparent freedom—the prejudices that must be respected, the indifference that has to be fought against, the fear of ridicule that is so constraining” (qtd. in Erber 553). French writers routinely



attempt to dismantle the myth that they enjoy greater freedom of publication, but Wilde persists in his essays, conversations, and publications to tell English readers that in France writers are free, critics are appreciative, and questions of morality in art are all but non-existent. The France that Wilde creates through the French motifs, references to French authors, and French-affiliated characters in his works is a compelling but fundamentally imaginary version of France. Although France is the nation he describes, England is the nation he critically reflects the mirror upon. In his selection of Decadent references throughout his English and French writing, in particular through his use of Huysmans' so-called "breviary of Decadence" *À Rebours*, Wilde paints France as a Decadent nation that allows for social and sexual artistic liberties which are condemned by the prudish English public, thereby equating artistic tolerance with social tolerance.

“And this is how Mr Wilde, who became famous in France as an English aesthete, has become famous in his country as a Parisian entertainer.”  
– Theodor de Wyzewa<sup>23</sup>

## Chapter 2 | “Oscar Wilde est vivant!”:

### English Decadence in France after Wilde

Wilde’s trials and arrest in England occurred only a month before the release of the first French edition of *Le portrait de Dorian Gray* on June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1895, and the scandal lingered strongly in public memory. Prior to the translation of his only novel, Wilde’s reputation in France rested on his celebrity to a far greater extent than on his writings, and *Le portrait de Dorian Gray* was the first of Wilde’s major works to appear in French bookstores.<sup>24</sup> In essays and interviews Wilde praised French audiences as more appreciative of art than English audiences, especially for having the greater critical capacity to separate the author from the work of art and thereby to judge art on its own merits, which the English repeatedly failed to do. His art, however, although it received quiet praise from certain French contemporaries, had little to do with his fame in Paris and Richard Hibbitt locates articles announcing Wilde’s visit in 1891 in the society papers rather than the literary ones.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, if Parisian society separated the art from the artist in 1891, in the case of Oscar Wilde it was at the expense of his art. It is not surprising, then, that years later upon the release of *Le portrait de Dorian Gray* in the immediate aftermath of Wilde’s trials and

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<sup>23</sup> April 1892. From “M. Oscar Wilde et les jeunes littérateurs Anglais” [Mr Oscar Wilde and the young English writers], which was published in the *Revue bleue* and quoted in Hibbitt (71).

<sup>24</sup> Some short stories were translated and published in French journals before this, including “The Birthday of the Infanta” which was released contemporaneously in English and French in 1891, and *Salomé* which was available in print in 1893.

<sup>25</sup> “The reports on Wilde are frequently found in the society columns of [daily] papers such as *Le Figaro* or *L’Echo de Paris*, demonstrating that he was known initially as a socialite rather than a writer and that readers were interested in the latest gossip. The reports on Wilde’s writing tend to be found in monthly literary journals such as *La Plume* or *La Revue bleue*” (Hibbitt 65).

imprisonment, French journals and news sources completely failed to separate the novel from its author. Articles refreshed for the public mind the matter of the trials and Wilde's imprisonment alongside their reviews of the novel and imbued these reviews with references, be they supportive or mocking, to the scandal.<sup>26</sup> These reviews in French newspapers undermine the generalizations about France that Wilde expressed in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism"; the French were not as blatantly hypocritical about reporting personal scandal as the English were, but the French press still pandered to the curious public and French critics repeatedly blended the biography of the artist with his art. Wilde's recent trials inevitably coloured readings of the novel since avoiding the news of "L'Affaire Wilde" was impossible on either side of the Channel. Although the French derided the use of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as evidence in the trial, in which the prosecutor had identified it as both sodomitical and biographical, the omnipresence of Wilde's scandal led French audiences to read a similar biographical element into the homoerotic undertones in the text.

Wilde's identification of the French—particularly the Parisians—as less hypocritical and morally censorious than the English holds true in journalistic responses to the trials in the two respective nations. The French papers were never as detailed in their descriptions of the trials even though their sources were the English papers which often provided extended transcripts and sensational side-stories, such as the father-and-son brawl in the streets between the Marquis of Queensberry and Lord Percy Douglas. While some French journalists expressed disgust at the nature of the crimes Wilde was accused of, many were more reserved and reiterated that the matter was private and that the highly public trials infringed on Wilde's right to privacy. *Le*

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<sup>26</sup> This usually took the form of either an expression of sympathy for Wilde's plight or the opportunity for a homophobic metatextual joke, as seen in the case of a review in *Le Journal*: "[in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*], the author describes, with loving refinement, the delights of the affection of a man for another like himself in a way which is completely different from the love of one's neighbour as extolled in the parable of the *Good Samaritan*, notwithstanding Mr Oscar Wilde's Christian tendency to turn the other cheeks" (qtd. in Eells 81).

*Journal* covered news of the Wilde trial under the title “Pudique Albion!” (“Prudish England!”), a title which highlights “what [the French] saw as the English hypocrisy of professing to be shocked and yet reporting as much prurient detail as they could about the case” (Holland xxxii). Many French writers, including Edmond de Goncourt, were unsurprised by the accusations, evidently having assumed during Wilde’s earlier visits that his “pederasty” was an open secret.<sup>27</sup> French newspapers continued to publish reviews and articles on Wilde, including an article in the *Echo de Paris* on July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1895, featuring a special report regarding Wilde’s welfare based on a day when Pentonville prison permitted two physicians and a team of journalists to observe Wilde’s Sunday exercise (Erber 574). As late as October of 1895 Adolphe Retté’s review of *Le portrait de Dorian Gray* in *La Plume* reflected upon Wilde’s sentence and “decried the silence that greeted the trial verdict” (Erber 574). By November, Wilde’s friends Stuart Merrill and Henry Bauer began their various unsuccessful attempts to lift or alleviate Wilde’s prison sentence through different petitions on which they sought to include the names of influential French and English men of letters, including Zola and Goncourt. These petitions failed miserably, as the fear of becoming associated with Wilde’s crimes was too great in both England and France. Merrill expressed his regret at this cowardice and reminded readers of *La Plume* that the late Victor Hugo would not have refused (Eells 78). This failure of French intellectuals to attach their names to Wilde’s scandal perhaps demonstrates the limitations of French ‘tolerance’ where sodomy and infamy were concerned. Although French law permitted sodomy in the private sphere and although the press had a greater estimation of personal privacy due to an

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<sup>27</sup> Nancy Erber translates a private entry from Goncourt’s journal dated April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1893: “A smile appeared on Henri de Regnier's face when Oscar Wilde's name came up. In response to my quizzical look: ‘Ah! You don’t know? After all, he doesn’t attempt to conceal it. Yes, he admits to being a pederast. He told me once that he has been married three times in his life: once to a woman and twice to men! After the success of his play in London, he left his wife and three children [sic] and moved into a hotel where he lived conjugally with a young British lord....’ (561)

individual, the refusal of so many prominent writers to sign the petition indicates that France was not a nation that supported willing association with accused sodomites.

Whether the scandal of Wilde's trials negatively affected the popularity of his novel in France is difficult to tell, as by 1911 *Le portrait de Dorian Gray* was running into its fifth edition and it lingered in the cultural consciousness (Eells 82). The criticisms that it was derivative of *À Rebours*, that Decadence was over, or that its author was a condemned sodomite did not diminish its popularity. Contrary to Wilde's belief that the French were better able to sublimate the personality of the author and authentically appreciate the artistry of a text, Wilde's lingering, charismatic celebrity combined with the tragedy of his imprisonment deeply affected public response to his works in the aftermath of his trial and sentencing. In the case of the first staging of *Salomé*, which occurred in 1896 during Wilde's first year of imprisonment, the perception of Wilde as a martyr to English judicial law and prudery was responsible for the relatively modest success of the event. The play itself did not cause much sensation in France upon its original publication in 1893 despite Wilde composing it in French,<sup>28</sup> but Wilde's supporters in France hoped to raise sympathy for him through the single-night performance of *Salomé* arranged by experimental theatre director Aurélien Lugné-Poe at the *Théâtre de l'Œuvre* (Erber 552). Although the petition that was passed around that evening again proved ineffectual, Jean Lorrain and Wilde's French friends took solace in the fact that the performance helped to bolster Wilde's literary reputation in France and brought the prisoner a degree of joy in his hopeless situation.

While the literary reputation of Wilde had indeed fallen by the wayside after his trials and imprisonment, it is unclear whether the 1896 performance of *Salomé* was appreciated for its

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<sup>28</sup> The rumour that Wilde was writing in French caused more sensation than the actual publication, Eells suggests: "French journalists aroused curiosity about the play by reporting on its composition before it was actually published" (Eells 84).

literary qualities or for the fame of its author and the sympathy that the French audience felt for him. While some praise was given to the actress in the lead role, many noted that aspects of the performance left them feeling neutral. However, “other reviewers did temper their negative reactions to the play with reports of the audience’s expression of support for Wilde. For example, the reviewer for the *Journal des débats* described *Salomé* as ‘one terribly long act, interesting in places but cruelly boring most of the time’ but added ‘when the name of the author was announced after the curtain fell, the audience responded with a deafening ovation’” (qtd. in Erber 578). A review by Catulle Mendès affirms the perception that the applause was for the man rather than the production, and in his review for *La Plume* Achille Segard “combined a favorable review of the play with a defense of the author. ‘Oscar Wilde is an admirable artist and poet. ... We all pity rather than condemn him’” (qtd. in Erber 579). The art and the artist remained intertwined long after the trials had ended. While the sympathy Wilde’s situation received in France accords with his belief that the French were less prudish and hypocritical than the English, reviewers also noted that it took great courage for Lugné-Poe to stage the play at all, and the same Mendès who considered the audience applause a duly befitting “consoling gesture” had previously fought a duel to dissociate his name from Wilde’s in the initial weeks following the trials (Erber 578). Although the French press was more sympathetic than the English public in the course of Wilde’s trials, to say that they were universally more accepting is misleading. They considered Wilde someone to be pitied, and disagreed with the English judicial system, but did not endorse homosexual love to a significantly greater extent. Although Wilde’s charges of gross indecency did not prevent the publication or performance of his works in France, neither was his reputation ever solely an artistic one. His infamous scandals had as much to do with his success as the quality of his works did.

