

THE IMPORTANCE OF SALOMÉ: APPROACHES TO A *FIN DE SIÈCLE* THEME

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Salomé: Topic and Theme

Salomé dances; John the Baptist is beheaded; and that, so it would seem, is enough to define one of the most extensive themes of high Modernism. But although Salomé has been well studied and documented as a textual corpus¹, no researcher has yet seriously posed the problem of how such a theme should be approached, nor why this particular corpus should be of any particular importance to literary history. This is moreover a problem of thematics as a whole, which has long tended to be overwhelmed by its material and not sufficiently endowed with serious thought about why and how such investigations should be undertaken. In this sense, careful treatment of Salomé may to some extent exemplify a more general methodological strategy, and should hopefully lead thematics to cut short some of its more useless endeavors and say something of or about historical importance.

An essentially pragmatic *Stoffgeschichte* would accept as Salomé virtually any woman going by that name. But should one also accept every woman named Herodias or Hérodiade, the mother occasionally confused with her generally dancing daughter? Should acceptance similarly be extended to a Salomé who speaks instead of dancing (Laforgue), who becomes a devout Christian (Heywood), or who lives in New York (Yeziarska)? And what might then be done with a narrative that makes structural reference to Salomé but insists on calling her “La Fanfarlo” and replaces the beheading with the far more modern catastrophe of bourgeois marriage and the birth of twins? This kind of questioning quickly reveals the fragility of most attempts to distinguish any one theme from another. At certain points, it is almost impossible to separate Salomé from the numerous other *femmes fatales* of her Modernist setting—Cleopatra, Dolores, Lilith, Lamia, Salammbô—and thematic specificity threatens to disappear forever into the arabesques of what Praz described and documented as the nineteenth century’s “erotic sensibility”. And yet, whatever the logic of such wider units of meaning, there is clearly something that enables one Salomé to be recognized as a reference to other Salomés, and for this small and actually quite specific chain of references to lay claim to a historical place of its own.

¹ See: H. Daffner, *Salome: Ihre Gestalt in Geschichte und Kunst*, Hugo Schmidt, Munich, 1912; R. Cansinos-Assens, *Salomé en la literatura, América*, Madrid, 1920; H. Zagona, *The Legend of Salomé and the Principle of Art for Art's Sake*, Droz, Geneva-Paris, 1960; R. Schaffer, *Die Salome-Dichtungen von Flaubert, Laforgue, Wilde und Mallarmé*, Julius-Maximilians Universität, Würzburg, 1965; M. Dottin, *S comme Salomé: Salomé dans le texte et l'image de 1870 à 1914*, Université de Toulouse, 1983.

The formation of such a place may be identified through the notion of topic, understood here not in the sense of linguistic predication but as a topos evinced by vectoral presupposition. In the case of Salomé, the presupposed reference is a singularly common point of departure: the Bible. The pertinent passages in the Gospels² are thus not merely two more versions in a circular chain of reference, but function as the underlying retainers of narrative elements that, once evoked as a whole or in part, may be assumed to form a stable and generally accessible unit. This biblical base in fact enables the Salomé topic to be described in the following way: four characters — John the Baptist, Herod Antipas, his second wife Herodias and her daughter whom tradition has named Salomé — are narratively interrelated in such a way that the first is ultimately beheaded at the instigation of one of the latter two. Such is the story that modern versions may presuppose without naming. Thus when Regnault, for example, presents an exotic woman sitting with a platter on her knees, the platter is enough for the topic to be activated and for reception to fill in the presupposed but undepicted narrative. A specific property of this particular theme would appear to be that the topic could not be evoked in this way if the painting were merely of one of the men: a version of Salomé must focus on one or both of the women. More importantly, as Barthes had occasion to remark, “a topic is always somewhat empty”, and the Salomé topic is indeed lacking in many respects. It does not provide many of the elements that modern versions have tended to make problematic: the motivational links between the characters, the moral and social status of female power, and the abstract relations between political power (the king), aesthetic value (the dance) and a moment of potential revolution (the militant prophet). These questions are not addressed in the topic, but their historical elaboration was certainly the work of the theme.

