With Oscar Wilde’s Decorated Books, Nicholas Frankel advances the argument that “to address Wilde’s writings as decorated books and material artifacts is simply to take seriously Wilde’s famous dictum that the artist is simply the creator of a beautiful thing” (177); in this spirit, Frankel interrogates the notion of the book as “a concrete, cultural performance” (178), of books as “social agents” (148) through which Wilde “alerts us to the symbiosis between imaginative fiction and material fact in the life of any artwork” (135). In works such as Poems (1881, 1892), Salome (1893, 1894), Intentions (1891), The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890, 1891), and The Sphinx (1894), Wilde stages productions in which “message tends to a merger with medium” (6-7), finally to “[interrupt] the orderly rhythms of our reading, calling our attention to the ‘written’ condition of the text and throwing literary consumption itself into brilliant relief” (21). In short, Frankel views the book qua book as an artifact as central to the making of meaning as—indeed, in the cases of the reissued Poems and The Picture of Dorian Gray, even more central to the making of meaning than—the content of the books themselves.

Frankel begins the first half of his study, “From Text to Work,” with a chapter entitled “‘Ave Imperatrix’: Oscar Wilde and the Poetry of Englishness,” in which he charts the motivations and effects of Wilde’s deliberate and highly self-conscious shift from an Irish to an English identity, not only with regard to his manner of speech, but also in terms of the subject matter and publishing practices of his early work, by means of which Wilde carved out his niche as the most English of the English writers so effectively that he became the subject of parody in Burnand’s The Colonel and Gilbert and Sullivan’s Patience; or, Bunthorne’s Bride, the latter production a boon to Wilde’s international reputation when it afforded him an opportunity to travel with the touring company to America to deliver a series of curtain lectures on British art and aestheticism, all the while embodying and exemplifying for his American audiences the oh-so-utterly aesthetic personality Gilbert and Sullivan’s production lampooned, and finally casting himself “as English in American eyes” (44). Frankel examines closely the textual changes Wilde made to his early works, especially to the Poems (1881), half of which were composed before Wilde’s official move to England (27), in order to trace Wilde’s deliberate efforts to shift from an Irish-inflected and -identified mode of language use to a more resolutely English style. Such a shift does more than remark English hegemony; it demonstrates, too, that any skillful interloper can successfully pose as English, that this Irish writer came to inhabit the customs and styles of a land not really his own (41). Such a carefully crafted masquerade
depended entirely on appearances—Wilde's celebrated personality, his speeches to an American audience, and the stylistic alterations that mark his early writing.

Frankel's next chapter, "The Dance of Writing: *Salome* as a Work of Contradiction," approaches the several editions of Wilde's drama (his French version of 1893, and Lord Alfred Douglas' English translation of 1894) with the belief that to overlook or otherwise to dismiss the play's "[deep preoccupations] with the relations between vision, meaning, and knowledge" (76) is to misunderstand the significance of the play's publication history. For while Aubrey Beardsley's drawings sometimes overwhelm the text—leaving it "stranded," "exposed," and even "embarrassed" (71), all in a manner "from which the work has never really recovered" (72)—the illustrations work seamlessly with the text in expressing two truths about the play, first in its awareness of itself as a performance, as a representational form, and second in its awareness of the highly self-conscious, nontranscendent nature of its language (68). Salome, in short, "takes an adamantly materialist approach to language" (65). And while Frankel rejects the idea that the meaning of the play lies in its images, and vice versa, he carefully traces the mesh of meanings that emerges when text and images are viewed together, as well as when the bibliographic conditions of the French and English editions of the drama are compared. The original French publication of Salome accomplishes important ideological work, particularly given its easily recognizable textual echoes of the bibliographic codes of many of the Symboliste productions of the day. Additionally, that edition marks a move away from Wilde's carefully crafted assimilation from Irish to English: Wilde published the play in French and in France, largely in response to English censorship of a planned production of the play to star Sarah Bernhardt, a staging suppressed under age-old proscriptions regarding the performance on English stages of works based solely or largely on Biblical sources. In Wilde's view, *Salome* "[functioned] as a form of critical engagement with dominant English cultural values" (60).

The second, larger half of Frankel's study, "The Decorated Book," takes as case studies four of Wilde's works, which collectively represent the genres of the essay, poetry, and the novel, an important and effective sampling of the kinds of writing that remain largely overshadowed by Wilde's success as a playwright (the unperformed *Salome*, interestingly, remains the sole representative of that strain to find representation in Frankel's book). In "Wilde's *Intentions* and the Simulation of Meaning," Frankel separates readers of and reactions to Wilde's collection of essays into two camps: the serious, earnest reader, best represented by Richard Ellmann, whose late-twentieth-century discussion of *Intentions* Frankel takes to task in the early pages of this chapter; and the "iconolatrous" reader, exemplified by Richard Le Gallienne, who reviewed the book upon its publication and who perceived—correctly, in Frankel's estimation—that the pleasure of *Intentions* lies in the book as a performance, not in the book as the site of meaning (107, 108). To search for meaning, for coherence, in Wilde's 1891 collection is to engage in a fruitless quest, for the book offers not argument but art, both in its narrative incoherence and in its desire to function chiefly as a spectacle masquerading as substance, as art pretending to meaning. Frankel draws on Baudrillard's sense of seduction and Barthes' model of the pleasure of the text to explain the textural appeal of *Intentions* that

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Le Gallienne so aptly recognized in his 1891 review: “Intentions simulates meaning in order to turn meaning against itself . . . to deplete itself of meaning,” Frankel argues, and in so doing, the collection “woos” us, seduces us by the beauty of its superficial appeal (94).