## Decadent Depictions, Decadent Dissociations

Writers and critics debated the definition and vitality of Decadence in England long before the trials curtailed Wilde's literary career. In Wilde's dialogue "The Decay of Lying" the character of Vivian despairs that "true decadence" in English drama occurs "when Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness" and that "it is from this that we are now suffering" (301). Vivian's article, also entitled "The Decay of Lying," proposes a new aesthetics to drive out this insufferable form of decadence, but it is important not to conflate Vivian's voice with Wilde's, and to contrast what Vivian says in this work with the recurring themes in Wilde's oeuvre. Critics condemned *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as an unseemly Decadent text, even though the word is never used in the final version of the novel.<sup>29</sup> As evidenced by its debt to *À Rebours*, these reviewers were right to consider *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a Decadent text, and the novel entirely matches Verlaine's description of "decadence, all shimmering in purple and gold" (qtd. in Romer ix).<sup>30</sup> In his introduction to the collection *French Decadent Tales*, Stephen Romer furnishes various definitions of decadence, including its modern origin from the classical scholar Désiré Nisard "who put the term *décadence* into circulation; but he meant it pejoratively, as pertaining to works in which mere description, from being an ornament, becomes an end in itself. He notes also that decadent art is extremely erudite, even recondite; it is a literature of exhaustion, weighed down by the weight of past masterpieces, and it therefore has to seek 'extreme' effects in the quest for originality" (x). Although a pejorative term, many writers

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<sup>29</sup> Between the in the *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* version of *Dorian Gray* in 1890 and the novel's release in 1891 Wilde or his editor changed the word "Decadent" for "Symbolist."

<sup>30</sup> Verlaine's description in full: "I love this word decadence, all shimmering in purple and gold. And I refuse, obviously, any damaging connotations it may have, or any suggestion of degeneracy. On the contrary, the word suggests the most refined thoughts a civilization can produce, a profound literary culture, a soul capable of the most intense enjoyments. It suggests the subtle thoughts of ultimate civilization, a high literary culture, a soul capable of intense pleasures. It throws off bursts of fire and the sparkle of precious stones. It is a mixture of the voluptuous mind and the wearied flesh, and of all the violent splendours of the late Empire; it is redolent of the rouge of courtesans, the games of the circus, the panting of the gladiators, the spring of wild beasts, the consuming in flames of races exhausted by their capacity for sensation, as the tramp of an invading army sounds."

took it up defiantly and thereafter far more positive definitions of decadence arose. The painter Braque identified decadence as “a complete facility of technique, that sets no limits to its material, and imposes upon itself no constraints,” and it is easy to believe that Wilde’s Vivian would heartily agree with an increase of this type of decadent writing in drama (xi). Regardless of whether Wilde believed his works embodied Decadence by any definition, English audiences identified Decadence as a Wildean phenomenon. Decadence could not be dissociated from Wilde when he was an active writer in London, and his conviction for gross indecency confirmed many of the worst fears English audiences already held regarding the danger and degeneracy of the Decadent movement.

The conflation between Decadence, Wilde’s name, and Wilde’s crime led to the continuation of a Decadent school in England becoming impossible. Wilde was so emblematic of Decadence and his trial was so scandalous that the perception arose that “the moral corruption, and perhaps the actual crime, of which Wilde had been proved guilty were in fact endemic to a set of literary and artistic practices shared by other authors” (Evangelista 162). Wilde’s plays were removed from the stage at the height of their popularity when the trials began, and he remained a *persona non grata* for some time after. The publication of expurgated versions of *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was palatable to English audiences because they featured a penitent Wilde, but the gilded and self-aware spirit of Decadence that was omnipresent in his former works was now out of the question. Immediately following Wilde’s imprisonment, John Lane, Wilde’s publisher at the Bodley Head, pulled all of Wilde’s books out of circulation (Stetz 46). He also dismissed the controversial artist Aubrey Beardsley from his position as art editor of *The Yellow Book*, a Bodley Head publication, due to his commonly



perceived association with Wilde.<sup>31</sup> Despite the hostility between Wilde and Beardsley, they were commonly perceived as artistic cohorts, particularly because Beardsley produced the iconic illustrations of the 1894 edition of *Salomé*. In reality, Wilde's association with Beardsley and *The Yellow Book* was ill-founded; readers perceived that the journal represented philosophies similar to Wilde's on the nature of art, yet Wilde was never included in it, nor did Beardsley want him to be and in fact "insisted that Wilde should be excluded from the journal, whose provocative contents the American editor Henry Harland knew would shock English readers" (Bristow 42). Despite this, news reports of Wilde's arrest at the Cadogan Hotel famously created a tableau of Wilde awaiting his arresting officers while holding 'a yellow book.' The indefinite article, although essential, continues to mislead incautious readers: a presumptuous public allegedly reacted to this story by breaking the windows of *The Yellow Book* headquarters under such a misapprehension (Stetz 47). *The Yellow Book* did not last for long after the end of Wilde's trial, and it is possible that its strong association with Wilde's philosophies and writings contributed to this. However, other artistic journals, decadent in style if not in name, arose in the wake of Wilde's imprisonment; Beardsley went on to found the short-lived artistic journal *The Savoy* with art and literary theorist Arthur Symons and Wilde's former publisher Leonard Smithers. In the inaugural issue of *The Savoy* (January 1896), Symons provided a manifesto which sought to distance their magazine positively from the Decadent movement, declaring "We are not Realists, or Romanticists, or Decadents," despite the decadent "art for art's sake" ethos Symons goes on to describe (5). The three men were so closely associated with Wilde that the success of their magazine necessitated the announcement of an artistic break from his art in theory, even if in practise the differences were not so dramatic.

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<sup>31</sup> Wilde claimed to have 'invented' Aubrey Beardsley (*Interviews and Recollections* 384).

One method that artists and writers used to continue their engagement with the now discredited Decadent movement was to absorb decadent themes into the closely related aesthetic of Symbolism. Decadence and Symbolism were already occasionally interchangeable, with Symbolism being more palatable in name. The necessity of a shift from the label of Decadence to Symbolism appears in the two titles given to studies published by Arthur Symons. In 1893 Symons produced an essay entitled “The Decadent Movement in Literature” which he later transformed into a full-length monograph, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. First released in 1899, with expansions in 1908 and 1919, Symons used his monograph to develop the themes from his original essay and included many of the same writers, but he also reduced his emphasis on particular works (most notably Huysmans’ *À Rebours*) and withdrew his praise of the “unhealthy” and “perverse” as signs of artistic superiority. It is clear that Symons deliberately distanced his 1899 publication from the dangerous label of Decadence and the vulnerability hazarded by associating his name with it. While in the 1893 essay he deliberately uses “Decadence” as a catch-all term, on the grounds that “both Impressionism and Symbolism convey some notion of that new kind of literature which is perhaps more broadly characterized by the word Decadence,” it is evident that after the Wilde scandal he exercises great caution in using the term (858). His monograph uses “Decadence” sparingly and often in quotation, placing a buffer between the Symbolist theory he wants to promote in art and the notorious reputation that Decadence had earned. In English publications, decadent writing needed to hide under the name of Symbolism in order to escape the risk that came with aligning itself with Wilde.

Symons dedicates his monograph entirely to French writers which makes his disavowal of the tainted term “decadence” curious in light of the fact that by excluding English authors he never risks contaminating the English literary tradition. He is aware of the dominance of

Francophone writers in forming the literary movement,<sup>32</sup> and even in his earlier essay comments that the “typical literature of the Decadence . . . as we have considered it so far, is entirely French” (866). However, his essay briefly considers the work of two Englishmen: he describes “the prose of Mr. Walter Pater, the verse of Mr. W. E. Henley” as “attempts to do with the English language something of what Goncourt and Verlaine have done with the French. Mr. Pater’s prose is the most beautiful English prose which is now being written; and, unlike the prose of Goncourt, it has done no violence to language, it has sought after no vivid effects, it has found a large part of mastery in reticence, in knowing what to omit” (866). Revising the essay into book form, he no longer included an analysis of either English writer, though he added several French authors to his study. His introduction explains his change of vocabulary and denigrates the idea of Decadence as no more than an “interlude, half a mock-interlude” which was the domain of middle-class men impotently seeking to shock the nation, but which only succeeded in “divert[ing] the attention of the critics while something more serious was in preparation” (*Symbolist Movement in Literature* 4). His criticism of Decadence seems even more disingenuous after his revision and expansion of the book in 1919, this time following the original essay more closely by paying far greater attention to Huysmans’ *À Rebours* and celebrating Des Esseintes as the “type and symbol” of decadence. In 1896, during the first year of Wilde’s imprisonment, an advertisement for Symons’ book appeared in the final volume of his journal *The Savoy* (December 1896). Described as “in preparation,” this proposed book retained the title *The Decadent Movement in Literature* (“Mr. Leonard Smithers’ List of Publications” 93). When the time of publication arrived, Symons had changed the title from

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<sup>32</sup> In his dedication to W.B. Yeats: “France is the country of movements, and it is naturally in France that I have studied the development of a principle which is spreading throughout other countries...” (*Symbolist Movement in Literature* xix)

“Decadent” to “Symbolist.” Symons’ decisions might be attributed to his own critical growth and a change in perception of what defines Decadence in opposition to Symbolism, but the cultural climate at the time suggests that such a decisive change was all but necessary when Wilde’s reputation sullied the name of Decadence in the eyes of the English public.