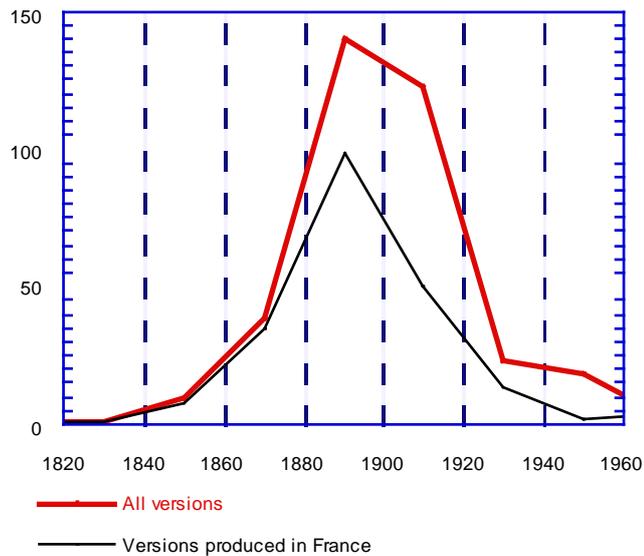
Distribution of the Theme

This definition of the Salomé topic is useful in that it allows us to select, with some respect for pertinence but without sacrificing variants, those texts that may form a valid and manageable thematic corpus. Our point of departure has been Mireille Dottin’s catalogue of 371 literary and pictorial versions dating from the modern period, to which our independent research has added a further 17 Salomés, including Baudelaire’s “Fanfarlo”. At the risk of introducing apparent scientism into a field where empirical rigor will never be more useful than careful speculation, the chronological and geographical distribution of this raw material may be presented as follows:

² Mark 6, 17-19; Matthew 14, 3-12.

□

Diachronic distribution of 371 versions of the Salomé theme



There can be no doubt that the theme's period of maximum concentration was the end of the nineteenth century, and that its major site of elaboration was Paris, the capital of *fin de siècle* literature and painting. Although Salomé's earlier nineteenth-century flowering was most probably initiated through Heine's French version of *Atta Troll* (1847), and Heine himself probably borrowed her from Pellico or from one of the earlier German versions, there can be no doubt that from 1869 to 1892, the period in which the theme won popularity, Salomé gained peculiarly Parisian features. It was then entirely fitting that Wilde should write his 1893 version in French and that Salomé's subsequent travels should generally follow the dissemination of French influences on the *fin de siècle* period. Wilde fought to have his Salomé smuggled into Britain; the painters Slevogt and Corinth produced their German versions after periods of study in Paris; and Julián del Casal, a Cuban poet who had never seen the woman in question, nevertheless wrote to Moreau and thus installed the French painter's Salomé in his own "Museo ideal". The turn of the century then saw a quite spectacular dispersal: Salomé appeared in Hebrew in 1897, arrived in Poland in 1902, in Croatia in 1908, in Romania in 1911, and so on. This period of French domination was eventually to be overtaken by German appreciation of Wilde's play — few in Britain took it quite so seriously —, and it was in fact after seeing the Strauss opera inspired by Wilde that Maurice Vaucaire remarked in 1907 a radical departure from "our typically French Salomé"³.

Thematic Importance

The simple weight and concentration of this corpus should suggest that Salomé was of some historical importance. She was by no means a dancer in the demimondes of pulp literature: writers of the order of Heine, Mallarmé, Flaubert, Laforgue, Wilde, Darío, De Castro, Apollinaire, Pound and Yeats could not, after all, be brought together to discuss an insignificant agenda. And yet it is not immediately obvious how thematics should understand the notion of importance. On the one hand, some such criterion is necessary

³ M. Vaucaire, "Salomé à travers l'art et la littérature", *La Nouvelle Revue* (Paris), May 15, 1907, p. 147.

if we are to avoid locating theme at the level of lowest common denominators or maximum textual banality. On the other, auctorial prestige is not in itself a stable index of what thematics should be able to discover.

There are at least three ways in which historiography might treat its raw material according to notion of thematic importance:

1. It might firstly be assumed that importance is shown by repetition, since truly problematic factors tend to return time and time again until their moment of historical solution or avoidance is reached. Unfortunately, simple repetition may also be an index of banality, of problematics sinking from topics to the level of *lieux communs* or Parisian fashions. Thus, the fact that Salomé's chronological distribution locates maximum repetition at the turn of the century does not necessarily imply that the theme was any more important in those years than in any others. Indeed, processes of cultural saturation may well have reduced rather than intensified its problematic aspects: in 1904, the French Salomé had become sufficiently anodyne for the Académie des Beaux-Arts to set her as a topic for open competition. One hesitates to cite official acceptance as a measure of thematic importance.

