

EXTRAVAGANCE; OR, SALOMÉ'S KISS

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This essay addresses the extravagance of a kiss, namely the spectacular extravagance of Salomé's kiss on the mouth of the decapitated head of Jokanaan at the close of Oscar Wilde's play. It addresses the writing and staging of that particular kiss and what that kiss reveals about the performance of extravagance. And, finally, it addresses a genuinely radical aestheticism produced by this extravagance. What I am calling a "*radical* aestheticism" is an aestheticism which, far from securing the stability or validation of the aesthetic, delivers us to the very diarticulation of the aesthetic and, in the process, to the limits of "culture" itself in so far as the concept of culture (at least in the dominant German and British traditions) relies upon the aesthetic as a *human* and *humanizing* capacity.¹

Certainly no figure within the British strain of this constellation is more responsible for, or more articulate about, an aestheticism carried to its most radical cultural, social, and ethical consequences than Wilde. By the same token, no writer's reputation has suffered more from the disrepute of an identification with aestheticism than Wilde. Even the extraordinary recent resurgence of interest in Wilde's work and life has not prompted a similar resurgence of interest in the critical potential of his aestheticism. In fact Wilde's importance for the developments of queer theory in the U.S. and Britain--his status as a founding figure of queer critical discourse--has more often than not resulted, oddly, in the subordination of his aestheticism. As compelling as much of the new critical attention to Wilde's life and writings has been, it has not often attended to the most radical moments, the most powerful extravagances, of his work. Such as the powerful and troubling extravagance of Salomé's kiss.

If this extravagance delivers us to what I am calling a radical aestheticism, it is not the received version of an aestheticism that we often attribute to Wilde and his mentor, Walter Pater, namely, the tautological and hermetic aestheticism of "art for art's *sake*": in the radicalizing of aestheticism, it is precisely the "*sake*" that's at stake. But the radical aestheticism that I'm interested in is not to be construed as the supplementing of aestheticism with a political content or the promise of its arrival at a radical political effect. Rather, what I call radical aestheticism is best understood through the Latin root of the word "radical," that is, something which