### **André Gide and Oscar Wilde’s Post-Trial Legacy**

Although in England it was necessary to downplay the Decadent themes most closely associated with Wilde, the same sense of caution did not influence the French writing of André Gide that came in the period immediately following Wilde’s imprisonment. As a young man and aspiring writer, Gide’s first encounters with Wilde produced a great effect on him which was often as troubling as it was inspiring. Richard Ellmann records Gide’s original raptures over the hours he spent with Wilde, and yet how “a week later he represents Wilde as besieging him” (“Corydon and Ménéalque” 85). Although Gide alternately viewed Wilde with admiration and antipathy, Gide’s 1897 novel *Les Nourritures terrestres* (*The Fruits of the Earth*) introduces the aesthete Ménéalque, a character who recurs in Gide’s 1902 novel *L’Immoraliste* (*The Immoralist*) and who is frequently perceived in scholarship as a representation of Wilde. His characters Nathanaël and Michel, the respective protagonists of these two novels, reflect Gide’s ambivalent feelings towards Wilde in their own responses to Ménéalque. Despite uncertainty about Ménéalque as a man and as an aesthetic theorist, he is often worth looking up to and recurringly functions as a catalyst for personal change, even when not in a direction of which Ménéalque would approve. Gide reformulates ideas and experiences recorded in his journals and letters regarding his own interactions with Wilde into episodes within his novels, but the reaction is tempered because

Gide can control the voice of Wilde and Wilde's dangerous ideas.<sup>33</sup> Because Ménéalque is Gide's creation, Gide is able to eliminate those aspects of Wilde that he personally disliked while maintaining a great deal of his Decadent theories. Ménéalque's return in *L'Immoraliste* revives the spirit of Oscar Wilde even after his death. As a portrait of Wilde, however, Ménéalque is unflattering, and Ellmann deems the representation an "ironic bow," noting how the narrator "feels for Ménéalque more than friendship, but less than love. Ménéalque is a man who no longer lives under the old dispensation. Rather than being dissolute, he is unconstrained. Gide represents him as much older, and I may mention that each time he met Wilde he noted how terribly he had aged since their last encounter" (90). Ménéalque captures the idealized Wilde existing in Gide's young memory and imagination, whose powerful and persuasive presence can overwhelm a mind and exert powerful influence on a soul, not unlike Lord Henry's influence on Dorian Gray. Despite Gide's early journal entries depicting Wilde as a potential Lord Henry full of dangerous ideas to Gide's untainted Dorian, "Wilde's main influence on the book came from his faith in himself as bearer of a new gospel to be transmitted above all to the young; Gide took over this role for his own; it is he who tutors Nathanaël, and Ménéalque is relegated to the lesser part of precursor" ("Corydon and Ménéalque" 90). In his novels Gide undercuts the representation of Wilde's influence over him, unwilling to allow Wilde's persona take the credit for Gide's own artistic and philosophical growth, just as Nathanaël and Michel refuse to follow Ménéalque's aesthetic theory to the letter. They leave aside as much of his philosophy as they take up, and modify it to their needs appropriately.

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<sup>33</sup> "Wilde contrives piously to kill what remains to me of soul, because he says that to know an essence, one must suppress it; he wants me to miss my soul. The effort to destroy a thing takes its measure. Everything constitutes itself only by being rendered void... etc.' This idea was good enough for Gide to restate it five years later in *Les Nourritures terrestres* where he declares, '... on certain evenings I was mad enough almost to believe in my soul, I felt it so near escaping from my body.' He adds scrupulously, 'Ménéalque said this too'" ("Corydon and Ménéalque" 85-86).

Both *Les Nourritures terrestres* and *L'Immoraliste* embody the solipsistic excess of Decadence; the latter novel in particular features Michel as the eponymous “immoralist” who forgoes his duties to his wife, his family, and his manor staff in order to pursue an independent existence that will allow him to feel alive. Although he knows that his family and friends will find his actions morally reprehensible because they go against convention, he also knows that for his own well-being he must reject the traditional path which has until now left him wilted intellectually and physically. Even more than Wilde’s Dorian Gray, Michel lives up to the ethos of Pater’s “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance* to forsake habit and “to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy” (120). In both Nathanaël and Michel, the sickly disposition of Gide’s lead characters recalls Huysmans’ depiction of Des Esseintes, embodying yet another aspect of Decadence: “a hyper-sensitivity to anything too loud or flashy or vulgar, and by the same token, a horror at the overly utilitarian excrescence of modernity” (Romer xvii). However, Gide departs from the type set up by Des Esseintes and Wilde as his characters are able to find reparation and resolution. Instead of collecting beautiful material objects like perfumes, jewels, and textiles, Gide’s characters collect singular experiences and relationships, and often step out-of-doors to find them. The experiences and relationships Nathanaël and Michel seek frequently challenge social norms, such as Michel’s interest in thieves and liars and the friendships he forms across class boundaries. While Gide modifies the Decadent catalogue that Huysmans and Wilde cultivated in their novels, he continues to owe a significant debt to his predecessors for establishing the yearning to transgress conventional cultural boundaries and for contributing the form of the catalogue that Gide’s novels embody.

In the parallels between Wilde (as Gide perceived him) and Ménélique it is fitting that the character should appear as he does within these novels: Ménélique is not a writer himself, but an

orator first and foremost. Victoria Reid identifies in her essay concerning André Gide's 'Hommage à Oscar Wilde,' that in his writings about Wilde Gide tended to characterise him as a speaker rather than a writer. His report of Wilde's famous quotation, "I have put my genius into my life. I have put only my talent into my works," is exemplary of the way that Gide memorializes Wilde as the man of oral genius at the expense of his literary ability (102). This representation is in keeping with Wilde's reputation upon his arrival in France as a personality—a social figure to a greater extent than a literary figure in the public mind—although his literary reputation grew in France as well as in England after his 1891 visit. In Gide's *Ménalque*, who only exists with his oral presence and is encased within Gide's literary voice, Gide creates, or possibly corrects, a version of Wilde. Gide plays a role in memorializing Wilde and establishes his identity *ex post facto* in the public mind both through his various memoirs of Oscar Wilde and his works of fiction.<sup>34</sup> Gide preserves the voice of Wilde through *Ménalque* and lends truth to the declaration of Symbolist writer Arthur Cravan, "Oscar Wilde est vivant!"—Oscar Wilde lives!<sup>35</sup>

### **Decadence and the Queer Canon**

In his 1924<sup>36</sup> defence of homosexuality, *Corydon*, Gide calls directly on Wilde once more, inscribing him into queer history, although not in a flattering light. Gide accuses Wilde of failing to be a martyr for homosexuality by lying on the stand. He admits it would take great courage

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<sup>34</sup> Gide produced a short study of Oscar Wilde in 1902 which he published in the literary magazine *L'Ermitage* and which he reprinted a year later in his volume of critical essays *Prétextes*. In 1910 he published the memoir known as *Oscar Wilde: In Memoriam*. Gide also dedicated a chapter of his autobiography to Wilde in *Si le grain ne meurt (If It Die)* (1926).

<sup>35</sup> Arthur Cravan, born Fabian Lloyd, was the nephew of Oscar Wilde by marriage and claimed in his magazine *Maintenant!* to have met with his uncle in Paris in March 1913. Wilde, according to Cravan, was not dead and had been travelling in disguise in Asia and Africa, giving his name as Sebastian Melmoth.

<sup>36</sup> Gide began work on this book in 1907, and between 1911 and 1920 he published segments anonymously until the book's release in 1924 in Paris.

not to do so, but is sorry that Wilde, among others, attempted to retract his homosexuality.<sup>37</sup> Gide places Wilde in a list of men who suffered scorn and punishment for the crime of sodomy, thereby positioning him in a homosexual genealogy. In doing this, Gide's work recalls Wilde's short story "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." which Matthew Potolsky describes as another decadent catalogue, this time one that forms a canon of queer texts:

Even more significant was the construction of a canon of homoerotic classics, a project to which Pater and Wilde made crucial contributions. Finding its chief point of reference in Johann Joachim Winckelmann, this canon elaborated a cosmopolitan "alternative classic tradition" defined by same-sex eroticism. It resembled both national canons and the decadent canon in shape and conception. Not unlike the national canon, the homoerotic canon seeks an incipient identity in a list of books and artworks, allowing individuals drawn to members of the same sex to "find" themselves as a potential community. Since the institutions of nationalism coincided with a new rigidity over gender roles and sexual propriety, however, the homoerotic canon was necessarily subversive. Wilde's 1889 story "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." at once plays on the decadent fascination with libertine literature and details the "discovery" of a specifically homoerotic tradition. . . . In the process, [the narrator] discovers (and constructs) a canon of works defined by homoerotic desire. Stretching from Plato to the Romantics, and including, along with Shakespeare, many figures drawn from Pater's *Renaissance*—Pico, Ficino, Michelangelo, and Winckelmann—this tradition

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<sup>37</sup> "I'm using the words that are needed. We've had Wilde and Krupp and Eulenburg and Macdonald..."

"And they're not enough for you?"

"Oh, victims! As many victims as you like—but not martyrs. They all denied—they always will deny." (*Corydon* 8)



constitutes a repressed history of amatory friendship writing within the authorized canons of literature, philosophy, and art history. At the end of the story, the narrator has given up his belief in Cyril's theory, but the canon he constructs remains as a legacy. (78-79)

In "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." the narrator's obsession with documenting those works that purportedly confirm the same-sex desires experienced by great artists and writers, including Shakespeare and Michelangelo, served a real-world purpose. By the end of the story Wilde thoroughly dissolves the theory and preserves the heteronormative status quo, and on trial Wilde openly contradicted Edward Carson's accusation that his short story attempted to prove Shakespeare's sonnets were sodomitical.<sup>38</sup> His ultimate equivocation about the existence of Willie Hughes appears to undermine the entire labour of the story, meaning that the work must have had some purpose beyond introducing a theory only to disprove it. Instead of proving a theory concerning Shakespeare's bisexuality, Wilde achieved the production of a catalogue as Potolsky describes; by the time the story is complete Wilde has undone his handiwork, but he has left behind a trail for his attentive and sympathetic readers to take up. Wilde uses the same technique identified by Graham Robb in works like Byron's *Lara* and Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, where the gender-twist that re-establishes the heteronormative world comes too late: "the reader has had a true taste of homosexual passion" and 'Théodore' "may turn out to be female but, as far as emotional realities are concerned, this is a mere technicality" (212). In *Mademoiselle de Maupin* the reader witnesses D'Albert's struggle with his sexuality and his ultimate acceptance that he cannot help loving a man without initially knowing that this will be

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<sup>38</sup> "CARSON: I believe you have written an article pointing out that Shakespeare's sonnets were practically sodomitical.