2. A second approach might be derived from a sociological adaptation of I. A. Richards' "Psychological Theory of Value"⁴ (which is in any case far too mechanistic to be properly valued within serious psychology). Richards describes importance as a measure of disturbance caused by one appetite or aversion for other appetencies or aversions. That which is easily gained or duplicated will thus not necessarily be important, and ease of acceptance would in fact tend to indicate that the desired or feared object involved no new problematic. Only when an object is of importance will energy be expended to bring it closer or to inhibit its approach.

The simplest kind of energy expended in the cultural sphere is that which seeks to bring distanced works closer through publication, exhibition, translation, performance or commentary. The texts that are most transported in these ways might be assumed to be of some importance, since if they were mere combinations of available elements already available in the place of reception, there would be little reason for their displacement. This admittedly rather rough criterion enables us to determine a workable shortlist of "strong" versions of Salomé, indexed according to the number of reworkings, translations, foreign performances and commentaries by which they were embedded not in international culture as a whole (a task best left for more idealist researchers), but in our original corpus. These then are the versions that the historical theme itself presents as being in some way more essential or fecund than others, a selection that in some cases inevitably contradicts our own opinions on the matter:

1833: S. Pellico, <i>Herodias</i> (Play)	1
1843: H. Heine, <i>Atta Troll</i> (Legend in Verse)	4
1862: J. Heywood, <i>Salome, the daughter of Herodias</i> (Play)	2
1863: E. Renan, <i>Vie de Jésus</i> (Historiography)	4
1869: S. Mallarmé, <i>Hérodiade: Scène</i> (Dramatic Poem)	6
1870: H. Regnault, <i>Salomé</i> (Painting)	2
1876: G. Moreau, <i>Salomé and Apparition</i> (Paintings)	4

⁴ I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner & C., London, 1924, pp. 47-51.

1877: G. Flaubert, <i>Hérodias</i> (Nouvelle)	1
1881: J. Massenet, <i>Hérodiane</i> (Opera)	5
1886: J. Laforgue, <i>Salomé</i> (Prose Pastiche)	2
1893: O. Wilde, <i>Salomé</i> (Play)	6
1894: A. Beardsley, Illustrations to Wilde's <i>Salomé</i>	3
1896: E. de Castro, <i>Salomé</i> (Poem)	1
1905: R. Strauss, <i>Salome</i> (Opera)	4
1935: W.B. Yeats, <i>A Full Moon in March</i> (Dance Drama)	1

This shortlist not only provides estimates of relative importance but can also be used to locate the historical problematics producing such importance, adjusting the pertinent dates to suite the specific study of themes rather than that of individual creators. This is crucial in cases such as Mallarmé's *Hérodiane*, where, although the moment of first publication in 1869 is associated with the Parnasse, all subsequent transportations — translations by Hovey in 1895 (Boston), by Brennan in 1904 (Sydney) and by George in 1905 (Berlin), with the *Cantique* published in 1913 and the *Ouverture* in 1926— firmly locate the importance of this work within *fin de siècle* aesthetics, at considerable historical distance from its original moment of production. This is moreover a general principle of the above list: although most strong versions were produced well before the end of the nineteenth-century, their zones of historical significance effectively cover Salomé's years of maximum repetition. Indeed this principle applies both to cases in which the chronological gap was narrow (in 1907 the Strauss opera was performed in Paris, Milan and New York) and in cases of relative dormancy where the original text had to await rediscovery (Laforgue's 1886 version retained pertinence long enough for Pound to find and translate it in 1920). Furthermore, whereas a criterion of merely quantitative repetition would suggest that Salomé remained significant right through to the 1950s, the relative absence of strong versions after the Strauss opera enables transportation analysis to reinforce the locating of importance around the turn of the century, and does so while avoiding —perhaps unfortunately— intrusions of individual caprice or taste.