WILDE: On the contrary, Mr Carson, I wrote an article to prove that they were not so." (Holland 93)

overturned.<sup>39</sup> As he comes to terms with his love for Théodore, D'Albert engages with the Classical canon of queer texts in his attempt to understand his new desires, and likewise he leaves behind a catalogue of homoerotic texts and biographies which a curious reader might pursue. D'Albert criticizes the bowdlerization of ancient texts, described by Gregory Woods as “the systematic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century heterosexualisation, and indeed bourgeoisification, of the literature of classical pederasty,” and disapproves of the frequent exchange of male for female names (143). D'Albert returns to the Classics for his definition of love and contrasts the “true” love with the false and restrictive policing of sexuality which led him to believe for so long that heterosexuality was the only legitimate mode of desire.<sup>40</sup> Gautier restores the heterosexual norm for D'Albert,<sup>41</sup> but not before indicating to his readers that finding romantic satisfaction in a homosexual love is a real and legitimate possibility.

In “Mr. W.H.” Wilde is able to reconcile the transgressive subject matter of Shakespeare's bisexuality with the prudery of his Victorian audience through the story's strange ending which unravels the theory, while at the same time he knowingly supplies a portion of his audience with a list of works in which they could seek identification for same-sex attraction. This search for literary forefathers was common among the isolated, silenced communities of homosexual men in the Victorian period and after. For men of a certain class, there was solace in seeing their own inclinations shared by the great minds of the Greeks and among such esteemed

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<sup>39</sup> The first volume ends with D'Albert's stark declaration that he is in love with a man. The second volume, where Théodore/Madeleine de Maupin's sex is revealed, did not appear until the following year.

<sup>40</sup> “Those strange love affairs that abound in the elegies of classical poets, which we found so odd and hard to believe, are exactly true to life and perfectly within the bounds of possibility. In the translations we did of them, we substituted women's names for the existing ones. Juventus ended up as Juventia and Alexis became Ianthe. Handsome boys were changed into beautiful girls, and thus we reshaped the monstrous harem of Catullus, Tibullus, Martial and the gentle Virgil. A most gallant occupation which only goes to show how little we understood the classical genius” (Gautier 171). André Gide also quotes this passage in his Socratic defense of homosexuality, *Corydon*.

<sup>41</sup> Gautier never rescinds Madeleine de Maupin's lesbian relationship with her page, but the perceived threat of male homosexuality and indifference to female homosexuality is another matter entirely.

Renaissance figures as Michelangelo, Shakespeare, and Marlowe. This kind of catalogue likewise occurs in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, when Wilde includes unabashed references to royal liaisons such as James I and Philip Herbert or Edward II and Piers Gaveston. Wilde also reused a portion of the list of authors he supplied in “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” in his famous defence of “the love that dare not speak its name” during his first criminal trial, a speech which is frequently characterized as a formative moment in the modern gay rights movement.<sup>42</sup> Linda Dowling identifies how in the moment following that speech “the applause of Wilde’s listeners marks the sudden emergence into the public sphere of a modern discourse of male love formulated in the late Victorian period by such writers as Walter Pater and John Addington Symonds and Wilde himself” (2). Wilde first created these coded canons in his own works and then became a part of them through Gide’s consciously explicit directory of homosexual ‘victims’ of society in *Corydon*.

In an open letter to François Porché in which Gide defends *Corydon*, he quotes a question posed to him by Jérôme and Jean Tharaud: “Whom will M. Gide convince that one should prefer green carnations to roses?” (135). The reference to green carnations, a symbol that Wilde allegedly adopted from Paris society but whose fame is associated with Wilde, represents a continued conflation of Wilde and homosexuality, and a continued danger of association with Wilde for writers and artists. Although Gide flouted these dangers with his numerous works about or alluding to Wilde, and eventually lived openly as a homosexual man, it was not a privilege that many others had. French laws and Gide’s wealth and social status permitted him enough freedom to be candid about his sexual orientation, but for writers in England an

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<sup>42</sup> “WILDE: ‘The Love that dare not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare” (qtd. in Hyde 236).

appreciation of Wilde had to be selective and coded. The French had an ability to use English Decadence in their art without the fear of serious social or legal repercussions, whereas the English remained constrained in their art and hid Decadence under another name for a long time after. Although Wilde remained an emblem of the possibilities of homosexual love in the literary culture of both nations, the prudery and hypocrisy of English law and morality curtailed the possibility of a continuing Decadent school of literature in England after Wilde's trials.

“To me there are only two languages in the world: French and Greek.”  
– Oscar Wilde<sup>43</sup>

### Chapter 3 | *Le Parnasse contemporain*:

#### France and Hellenism in the English *fin-de-siècle*

##### **Fantasies of Tolerance and National Sexualities**

Wilde and his contemporaries in England imagined that even if the French did not celebrate homosexuality, at least a permissive attitude could be found in French society. This supposed tolerance was supported by French law. After the introduction of the Penal Code of 1791—ratified under Napoleon in the French Penal Code of 1810<sup>44</sup>—sodomy was no longer a punishable crime. Under Napoleon, the French Penal Code applied to all countries of the First French Empire and continued to influence law in those nations after his empire finally fell in 1815. In contrast, sodomy was punishable by death until 1861 in England. However, the “mere absence of anti-sodomitical laws did not bring immunity from harassment and prosecution. France, with its revolutionary code, is sometimes mentioned as an example of modern tolerance, but ‘pederasts’ could still be punished under laws of public indecency, corruption of the young, and even vagrancy” (Robb 27). Indeed, it may have surprised many of the English men that regarded France as a sexually permissive nation to know that “for most of the 19th century, raids on homosexual clubs and cruising grounds were even more common in Paris than they were in London” (Robb 28). However, the Penal Code is still significant in carrying out the French resolution to keep private matters private as long as sexual acts were consensual and neither

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<sup>43</sup> From an 1882 interview in Paris (*Interviews and Recollections* 190).

<sup>44</sup> The French Penal Code of 1810 is distinct from the Code Napoléon, also of 1810, which was a civil rather than penal code. These codes were adopted in many of the counties occupied by the French during the Napoleonic Wars.

party suffered. Even before the introduction of the Penal Code, the spirit of what would eventually become law prevailed: “The last execution of a sodomite in France took place in 1783, when a defrocked monk was burned at the stake for murdering a boy who refused to have sex with him” (Robb 23). Contrary to numerous cases in England, the death penalty was not for an act of sodomy but for murder. However, French culture frequently contradicted the tolerance it was presumed by Englishmen to possess. Looking selectively at its literature and laws to construct the notion of a tolerant paradise, English homosexual men did not fully recognise the homophobic language and violence that exists on record throughout the 1800s. Alongside the physical violence of gay-bashing exists the rhetorical violence embedded in French vocabulary, such as displayed in “a French slang dictionary of 1874” which “list[s] over forty insulting terms for a male homosexual” (Robb 150). Even in their literature the French were not always as progressive as English readers presumed them to be from the homoerotic overtones of works like *Mademoiselle de Maupin* or *Illusions perdues*; the first French translations of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* changed the companion of the “Calamus” sections from implicitly male to overtly female, a fact which Gide laments in *Corydon*.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, select novels of Gautier and Balzac and the careers and reputations of authors such as Paul Verlaine struck certain English readers as indications that the French were able to express same-sex desire more openly than could ever be possible on their side of the Channel.

The law was not the sole influence on English perceptions of homosexual tolerance in France. National masculinities often depended upon the displacement of homosexuality onto other countries, generally moving either farther south or east in the process but always toward

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<sup>45</sup> This is because French demands a choice of gender (‘ami’ or ‘amie’) where English says ‘friend.’

the essentially distant and ‘other.’<sup>46</sup> One’s own country was generally always considered the most virile and sexually conventional, and this rhetoric figured in both nationalist discourses and personal ones. Gendering one’s own country was justified through self-imposed and self-serving definitions of how to qualify masculinity or sexual normativity. Meanwhile, preconceived stereotypes of other nations were generally crystallized while abroad, especially in the observation of sexual behaviours. Nineteenth-century French, German, and English male tourists travelling in Mediterranean countries such as Italy, Greece, Turkey and Algeria, not infrequently indulged in homosexual encounters while abroad. This occurred both because they were at a safe distance from their homes where such behaviour carried the danger of social and legal consequences and because differing economies and sexual standards meant that it was not difficult to find young men there whom a Northern European gentleman could woo with money or gifts.<sup>47</sup> This trend led people in these Southern nations to presume that homosexuality originated in those Northern countries, while many of the foreign tourists who went south for these homosexual experiences found them far more readily available there than in their home countries. Many theories were created to justify the sexual practises identified in these southern nations by northern travellers. In his study *Capri und die Homosexuellen* (1902), Dr. A. Sper

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<sup>46</sup> England was not excluded by its North-Western geography. *Il vizio Inglese* (in Italy) or *le vice Anglais* (in France) euphemistically applied to both buggery and flagellation (Robb 7). Robb also records that, “In France, ‘l’amour allemand’ crossed the Rhine like an invading army. Meanwhile, ‘die französische Krankheit’, carried by pornography and dilettantes, conducted a counter-offensive, turning cities into open-air brothels and respectable women into lesbians.

“Romanians traced homosexuals back to Turkey, Turks traced them to Persia, and Persians to a remote Persian province. In 1810, when a flourishing club of ‘mollies’ was discovered in a London pub, two newspapers blamed ‘the evil’ on the Napoleonic wars: too many foreign servants and too many Englishmen exposed to foreign customs. In Paris, a supposed increase in ‘pederasty’ in the 1840s was attributed to the conquest of Algeria: according to the Marquis de Boissy, troops had brought the ‘mal d’orient’ home like a tropical disease. Later, the surge of bourgeois sex tourists from Britain, France and Germany convinced Algerians (according to André Gide) that ‘these tastes came to them from Europe’” (7).

<sup>47</sup> According to Aldrich, rather than identifying as ‘homosexual,’ Italian males made distinctions between the ‘active’ and ‘passive’ sexual roles, as in the traditional ancient Greek ‘model’ of sexual relations. Italian youths could “transition from the passive to the active role without losing status . . . so long as the metamorphosis occurred” (176).

argued his belief that “in colder, northern climes, where men were obliged to work hard just to survive, the sexual instinct was less strong than in southern and tropical regions, where warmth, fertility and temperament provoked greater sexual desire” (qtd. in Aldrich 162). These arguments were persuasive enough to influence the artistic depictions of Southern climes and peoples by Northern European artists, whose works were dominated by ideas of warm-blooded temperaments and relaxed sexual attitudes. Another tenuous scientific rationalization was proposed by the explorer Richard Burton who “described the existence of a ‘Stotadic Zone’ which covered the area between the northern latitudes of 35 and 43 degrees and included the Iberian peninsula, Italy, Greece, Northern Africa, the Punjab, Kashmir, China, Japan, and Turkistan. Within this zone homosexual behaviour was, Burton argued, especially common” (Cook 92).<sup>48</sup> Burton’s hypothesis rested upon commonly held theories regarding variance in sexual practices between countries and offered a pseudo-scientific confirmation of pre-existing beliefs: “his conclusions lent a certain credence to presumptions about excessive homosexual indulgence in these areas” (92). If the climate alone could account for sexual habits, and especially sexual excesses, then sexual practices in England should logically be the direct opposite of those prevailing in the Mediterranean regions. In its own national rhetoric England set the standard for masculinity and heteronormativity, and so it was easy to justify the differences in national sexual character with the dramatic differences in climate and culture found in the Mediterranean.

Of course, the climate of these nations was not the only way in which they differed from England. In both Italy and France, Catholicism remained the dominant religion, one which the

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<sup>48</sup> Cook goes on to note that Burton’s theory “is confusing, not least because he also talked, without explanation, of ‘born pederasts’ and of ‘pederasty’ being ‘carried’ from one country or area to another through trade routes and colonisation” (92).



English mind had long associated with decadence and tradition. Associations of Catholicism and homosexuality may not have been foremost in the minds of nineteenth-century English tourists on the Continent, but Catholicism played an important role in the formation of the sexual restrictions which influenced English sex tourism in these countries. After Unification in 1871, the centrality of the Catholic Church influenced the legislature of the Italian state which “elected not to criminalise homosexual acts precisely because it left the task of regulating sexual behaviour to the church. Dall’Orto argues that this situation obtained in most Catholic countries, including Spain, Portugal, and France, as well as Italy. In Catholic Europe, the church retained authority over morals and ‘private’ behaviour and, therefore, the state did not need to intervene” (Aldrich 172-3). When English homosexual men presumed that the absence of anti-sodomy laws was a sign of sexual liberty, they underestimated the power of the church. Dall’Orto’s proposal also challenges one commonly held theory behind Napoleon’s decision to omit sodomy as a crime in the Penal Code of 1810. Even in Gide’s *Corydon*, the decision is attributed to the embarrassment that would follow Napoleon given the well-known homosexuality of one of his closest generals, Jean-Jacques Régis de Cambacérès. This misattribution of motivation overlooks the Penal Code of 1791 where sodomy was first decriminalized in France under the justification that only “true crimes” were included in the Penal Code and not any of “those phony offenses, created by superstition” (Sibalis 82). However, it is important not to perceive either code as condoning same-sex love through silence. Dall’Orto perceived that the “cost” of the church’s control (rather than the state’s) over the matter “was little less than a ‘social compact’ between homosexuals and authorities: homosexuals could do what they liked in private so long as they did not adopt a blatant, public ‘lifestyle’ which overtly challenged orthodox beliefs and practices” (Aldrich 173). English writers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier sensationalised and

eroticed Catholicism, but seldom with an understanding of the interplay between church and self-monitoring in these homo-eroticed southern nations.

The Grand Tour through Italy and Greece was as much a part of the education of middle- and upper-class young men as attending Oxford or Cambridge, but English tourists seldom strayed off the beaten path. Byron had forged a path for English tourists to follow and his poetry shaped the way that travellers viewed particular monuments; Ruskin's guides for Florence and Venice told the traveller which were the important paintings or architectural features; Wilde's own visit to Rome included a pilgrimage to Keats' grave. The English were constantly seeking themselves in Italy, and often brought the writings of Englishmen about Italy and Greece with them, informing them of what to look for while shaping their expectations. In their agendas and accounts and especially in the popular pictures of the time, we can see that English "visitors recreated in their own image the Mediterranean they visited. They looked for vestiges of Antiquity not only in architectural ruins but in the local population" (Aldrich 166). However, the search for Antiquity in the modern population was often frustrated; Northern tourists desired Italy without the Italians, preferring to meditate on the past and fill the settings with Classical figures.<sup>49</sup> Aldrich proposes that for some English tourists "contemporary Italy lived only through its history and culture. Travellers paid little attention in their accounts to contemporary politics and economics. In many paintings and photographs, real-life Italians appear primarily as quaint figures against a landscape of classical ruins... The alternative, shown in von Gloeden's photos, is for the 'natives' to be dressed up (or undressed) as ancients or reduced to folkloric models" (166). The photography of von Gloeden provides the visual epitome of how Victorian writers

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<sup>49</sup> French artist Claude Lorrain, popular in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, painted many idealized Italian scenes, some contemporary, some of Classical myths. Majestic ruins in pastoral landscapes overwhelm the canvas, while the figures are miniscule. Italy and Greece as landscapes dominated by the past are emphasized by the fact that even in his paintings of Classical figures the temples are already in the crumbling state seen by tourists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

perceived the Mediterranean and the people who lived there. Using the modern tool of the camera, von Gloeden captures images that hearken back to neoclassical paintings of figures from Antiquity, thereby transferring the image and idea through a variety of historical frames. Staging the photographs to look like familiar paintings gave von Gloeden the freedom to photograph young Sicilian men in little-to-no clothing, although the photographs were often highly suggestive and clearly meant to titillate the appreciative eye.<sup>50</sup> Although von Gloeden depended on well-established artistic precedents to permit such glorification of the male form, there is a documentary quality to the photographic medium that suggests the scenes are happening presently. The modern camera lens of Northern photography captures Italian figures living in a present-past where the attitudes of Antiquity never really ended. As such, these photographs both intensely reflected and created homoeroticized ideas of modern Greece and Italy. Nothing indicated that these boys had lives outside of their photographed scenes; whether draped in cloth or bearing only a wreath they stood removed from their context and, aside from their very medium, the photographs are devoid of modernity. The boys in these carefully constructed pictures suggested both an ideal of Italy and an ideal of Hellenic love and appreciation of male beauty that could supposedly always be found in Italy. They are comfortable and careless in their nudity, portrayed with a sexual readiness and availability, and were perceived by the English as “natural, spontaneous, open and able to live out their sexuality, just as in ancient Greece or Rome” (Aldrich 167). Von Gloeden’s photographs of Italian subjects were widely appreciated and portrayed the ideal of Italy and Greece that Northern imaginations already believed in.<sup>51</sup>

While his photographs gave form to the Italy found in foreign imagination, von Gloeden was hardly the inventor of the homoerotic modern Mediterranean; the writings of theorists before

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<sup>50</sup> See Appendix B for Wilhelm von Gloeden’s “Land of Fire.”

<sup>51</sup> Wilde was one such appreciator and visited von Gloeden in 1897 after his release from prison (Aldrich 146).

him, most particularly Walter Pater and J.A. Symonds, set the foundations for the idealized Greece and Italy that arises from late 19<sup>th</sup> century works. Pater and Symonds disseminated their theories at Oxford, where Wilde heard and incorporated Paterian ideas of antiquity and aesthetics into his own art. *The Renaissance* in particular transformed conservative views of how Greek art should influence modern living, and it operated through a new level of language that at once encoded and acknowledged homosexual passion:

“Pater’s work suggested a new aesthetics, openly sensual and erotic, which by implication should be free of the straitened morality of traditional cultural and religious beliefs. . . . [Pater’s “Conclusion”] brought together aesthetics and morality in a way which embraced eroticism. Without naming homosexuality, even by shying away from overt discussion of it, Pater had used Antiquity, medieval romances which (in his view) foreshadowed the Renaissance, the Renaissance itself and neoclassical views to justify passion. What was homoerotic verse in Byron’s poetry and political activism in his life, now metamorphosed into aesthetics with homosexual overtones in Pater’s essays.” (Aldrich 76-77)

Pater is often cautious in his references to homosexuality. Despite the chapter he devotes to the German art historian Winckelmann, he frames Winckelmann’s well-known homosexuality carefully, embedding harmful consequences in his account of Winckelmann’s “romantic” as well as “intellectual” affinities with Hellenism (94).<sup>52</sup> Unlike Wilde in his speech from the dock, which praises Michelangelo and Shakespeare as pederastic forefathers, Pater treats even such

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<sup>52</sup> “Certainly, of that beauty of living form which regulated Winckelmann’s friendship, it could not be said that it gave no pain. One notable friendship, the fortune of which we may trace through his letters, begins with an antique, chivalrous letter in French, and ends noisily in a burst of angry fire. Far from reaching the quietism, the bland indifference of art, such attachments are nevertheless more susceptible than any others of equal strength of a purely intellectual culture. Of passion, of physical excitement, they contain only just so much as stimulates the eye to the last lurking delicacies of colour and form. These friendships, often the caprices of a moment, make Winckelmann’s letters, with their troubled colouring, an instructive but bizarre addition to the History of Art” (95).

subjects as Leonardo da Vinci with delicacy. Although “shying away from overt discussion” of homosexuality (Aldrich 76), Pater’s frequent invocation of Hellenic ideals was enough for readers such as Wilde and others to comprehend a vision of an ancient world where sexual and artistic liberty were not only positively correlated but worthy of celebration. W.H. Mallock’s *The New Republic* (1877) indicates that although Pater might not have mentioned Greek pederasty by name, it was not difficult to draw a case for pederasty out of his lectures and writings and the general rise of Hellenism in Oxford in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the character of Mr. Rose, Mallock created a flamboyant caricature of Pater with the aim of “exposing and publicizing the homoerotic subtext of Victorian Hellenism, and translating the hitherto abstruse cultural preoccupations of the Oxford elite into the ordinary language of Victorian middle-class aspiration” (Dowling 110). However, in her breakdown of *The New Republic* Linda Dowling notes how it becomes a text which paradoxically propagates Hellenism as the code-language of homosexuality; when he “simplifies Pater for the purposes of satire, Mallock unintentionally makes Paterian Hellenism just that much more accessible. . . . *The New Republic* in this way operates as a translator mechanism between academic and public sectors, through which the claims to cultural regeneration—the spiritual procreancy of homoerotic Hellenism—now achieve a new currency and glamour in the eyes of its younger readers” (110-111). Pater led young men, through writing and through reputation (or representation), towards the Greek sources that afforded potential homosexual self-recognition.