3. Analysis of successful transportation cannot however tell us how the selected strong versions should reveal the nature of their presumed importance. It is for this reason that some recourse is ultimately necessary to the notion of negative transportation, to the energies expended in order to suppress or transform the appearance of problematic elements. Public or official resistance to transportation may indeed be forceful —the Massenet opera was refused in Paris in 1881 and Wilde's play was banned in London in 1893, as was the Strauss opera in Vienna in 1905—, but all Freudians, at least, know that suppression is never complete: it cannot entirely efface the desire which originally released energy for transportation. In the aesthetic sphere, such conflicts between desire and suppression habitually lead to the partial transformation of problematic elements and thus to historical chains of adaption and permutation. Research informed by such a criterion of transformation may in turn locate aesthetically significant versions that empirical history has missed: although *La Fanfarlo*, for example, was in no way important for the historical development of the Salomé theme, the transformational chains we are about to analyze suggest that this practically forgotten text does indeed correspond to the problematics of the Modernist Salomé and moreover fulfils the minimum requirements of the corresponding topic. In this way, thematics may contribute to something more than an empirical catalogue of its historical object.

Summary investigation of the most transformed elements in and between the above strong versions reveals two major problematics: the transition from Herodias to Salomé, and the political evaluation of John the Baptist.

Two Women: the Problem of the Public

Although most versions focus on one or the other, the Salomé topic in fact concerns two women: the mother and the dancer. The former is usually called Herodias (Hérodiade); the latter is generally known as Salomé. But a problematic transfer was initiated by Heine's naming of the daughter as Herodias. This at once continued the focus of previous German versions and introduced into France the name that was to remain dominant until Laforgue's unambiguous selection of "Salomé" in 1886. The empirical corpus might thus be bisected in the following way: before 1886, Herodias is generally the nominal focus; after that year, Salomé comes into her own as the name and character preferred by creators of original versions.

This curious transition cannot be explained as a result of ignorance or indifference. Although Renan had seen mother and daughter as essentially the same character—both "ambitious and immoral"⁵—, Mallarmé's conscious selection of his heroine was based neither on the mother-daughter relationship nor on common traits: "I have retained the name of Hérodiade so as to distinguish her clearly from the Salomé I believe to be too modern or to have been exhumed along with her archaic news item, the dance, etc."⁶.

Like Heine, Mallarmé suppressed both the dance and the dancer's name. He thus attributed his heroine with the reflective stillness that was to be repeated in the Salomé's of Regnault and Moreau—dancers represented in immobile situations—and later in the implacable moon dominating the versions by Wilde and Yeats. The cold distance introduced by Mallarmé belong properly to the Herodias figure. It at once recalls the pallid faces of Pre-Raphaelite beauty and rejects much of what might be associated with the baser modernity praised by Baudelaire: facile exoticism ("exhumée"), public details of city life ("son fait-divers") and ultimately with the demi-monde of prostitutes and music-halls ("son fait-divers archaïque, la danse, etc."). Hérodiade-Herodias is to belong to transcendent sphere untouched by historicity. She stays apart, preserving her power through non-action. If she attracts, it is not through movement of the body but through manipulation of the mind, drawing towards death as the anti-nuptial. This intellectual preservation of power through non-action is moreover present in most versions that deal with two women. In Heywood's religious dramas, Herodias is an unambiguously evil manipulator who forces an innocent Salomé to act on her orders. In *La Fanfarlo*, the Herodias figure similarly remains in the shadows, from where she cunningly structures the entire plot so as to preserve her marriage. For Flaubert, Herodias is the schemer in control of an incredibly complex political plot into which Salomé enters as little more than tantalizing bait. Wherever Herodias occupies and maintains her power through thought, Salomé is accorded little scope beyond the Romantic figure of the reformed or reformable prostitute.

A major transformation of this model took place during the theme's period of French domination. As the transcendent Herodias disappeared, a dancing Salomé of the body received potential power of her own and became an object for irony. Following

⁵ E. Renan, *Vie de Jésus* [1863], Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1964, p. 151.

⁶ S. Mallarmé, cited in *Les Noces d'Hérodiade*, ed. G. Davies, Gallimard, Paris, 1959, p. 51.

Baudelaire in this respect, De Banville could thus introduce his 1874 version in the following way:

The dreamy enthusiast of colorful spectacle must surely feel out of his element in this age where neither revolutions, nor the excessive tumult of civil wars, nor industrial and scientific progress, nor indeed the way of the world itself, can overcome and destroy this monster more frightening than the Great Python: the young dancing girl of Monsieur Scribe's vaudevilles.⁷

Although the exotic dancer is here accorded transcendent power, she is clearly far outweighed by the list of male activities—including her ownership by the writer of vaudevilles and “the way of the world itself”—which ultimately protect this self-assured male speaker. Could such a Salomé be taken seriously? Laforgue, in his parody of decadent preciousness, suggested that not even she pretended to any gravity: “Salomé gave out a cough-covered giggle, perhaps to have it known that, above all, she did not take herself seriously”⁸. Wilde's *Antipas* repeats the same doubt: “Now Salomé, let's be reasonable... I cannot believe you are serious.”⁹. Such homely irony informs not only suppressions and transformations of the dance, but also divergent receptions of the same work. Whereas Regnault's Salomé had led Gautier to declare that “Oriental disregard for human life has never been depicted better than in this young girl”¹⁰, Théodore Duret was not quite so convinced of the dancer's tragic power:

We are really very sorry, charming Salomé, that we cannot offer a more gallant love, but, just between us, we do not take you the least bit seriously in your tragic role of Salomé, and we are quite convinced that you are in fact no different from Mimi Pinson or Mademoiselle Pamela.”¹¹

There was thus a clear disparity between an erotic Salomé who was supposed to have inherited transcendent power, and a modernity that inevitably reduced her to the level of exotic and theatrical artificiality. The imaginary force of Salomé's dance could no longer be real; its art was transcendent, but also of an active transitivity that the late nineteenth century either suppressed or ironized. In these terms, the theme could well be allegorized in terms of artistic creation that finds its seriousness and effectiveness blocked in a philistine age.

It is not difficult to see why Helen Zagona has attached the Salomé theme to the aesthetic of “Art for Art's Sake”. And yet it is puzzling that she has done so without taking into account several peculiar non-correspondences. Firstly, according to such an interpretation, male artists would be allegorizing themselves as women. Secondly, the theme concerns not one, but two women. And thirdly, Salomé's artistic presentation was predominantly in the theater, a place where otherwise isolated creators sought to have a transitive effect on an immediate and extensive public. The artistic import of the dance would appear to be a little more complex than Zagona would have us believe.

Even the most serious versions of the theme deny any male identification with female power. Far from projecting his own subjectivity in his virgin Hérodiade, Mallarmé instead endowed his heroine with the external subjectivity of a poetry of “severe, chaste and unknown signs”¹². The text, like the woman, remained other. Thus,

⁷ T. de Banville, “Au lecteur”, *Les Princesses*, Lemerre, Paris, 1874.

⁸ J. Laforgue, “Salomé” [1886] in *Œuvres complètes*, Mercure de France, Paris, 1921, p. 163.

⁹ O. Wilde, *Salomé* [1893] in *Complete Works*, Doubleday Page, New York, 1923, vol. IX, p. 69.

¹⁰ T. Gautier, “Salon de 1870: Salomé”, in “Notice” to *Œuvres d'Henri Regnault exposées à l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris, n.d.

¹¹ T. Duret, “Salon de 1870”, in *Critique d'Avant-garde*, Charpentier, Paris, 1885, pp. 52-53.

¹² S. Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, Gallimard, Paris, 1969, p. 257.

with respect to *Hérodiade*, the artist could say "... this solitary work sterilized me"¹³, for lyric subjectivity was forced to retreat from the text: "The pure work of art implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet"¹⁴. The writer himself may thus hide from the public domain, finding company in exclusively male artistic circles and leaving his heroine to face the wider public. It was not by accident that *Hérodiade* was written for the theater, and that it was also in the theater that Mallarmé planned to present his absent "Œuvre souveraine"¹⁵.

This retreat of the artist, this special use of the theater as highly mediated communication, may explain something of the Herodias-Salomé duality. There can be no doubt that the kind of poetic theater inspired by limited French understanding of Wagner was meant to be a form of sacred and mythological communion. Such was the art sought by Maeterlinck and Villiers, perhaps by Wilde, and certainly by Yeats. And yet this was also the period when Salomé entered the world of music-halls and pantomimes. She was already the dancer of a profane and popular artificiality which would allow lyric subjectivity no room for serious expression. The poet was thus historically forced either to reflect on this retreat (Herodias) or to protect his interiority through mocking treatment of the dance as public spectacle (Salomé). Only in Yeats, well after the nineteenth-century development of this problematic, is there any apparently satisfactory reintegration of Mallarmé's "archaic news item" as an expression of both personal and theatrical lyricism, uniting both first and third persons under the name of Herodiade:

Yet I am certain that there was something in myself compelling me to attempt creation of an art separate from everything heterogeneous and casual [...] as some Herodiade of our theatre, dancing seemingly alone in her narrow moving luminous circle.¹⁶

The act of creation may still separate the male artist from his female dancer, but Yeats would appear to indicate a third factor overdetermining this uncertain relationship: the theatrical dancer is only "seemingly alone", for there is also the world of benefactors and audiences. And as Baudelaire commented at the beginning of Salomé's rise to popularity, "the true nineteenth-century public is composed of women"¹⁷.