### **Victorian Hellenism in England**

The portrayal and seeming acceptance of same-sex love in Ancient Greek texts, especially in a culture where Ancient Greek language and philosophy held considerable cultural capital, provided more than a signal or code between homosexual men. The possibilities of self-

recognition and legitimation provided by Ancient Greek texts regarding sexual practices held great importance to homosexual men in Victorian Britain. The society of ancient Athens was widely regarded as worthy of emulation and for many it upheld ideas of mental and bodily purity that England aspired to attain, a society populated with ideal masculine warriors and brilliant philosophers. The *literae humaniores* course at Oxford<sup>53</sup> was preeminent under the shaping of Benjamin Jowett and those that followed his teaching model, including Symonds and Pater. Prominent men in business, parliament, and the church had risen to their positions of great esteem under Jowett's tutelage, perpetuating the value of the content of his courses as well as his method. Jowett's influence at Oxford changed the focus of study from predominantly Latin works to Greek, and the singularized nature of his innovative tutorial system led the students to engage in far greater depth with the contents of the work they studied. In texts like *The Symposium* and *Phaedrus* certain young men found, potentially for the first time, a reflection of the desires that they felt but which their culture had never legitimised with any favourable example. Although Oxford was not where Wilde and Symonds first encountered Greek philosophy, Linda Dowling asserts that they, as others, found themselves in part through these Greek texts studied there. The central place that the study of the Ancient Greeks held in the Oxford curriculum further sanctified same-sex love: "it is clear," she says, "how fully embedded these materials of the emergently homosexual legitimation strategy yet remain within the ideological matrix of Oxford liberalism" (121). The tutorial system in place at Oxford, even without erotic exchanges between the tutor and the pupil, reflected the pederastic ideal purported by no less a figure than Socrates. Central course texts not only affirmed that same-sex love had a historical precedent and might be as natural as heterosexual love, but afforded the opportunity to

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<sup>53</sup> Also known as 'Greats,' or, now in more common parlance, 'Classics.'

see in “this same Plato . . . an apology for male love as something not only noble but infinitely more ennobling” (Dowling xiv). However, Dowling notes that despite Jowett’s role in centralizing texts like *The Symposium*, Jowett and other early proponents of the Greek-heavy curriculum at Oxford did not anticipate the “homosexual counterdiscourse” that would form out of Hellenism, and Jowett never approved of the pederastic elements in Plato and his contemporaries. Once an enthusiastic student of Jowett and later a tutor in his own right, John Addington Symonds became “utterly exhausted and oppressed by his experience of the central contradiction within Oxford homosocial Hellenism—its willful denial of the paiderastia so crucial to the Greek culture it otherwise held up to emulation and praise” (Dowling 88). Two versions of emulation of the Greeks existed concurrently; however, one interpretation was at the exclusion of the other. Victorian Hellenists who denied the pederastic elements of Greek teachings perceived in these works a capacity to combat the ‘degeneracy’ found in cities in the form of prostitution, theft, and inversion: “[Charles] Kingsley noted the Hellenic onus on physical development and argued that exercise and outdoor activity were the means through which the effects of urban degeneration might be avoided and English ‘virtues’ recovered” (Cook 124). The love of Greek Antiquity but hatred of Greek Vice that so exhausted Symonds was widespread outside of Oxford.<sup>54</sup> However, despite this definite area of contention, homosexual men in the late-Victorian period continued to feel stirred by the expressions of same-sex love in their Greek course readings; it is what Dowling calls a “language of moral legitimacy” which functioned because of how “the prestige of Greece among educated middle-class Victorians . . . was so massive that invocations of Hellenism could cast a veil of

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<sup>54</sup> “This desperate anomaly between ‘2 favourite prejudices that are apt cruelly to jar,’ as Jeremy Bentham had once described them in an unpublished paper of 1774, ‘the one in disfavour of this vice [of Greek love], the other in favour of antiquity, especially ancient Greece,’ was one that Symonds would in later years trace to Jowett’s pedagogical influence at Oxford” (Dowling 88).

respectability over even a hitherto unmentionable vice or crime” (28). References to Ancient Greece became not only an indication of a man’s learning, but in particular contexts could function as a code through which men and women attracted to their own sex could speak about themselves and to each other. Hellenism furnished a discourse of solace which the unforgiving strictures of Christianity at the time consistently failed to provide.

### **Decadent Hellenism and France**

Although in an earlier analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* I identified Dorian as a nominally French figure, of equal importance are the ancient Greek qualities with which Wilde imbues him. “The trope of Dorian as revenant from the classical past is set up from the beginning of the novel,” Evangelista explains, beginning with his very name as “a signifier of his Greek identity” and extending to how “the supernatural plot of Dorian Gray relies on a Greek mythic archetype—the myth of Narcissus—a tale to which Wilde was repeatedly drawn” (152). Basil prefaces Dorian before his first appearance, guiding both Lord Henry and the reader in their expectation of the title character; Basil tells Lord Henry that Dorian “defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek,” and, further, that what “the face of Antinous was to late Greek sculpture, and the face of Dorian Gray will some day be to me” (13). In this latter expression it is unclear whether Basil is the anonymous but inspired Classical artist who hews Antinous’ face from marble or Hadrian who commissions the images out of his morbid devotion. We later learn that Basil has repeatedly painted Dorian into the past within various historical or mythological scenes: “[Basil] had drawn [Dorian] as Paris in dainty armour, and as Adonis with huntsman’s cloak and polished boar-spear. Crowned with heavy lotus-blossoms [Dorian] had sat on the prow of Adrian’s barge, gazing across the green turbid Nile. [He] had leaned over the still pool of



some Greek woodland and seen in the water's silent silver the marvel of [his] own face" (110). Basil considers that his fatal 'mistake' is to depict Dorian "not in the costume of dead ages, but in [his] own dress and [his] own time," because Basil recognises it retroactively as the moment that he lost his special connection to Dorian. He has, until this point, played the role of von Gloeden, channeling and coding his desires through these Hellenistic scenes. By framing Dorian in these contexts, "Basil subconsciously enacts his desire for the other man by setting it in antiquity, where it can be visualised and enjoyed outside of the repressive economy of the present" (Evangelista 153). Dorian's Hellenism is inextricably tied to the homoeroticism of the narrative, and works to augment the homoerotic subtext by guiding the reader to the ancient Greek and Roman sources that Wilde refers to. A reader need not search long to find out the history of Antinous and Hadrian and from it draw out the correlation between the never-aging beauty of Antinous and Dorian.

The influence Lord Henry enacts upon Dorian, and in which he takes such pleasure, likewise mimics the shaping of a mind and soul which is the duty of the older party in a traditional pederastic relationship and reflects "precisely the erotic and pedagogical pleasure generated within the hearer/inspirer relationship of Dorian painerastia" (Dowling 125). Lord Henry also reinforces for the reader Wilde's views on Greek modes of art and living, and we can see him both expressing and practising Greek ideals. He identifies a form of perfect freedom of self-expression in ancient Greece as he verbally seduces Dorian with the entreaty, "Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing... A new Hedonism—that is what our century wants" (25). He proposes that "if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream—I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we

would forget all the maladies of mediaevalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal—to something finer, richer than the Hellenic ideal, it may be” (21). Lord Henry’s “new Hedonism” recalls Basil’s “fresh school” with “all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek” as well as the “new aesthetics” of Vivian in Wilde’s essay “The Decay of Lying,” which seeks the same fresh vitality in art. In both works, Wilde’s tone and message imitate Pater’s “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*, and he thereby channels ancient Greece through Pater. Evangelista suggests that “Wilde asks us to read the homoerotic desire treated in this novel within a canonically strong tradition that takes us all the way back to the Greeks by way of the Paterian figures of Michelangelo and Winckelmann” (154). Emulating Pater in style and subject matter functions to create a strong homoerotic intertext for those who have read from the same canon and hold a vested interest in sharing in the code. The scathing and accusatory nature of certain negative reviews of the novel indicate that this code was transparent enough to parse in Wilde’s day, but this decoding also occurred more positively in the way that homosexual men used the novel to self-identify. Gay literary circles in France “adopted ‘Dorian Gray’ as an autonomastic code-name and French writers with an agenda to portray homosexuality in their works turned to Wilde as a model” (Eells 80). The importance of self-recognition for homosexual minorities in both England and France meant that a book like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which reinscribed literary homoeroticism through both an emulation and performance of ancient Greek sexuality also became a vehicle of expression for homosexual writings that came after it.