In *La Fanfarlo*, the Herodias and Salomé figures are indeed the poet's only readers, his only hope of serious reception. But the female response is decidedly less than enthusiastic. The scheming woman seeks only to incorporate him into her own social plans, and the dancers merely laughs at his "andalouseries". The more serious and tragic the poet, the greater the risk of him appearing ridiculous. And so Baudelaire, like many others, chose the path of an irony which, in focusing precisely on a woman, could display both his own seriousness and that of his necessary *lectrice*. More importantly, this strategic irony in fact responded to a very real change in the artist's social position and mode of public contact: the transition from an austere Herodias to an ironic Salomé closely followed the demise of the Romantic salon, traditionally dominated by aristocratic women who could make or break artistic careers. With the passing of the salon, the writer had only the company of his own kind (Mallarmé's *martis*, the café), and had financially to confront or seduce predominantly female mass readerships (the

¹³ S. Mallarmé, letter to Cazalis, June 1863, *ibid.*, p. 1449.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

¹⁵ Cf. E. Dujardin, *Mallarmé par un des siens*, Messein, Paris, 1936, pp. 62, 81.

¹⁶ W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, Macmillan, London, 1961, p. 321. Italics mine.

¹⁷ C. Baudelaire, *La Fanfarlo* [1847], Rocher, Monaco, 1957, p. 56.

feuilleton, the circulating library). Several names of importance effectively participated in this potentially frightening exercise: the two major creators of the modern Salomé — Mallarmé and Wilde— in fact both edited women’s magazines. But artistic integrity also required a more distanced seriousness, a position of retreat from a hostile society. Hence mutual ironization and recourse to sacred theater. If Yeats should then appear to have achieved some kind of resolution to this historical problem, it is useful to point out the peculiarly regionalist and participative nature of his theater, and his peculiarly anachronistic relation with an aristocratic and female patron. Elsewhere, the modern Salomé evoked women as necessary counterparts who, for the nineteenth-century artist, retained the power to foreclose communication.

A Fallen Head: the Displacement of Revolution

It seems peculiar, in the light of both the above interpretation and approaches involving symbolic castration, that no version of Salomé explicitly develops the beheading of John the Baptist as an allegory of the destruction of the artist. Nineteenth-century writers and painters were certainly able to portray themselves as prophets and victims, but they clearly hesitated to identify with a religious martyr beaten by a woman. Most of our raw corpus is in fact characterized by a marked lack of sympathy for John’s spiritual virtue. Instead, the shadow of the guillotine being far closer than the birth of Christianity, what we find is widespread fascination with the beheading as an irrational end to an irrational revolutionary.

Renan made no secret of the Baptist’s political identity and declared his preaching to be “poorly disguised militarism”¹⁸. Nor did the biographer of Jesus fail to compare the rise of Christianity with a more immediate revolution: “Some would also regret that the French Revolution exceeded its principles more than once, and that it was not led by wise and moderate men.” Yet Renan could still justify the irrational in terms of genius: “But let us not impose our little bourgeois programs on these movements that go so far beyond our own dimensions”¹⁹. The heroism of the past was not to be judged in terms of the modernity of the present.

Several less committed writers were not quite so convinced of the greatness of decapitation. In Heine’s *Aufzeichnungen*, the Salomé theme is introduced by a nightmare vision: “Place Louis XVI — A coffin, a head next to it — the doctor tries to put things together, shakes his head: “Impossible! When a king has lost his head, nothing can help him”²⁰. There was nothing to be done, neither for the lost sovereign nor for the Baptist as revolutionary. For Heine, the days of the politically engaged artist were no more than a haunting past. In Flaubert, the Baptist appears once again as a political activist, but now the effects of his actions are well beyond his control. Real power lies in the hands of Herodias, making the beheading little more than an absurd tragedy without relation to historical progression. Laforgue presents this same absurdity with heavy satire: his Baptist is an “ideologue, pamphleteer, unfit for military duty, bastard of Jean-Jacques Rousseau” who has in fact organized a general strike²¹. For Wilde, the Baptist remains a frightening figure, but his discourse has as its context a group of Jewish intellectuals involved in endlessly insignificant disputes. Even Apollinaire, who used the Salomé theme to praise passion in the face of death, found

¹⁸ E. Renan, op. cit., p. 151.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 161.

²⁰ H. Heine, *Auzeichnungen*, in *Sämtliche Schriften*, Hanser, Munich, 1975, vol. VI/1, pp. 650-651.

²¹ J. Laforgue, op. cit., p. 154.

more heroism in the dance and the beheading than in the prophet who is beheaded. And Yeats was scarcely more flattering in making his Baptist a bucolic swineherd. In fact, Baudelaire would appear to present the only fictional poet who unambiguously occupies the place of the Baptist. Yet this artist is far from ideal: he is portrayed as a Romantic of dubious talent; he is defeated by marriage —not gratuitously described as a “coup de tête” on the part of the dancer—; and he is financially forced to become one of those pale shadows of lost revolution, a socialist journalist.

Revolution, under the Second Empire and more especially during the bourgeois democracy of the Third Republic, connoted a heroism condemned to failure. As the substantive “intellectual” gained a pejorative and then political sense in the 1890s, the artist became increasingly isolated from the sphere of concrete action. Spontaneous heroism was no longer effective in Europe, but its fading color could nevertheless be projected onto other climates. Artists like Gautier, Loti and Regnault could indeed displace themselves in the interests of such projections. They sought and sometimes thought to have found the more primitive heroism of an exotic Orient, which could be as close as southern Spain or a version of Salomé.

Although Regnault depicted no fallen head in his *Salomé*, the canvas was sent to the 1870 Salon in the company of the gruesome and spontaneous beheading of *L'Éxecution sans jugement*. The artist himself was in Tangier, living out fantasies of what he described as “Mahommedan despotism and indifference”²². “I prefer this to your Parisian revolutionaries,” he wrote to Cazalis, “here we are unconcerned by politics.” Only when national heroism became something more than little bourgeois programs did Regnault see fit to follow his *Salomé* back to Paris, where he sought and found, in the form of a Prussian bullet fired in 1871, a patriot’s death.

As with the aesthetic force of *Salomé*’s dance, so the Baptist’s fallen head came to represent a transcendent value without modern correlative. When the revolutionary prophet had no substantial place of his own, irrational cruelty could only be clothed in exotic artificiality. Thus, according to a minor transformation exploited by Heywood, Mallarmé and —appropriately enough— Held, John’s voice may come from a severed head, speaking in the absence of the body, echoing a lost substantiality. Decapitation could still shock in a juvenile way —Flaubert claimed that he had to observe a freshly cut head—, but its very exoticism and appeal to non-judgment blocked any possible reference to the real cruelties of an imperialist age. In fact, after so many fallen heads, decapitation no longer seemed sufficiently exotic: in 1894 Jarry claimed the guillotine to be “ill-conceived vandalism”, vastly inferior to English hanging, which made murder “a true work of art”²³.

By the turn of the century, processes of saturation and semantic blocking restricted both the Baptist’s revolutionary potential and *Salomé*’s erotic power to ironic modes that would eventually make the theme little more than a pretext for essentially decorist art. In a sense, the theme had been exhausted to the point where it had little of real importance to offer to the serious irrationality and formal austerity that was to characterize Surrealist aesthetics.

The above outlining of two vast problematics that made the *Salomé* theme historically important should more generally serve to illustrate how thematics may work from empirical data to reach levels that strictly belong to the analysis of aesthetic ideologies.

²² H. Regnault, letter to Cazalis, cited by P.G. Hamerton, *Modern Frenchmen*, Seeley, Jackson and Halliday, London, 1878, p. 397.

²³ A. Jarry, “Visions actuelles et futures”, *L'Art littéraire*, 1894, 5.

This process has nevertheless managed to avoid any hasty association of the theme with vague and ill-defined categories such as “erotic sensibility” or “Art for Art’s Sake”. It is instead the task of historical thematics to enable themes to reveal their own importance and talk about the reasons why they have been called upon to serve or hinder one ideology or another. It is hoped that the methodological criteria we have introduced may prove to be of general usefulness in this regard.