In his biography of Wilde, Richard Ellmann entitles the period of Wilde’s 1891 visit to France as “Hellenizing Paris.” However, if Wilde brought Hellenism to Paris, it was because he believed that it was already Hellenized. Much in the same way that his reputation in England was

paradoxically affirmed by his reception in France,<sup>55</sup> any perception that Wilde had brought ancient Greece to Paris was because Wilde already perceived Hellenic attitudes were commonplace there and accordingly spoke and behaved as a Hellene while in the city. In the 1860s and 1870s, French poets including Verlaine, Gautier, and Baudelaire published their works in the poetry anthology *Le Parnasse contemporain* (*The Contemporary Parnassus*).<sup>56</sup> Although the publication ran for only three volumes, the well-known poets published in it were referred to as Parnassians long after the end of its run. In 1892, Teodor de Wyzewa even acknowledged in his commentary on *Intentions*, part of a comprehensive review of Wilde's works up to that point, the debt that Wilde owed to the group, saying, "None of this is new to us. It goes back to concepts and principles expressed by our greatest thinkers twenty years ago ... nothing more than the doctrine of 'art for art's sake' as it was formulated by the Romantics and the Parnassians, but developed to an extreme" (qtd. in Erber 560). However, for Wilde and for other English Decadents of the period, contemporary *fin-de-siècle* France could be equated with the Classical Mediterranean world, and therefore represented a modern-day Parnassus itself. Wilde's writings and interviews underscore his perception of France as a place with unmediated creative expression, a city that is itself an eternal Castalian Spring.<sup>57</sup> The Parisians were not beholden to sodomy laws in their personal lives or charges of immorality in their literature in the way that Wilde was in England, and for Wilde sexual and artistic freedom were intertwined in his vision of ancient Greece as much as in his vision of modern France.

The city of Paris in the English imagination was a consolidation of multiple artistic, cultural and social influences. It had the ability to impersonate ancient Athens and embody a

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<sup>55</sup> Teodor de Wyzewa on Wilde's reputation: "Before the month of December 1891, when Mr Wilde came to Paris, the English, his compatriots, did not know how to appreciate him" (qtd. in Hibbitt 65).

<sup>56</sup> A reference to Mount Parnassus above Delphi where the muses resided according to Ancient Greek mythology.

<sup>57</sup> "Paris is a city which pleases me greatly. While in London one hides everything, in Paris one reveals everything. One can go where one likes, and no-one dreams of criticising one" ("An English Poet in Paris" 170).

modern metropolis at once,<sup>58</sup> which the literature Parisian Decadents and Parnassians produced helped to foster: “Paris was the place where Oriental eroticism, aestheticism and the decadent impulse for sensual exploration were seen to intersect. This urban conjunction was captured especially strikingly by Joris-Karl Huysmans in *À Rebours*. The novel exerted a huge influence on English aesthetic and decadent writers, especially in its representation of the relationship between the city, gender, and sexuality” (Cook 99). Concerning sexual opportunity for homosexual men, places of possible homosexual union are mapped out in French books, including *À Rebours*, where in an infamous passage (alluded to during Wilde’s trials) Huysmans infers a sexual relationship between Des Esseintes and a boy he encounters near the Invalides who asks for directions to the Rue de Babylon.<sup>59</sup> Conflations of the French language, Greek paganism and pederasty in Antiquity, and the modern Paris are common among the writing trends of late Victorian Hellenists including Wilde and Symonds, whose references to Antiquity exhibit strong Paterian intertextuality. The palimpsest of Paris as they imagined it becomes clear in Wilde’s reference to a passage from Symonds’ ‘Ancient and Modern Tragedy’ where Symonds uses a particular Greek proverb:

“glossed through the French expression ‘l’amour de l’impossible’, to lament the destruction of the ‘free, frank sensuality of Paganism’ by the hand of Christianity and the inability of modern art to be ‘satisfied with merely aesthetic forms’ . . .

The expression ‘l’amour de l’impossible’ forges a mythic understanding of the

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<sup>58</sup> In a similar vein, in *À Rebours*, Des Esseintes is able to take a trip to England without leaving Paris because of his capacity to imagine (and even improve upon in his imagination) the real experience, much like the perfect visit to Japan Wilde expresses in “The Decay of Lying:” “If you desire to see a Japanese effect, you will not behave like a tourist and go to Tokio. On the contrary, you will stay at home, and steep yourself in the work of certain Japanese artists, and then, when you have absorbed the spirit of their style, and caught their imaginative manner of vision, you will go some afternoon and sit in the Park or stroll down Piccadilly, and if you cannot see an absolutely Japanese effect there, you will not see it anywhere” (315-316).

<sup>59</sup> In Cook’s view, “the city permitted an exploration of homosexual desires; they may have been ‘invalide’ and ‘Babylonian’ but they were apparently accommodated and incited by the decadent French capital” (102).

relationship between modernity and antiquity in terms of exile and longing. It contains a strong homoerotic energy, which translates the ‘impossibility’ (social and legal) of modern male love into larger cosmic conflicts between desire and duty entertained by science and religion.” (Evangelista 136)

The use of French here is hardly incidental: it further conveys the stereotypes existing constantly in the periphery of English imaginations regarding French social and sexual permissiveness. France makes ‘l’amour de l’impossible’ possible by encompassing it linguistically and culturally.

Using French Decadence as a medium, English aesthetes “resurrected from antiquity the ideas that they knew would be most noxious to modern English society in order to sabotage its institutions and values” (Evangelista 161). Although Decadence challenged moral and academic orthodoxy, the ideals of ancient Greece counter-balanced it. By using the canonical legitimacy associated with Classical texts, aesthetes made it “harder to contest that the decadent and aesthetic movements, which, despite being rooted in part in the same Hellenic valorisation of beauty, did not have the same cultural kudos” as mainstream Victorian Hellenism, although “there were increasingly clear lines connecting ‘Greek love’ to the acts of gross indecency reported in the papers” (Cook 126). If ancient Greece provided the grounds for a homosexual counter-discourse for men, then French Decadence provided the form for it. Evangelista notes that “like the modern France of Decadence and Symbolism, ancient Greece is undesirable inasmuch as it causes ‘innovators’ (a term of abuse in its own right in this context) to call into question conservative artistic and cultural practices deviously dressed here as Englishness. In a striking image that reverses traditional discourses of the classical body, the sensational and ‘spasmodic’ Greece of the aesthetes is unfavourably contrasted to the ‘healthy’ body of modern England” (161). In English Decadent writing, France converges with modern and ancient Greece

to become an ideal location which confronts English social taboos and artistic limitation; they create modern Paris as a zone of both artistic and sexual fantasy.

In this view, France's lack of sodomy laws had less to do with the Penal Code and the French Revolution than with France's perceived proximity to the Hellenic past. Verlaine's tumultuous relationship with Rimbaud was notorious,<sup>60</sup> as much for its homosexual nature as for the fame of both participants and the dramatic accounts which circulated about it, yet Verlaine's poetic reputation never suffered for it. If he were an Englishman, particularly given that he came from no exceptional class, Verlaine could not have continued to live and publish in his own country. The recovery that French writers were able to make after the revelation of sexual scandal contrasted greatly with the pattern evident in England, although it does not mean that homophobia did not alter and affect the lives of French homosexuals. In 1873, Paul Verlaine would be arrested for shooting his lover Arthur Rimbaud, after which he was obliged to endure a humiliating 'medical' exam that determined recent participation in both passive and active sodomy. While he could not be sentenced for sodomy, the pederastic nature of his relationship with Rimbaud did not aid his case, and the scientifically illegitimate examination of his body reveals an underlying homophobia that stands in contrast to the English view of France as a nation of sexual liberty. After two years in prison, Verlaine chose to spend some time as a tutor in England and then the United States, evidently aware of the hostility he might meet in France. He eventually returned and resumed his literary career despite his turbulent lifestyle, hampered by alcoholism, syphilis, poverty, and other ills.

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<sup>60</sup> The French perception of Wilde's imitation of the Parnassians was so great that even in a discussion of his sexuality between Henri de Regnier and Edmond de Goncourt in 1893 de Regnier remarked: "that with a literary plagiarist like Wilde, his pederasty must be an imitation too—of [the poet Paul] Verlaine" (qtd. in Erber 561).

Like Verlaine, Wilde departed from his home country immediately after his prison sentence expired, but his was to be a permanent leave-taking. Wilde's travels after his self-imposed exile took him through countries where the Napoleonic law had some influence—France, Switzerland, Italy—where both the physical and social climate might be more forgiving. He finally settled in France but did not live to enjoy any reparation of his reputation. Even in France Wilde could never recover from the ignominy of his trials nor the poverty they left him in, and Gide reported in his memoir of feeling embarrassment when he was requested to join Wilde at an outdoor table at a restaurant in Paris, where anyone could see them associating. Although the imagination of France as a safe haven for types of writing and sexual behaviours that were legally and socially condemned in England was not grounded in a social reality, in an 1897 interview with Wilde in France Gedeon Spillett reports that the vitality of the fantasy lingered: “Oscar Wilde loves France because she alone stands up for freedom of speech, because she alone offers help to the weak, and because she alone satisfies man's longing for justice” (*Interviews and Recollections* 355). Freedom from legal persecution and comparative privacy from the press altered little. Wilde, so celebrated in the society papers during his earlier visits to France, did not meet with the same appreciation again during his lifetime.

## Epilogue

When Oscar Wilde died in Paris in 1900, he was originally buried at the Cimetière parisien de Bagneux outside the walls of Paris. In 1909 his remains were disinterred and moved to his now famous tomb at Cimetière du Père-Lachaise in the 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. Wilde had converted to Catholicism on his deathbed, although the religion had attracted him throughout his life.<sup>61</sup>

Wilde's posthumous affiliation with France honours his lifelong Francophilia as well as his literary rejection of England. Wilde's migration after his imprisonment and decease in Paris reflects the international reciprocity of his own art; it was inspired by the French, and Wilde insinuated that only the French, or those at least with French sympathies, could appreciate it. Oscar Wilde, *écrivain français*, emerges from the French inspiration present in his own works and further through Wilde's role in French literature after his scandal.

In 1916 Wilde's friend Frank Harris released a memoir concerning Wilde wherein he details the aftermath of Wilde's trials and the wave of upper-class homosexual men fearfully fleeing to the Continent.<sup>62</sup> Graham Robb calls Harris "famously unreliable" and casts doubt on Harris' tableau of "trains to the coast and the cross-Channel ferries . . . crammed with wealthy sodomites, fleeing to France or Italy" as a melodramatic fantasy (36). Matt Cook affirms how little changed in the legal environment: "After the trials there was no purge of homosexual activity and nor was there a sudden drop in convictions. Arrests and prosecutions continued,

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<sup>61</sup> In an 1893 letter to her friend Lady Mount-Temple, Oscar's wife Constance Wilde wrote, "imagine my surprise to find that Oscar goes to Benediction at the Oratory sometimes & other things that he does surprise me more still! He will not go himself with me there, but he would like me to go & burn candles at the Virgin's altar and offer prayers for him" (qtd. in Moyle 229).

<sup>62</sup> "Never was Paris so crowded with members of the English governing classes; here was to be seen a famous ex-Minister; there the fine face of the president of a Royal society; at one table in the Café de la Paix, a millionaire recently ennobled, and celebrated for his exquisite taste in art; opposite to him a famous general. It was even said that a celebrated English actor took a return ticket for three or four days to Paris, just to be in the fashion. The mummer returned quickly; but the majority of the migrants stayed abroad for some time. The wind of terror which had swept them across the Channel opposed their return, and they scattered over the Continent from Naples to Monte Carlo and from Palermo to Seville under all sorts of pretexts" (Harris 250-251).



rising intermittently, but showing no dramatic change until 1911, almost fifteen years after Wilde's imprisonment" (120). Yet Harris' narrative arose from an understanding of the legal and artistic prohibitions that homosexual men faced in England and their knowledge that across the Channel attitudes were different. In a prefatory dedication to *De Profundis* in 1908, Robert Ross writes that there was originally "no idea of issuing the work in England" (x). He reserves praise for "Germany and France, where tolerance and literary enthusiasm are more widely distributed, [and where] Wilde's works were judged independently of the author's career" (x). Indeed, in German translations of *De Profundis* portions were published that were not included in the available English versions, and a complete English edition of the text was not printed until 1962.

Wilde's writings countered the unspoken embargo on homophilic art in England through the apparatus of French Decadence, which encoded ideas of "perverse" morality and sexuality alongside ideas of pederastic love taken from Antiquity. Decadence blended the vice and the virtue: sexual crimes that offended the English national character became inextricable from ideals of Greek love that originated in the very Hellenism that society held up as the measure of English moral and physical health. Wilde's Paris was a palimpsest of modern French writing invoking ancient Greek ideas, and the same can be said of his own works. After the scandal of his trial, Wilde's name and reputation came to be associated with many of the same values that he embedded in his own art through the code of French Decadence. Cautiously in England, but more openly in France, writers referencing Wilde's theories and publications did so as a deliberate evocation of decadent insurgency, artistic martyrdom, and same-sex love.

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## Appendix A: *À Rebours* at the First Wilde Trial\*

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CARSON: You had, I suppose, a particular novel in your mind at the time?

WILDE: No, a suggestion.

CARSON: Do you say that you hadn't?

WILDE: Well, if you will allow me to say, there is a French novel which I do not admire very much myself.

CARSON: If you will tell me the name of it, we will see about it.

WILDE: No, I think you had better leave it. I don't mind telling you the name. The novel is called *A Rebours* and the artist is Huysmans. I consider it a badly written book, but it gave me a suggestion that there might be a wonderful—

CARSON: The novel was *A Rebours*.

WILDE: Yes.

[...]

CARSON: Now, that book that you say you referred to there, *A Rebours*, was that an immoral book?

WILDE: Not very well written, but I would not call it an immoral book. It was not well written.

CARSON: Was it a book, sir, dealing with undisguised sodomy?

WILDE: *A Rebours*?

CARSON: Yes.

WILDE: Most certainly not.

CARSON: Let me read to you.

WILDE: You must remember Mr Carson—I wish distinctly to state that while the suggestion of the book—the thing being a work of fiction—while the suggestion of a young man taking up a book in a yellow cover and having his life influenced by it—while that to a certain degree suggested to me that I might write a book like *A Rebours*, on the other hand when I quote from the book, as I do later on, and allude to passages in the book, those passages don't occur in the book. It was merely what I imagined. I read this book *A Rebours* and I imagined it being grander than it was.

CARSON: Was *A Rebours* a sodomitical book?

WILDE: *A Rebours*?

CARSON: Yes.

WILDE: No.

CARSON: Now, just take the book in your hand.

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\* In April 1895 Wilde persecuted the Marquess of Queensberry for libel when Queensberry left a calling card at Wilde's club accusing Wilde of "posing" as a "sodomite" (for "sodomite"). Encouraged by his lover (and the Marquess' son) Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde attempted to sue Queensberry, but would have to prove the accusation false. In this portion of the trial proceedings Wilde denies that *À Rebours* is the "poisonous bible" that Dorian Gray reads, but in the context of this trial it would be compromising for Wilde to admit that it is anything more than, as he says, "merely a motive."

This excerpt comes from *Irish Peacock & Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* by Merlin Holland, pp. 94-100.

WILDE: You must describe to me what you mean by a sodomitical book.

CARSON: You don't know?

WILDE: I don't know.

CLARKE: I really want to see how far this is going. In the book upon which Mr Carson, of course, is most properly cross-examining because it is contained in the plea here, there is a reference to some supposed French novel, not mentioned by name—and—as Mr Wilde says, not representing or purporting to give a specific book. He is asked what book suggested that idea to him, and then he is to be cross-examined as to the contents of that book. I do not know whether your lordship does not think we are going a long way.

CARSON: My lord, I asked him the question as to whether this book *A Rebours* was a book depicting sodomy. My lord, he admits that is the book he referred to there.

WILDE: No, I don't admit that.

CARSON: What?

WILDE: I don't. I say that the idea of the book was suggested by *A Rebours*, but that when I came to quote in the next passage of *Dorian Gray* from this supposed imaginary book, I quote chapters that do not exist in *A Rebours*. It was merely a motive, that is all. There is the difference. When I quote—if you read the next chapter—I say ‘in the seventh chapter of this book.’ There is no chapter of the character I speak of.

CARSON: But the book you had in your mind was *A Rebours*?

WILDE: No, the book I had in my mind was a book that I should like to have written myself.

CARSON: I ask you, now, was the book you had in your mind as the book sent by Lord Henry Wotton to Dorian Gray, was it *A Rebours* or was it not?

WILDE: It was not.

CARSON: But you told me a moment ago it was.

WILDE: No.

JUDGE: I certainly took it down.

WILDE: What I meant was—if you will allow me to say so—I am not quibbling about the matter—in the book sent to Dorian Gray by Lord Henry Wotton there is an allusion in the next chapter—

CARSON: I do not want to know that.

WILDE: To a particular chapter that does not occur in *A Rebours* and I was particularly anxious not—

CARSON: I will take your answer one way or the other.

WILDE: Will you kindly allow me to say this—that I would not have taken the work of a French man of letters deliberately and said, ‘This is a book that has poisoned a young man’s life.’ I would not have done it. I should consider that dishonourable, untrue and unjust. I would not have done it.

[...] I say the idea of the book that might have been written was suggested to me by *A Rebours* but the book was not *A Rebours*.

[...]



CARSON: My lord, I submit to your lordship that it is a perfectly legitimate question to put upon cross-examination. I have asked this gentleman what work it was that was in his mind when he wrote this particular passage in *Dorian Gray*. He told me it was *A Reboours*. Surely, my lord, where the issue here is whether Mr Wilde was posing as a sodomite, which is the justification pleaded here—I have a right to show when he was publishing that book he had in his mind a novel, which according to the extract that I have was plainly a novel which would lead to and teach sodomitical practices? My lord, surely I ought to be allowed to ask the witness and to test the witness as to whether the book was of that description?



1: "The Apparition" by Gustave Moreau

One of the two paintings to which Des Esseintes refers in *À Rebours* and one of many of Gustave Moreau's depictions of Salomé.



2: “A WILDE IDEA. OR, MORE INJUSTICE TO IRELAND!” in *Punch*

“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!’”\*

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\* A reference to a line associated with Wilde from Gilbert & Sullivan’s 1881 comic opera *Patience; or, Bunthorne’s Bride*: “An attachment *à la* Plato for a bashful young potato, or a not-too-French French bean!” (15). Wilde’s lectures on aestheticism in America were part of the publicity for the American production of *Patience*.



OSCAR WILDE AT WORK  
 By Aubrey Beardsley

3: "Oscar Wilde at Work" by Aubrey Beardsley

This caricature specifically targets the composition of *Salomé* in French. The books surrounding Wilde include the French authors Gustave Flaubert (Wilde borrowed heavily from "Hérodiades" in the book *Trois Contes*) and Théophile Gautier. Beardsley's caricature undercuts Wilde's French ability and makes the language of composition appear as a forced and pretentious artistic decision with French dictionaries and lessons on hand to aid Wilde in writing.

Wilde's speech bubble, "Il ne faut pas le regarder," translates to "Do not look at him," while the refrain throughout *Salomé* is "Do not look at her" ["Il ne faut pas *la* regarder"] as Herodias repeatedly begs Herod to stop lustfully staring at his step-daughter Salomé.



**4:** “Land of Fire” by Wilhelm von Gloeden

This photograph was taken on the terrace of a villa von Gloeden shared with his cousin and fellow photographer Wilhelm von Plüschow. Mount Vesuvius in the background was heavily retouched on the glass negative. Von Gloeden legitimizes the homoeroticism. Von Gloeden invokes an idealised and homoeroticized Antiquity while steering clear of obscenity through the use of familiar neoclassical motifs: the leopard-skin throw, the carefully draped coverings, and the props such as jugs and vases. This photograph, taken in 1895 or earlier, embodies the vision of Italy as a land still tied to the Classical past, although careful composition and editing were necessary to produce this image.