A good portion of Frankel’s chapter on Intentions is given over to a consideration of the debt Wilde owes to Whistler, to the ways in which Intentions echoes, typographically and decoratively, many of the American painter’s writings, particularly The Gentle Art of Making Enemies (1890), a collection whose disparaging remarks about the writer caused Wilde “personal embarrassment” (95). While Frankel’s point-by-point comparison of the frontmatter of Wilde’s and Whistler’s books makes for fascinating reading, and for even more fascinating speculation, I remain skeptical of the real force of some of that comparison’s conclusions, for Frankel’s acknowledgment that the inclusion and placement of some bibliographic matter stemmed from recent changes in copyright law leaves him a bit hard-pressed to argue convincingly that typographical echoes are without exceptions Wilde’s deliberate plagiarisms of Whistler’s work. Too, Frankel provides little evidence that Wilde designed or endorsed such typographical and decorative decisions, and so one is left to ponder how much of the front matter’s plagiarism may have been the work of hands and eyes other than Wilde’s. Nevertheless, Frankel’s recognition of Wilde’s clever handling of the issue of plagiarism—calling attention to itself, unmasking itself as a performance (in this case, Wilde’s of Whistler’s “style”) rather than concealing itself under claims to truth, originality, or authenticity—reminds us of Wilde’s penchant for self-protective reversals, his savvy for turning occasions of personal and artistic vulnerability into moments of ideological and aesthetic victory. Wilde responded to Whistler’s claims by insisting that he had “plagiarized a phrase Whistler had used to describe Wilde’s very tendency to plagiarism”; in so doing, Wilde’s response was “to plagiarize the charge, and thereby to so transform it that it no longer remained a charge of plagiarism as such” (89).

Frankel next turns his attention to “Book Decoration and the Poetic Text: Charles Ricketts’ Designs for Poems (1892),” that volume a reissue of the 1881 Poems, and one that exhibits absolutely no real change in content (the sheets in fact were bound from leftover printings of the original edition) but sports a new binding and title page designed by Ricketts, elements whose presence change completely, Frankel argues, any reader’s experience of Wilde’s work. Add to this the 1892 printing’s designation as an Author’s Edition, the limiting of its press run to 200 copies, and its publication by John Lane and Elkin Mathews, the soon-to-be-notorious proprietors of The Bodley Head, and Wilde’s 1892 Poems becomes a different artifact indeed than its 1881 predecessor. Poems “marks a sea change in the world of 1890s publishing; and it marks a sea change in Wilde’s . . . sense of himself as an author” (110), most notably in the manner by which the signed Author’s Edition positions Wilde, Frankel argues, as the first-person presence in each and every poem, so that the poetry becomes for the first time not only by Wilde, but very clearly about Wilde, as well. In a similar manner, Ricketts’ designs alter the reading experience of the poems, primarily by shifting attention to the book as a material artifact, to Poems as a decorative object whose surfaces require attention, and whose aesthetic deserves applause. Ricketts’ binding, for example, “reminds us that a book

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is a complex textual machine, and that the language it bears is meaningful only insofar as it actively calls its reader’s eye into play” (129). Such scopophilic pleasures take on especially meaningful resonance in Ricketts’ rendering of “Charmides,” a poem that describes the title character’s desire for, and rape of, a statue. In the 1892 edition, the poem “ultimately turns the obsessive voyeurism of its protagonist . . . back onto its reader,” and so “it is at the level of textual decoration that the most threatening and distinctive concerns of the work get enacted” (130). Marking “the birth of the modern author” (126), Poems includes as part and parcel of authorship an attention to decorative detail, often to the point that decorative detail not only frames but, finally, provides (new) meaning for the selections included in the volume.

Frankel considers Wilde’s only novel in “Picturing Dorian Gray: Wilde’s Novel as a Work of Graphic Design,” and he begins by observing that Dorian Gray describes a world “largely predicated on books” (131). Frankel argues that the shift from the novel’s original serialization in Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine (1890) to the Ricketts-designed, Ward, Lock, and Company-produced novel (1891) includes important alterations to both the content and the form of the work: the content in that much that had been attacked as unseemly gets excised, even as the novel extends the serialization in terms of numbers of both chapters and words; the form in that the novel’s elaborate binding, title page, and other aspects of production remind the reader, as Wilde claims in the book’s Preface, that the novel explores—and embodies—an art devoted to surface, not symbol, to superficiality, not depth. Frankel describes the effect of this shift as a move from a concern about “what Wilde’s novel means” to an interest in “how it means” (139), particularly given the cues its readers receive from its decorative effects, which ultimately render the book one that “has been turned inside out,” its binding, dust cover, and overall design functioning as participants in the book’s content, so that its “outsides” (its “looks”) are thus rendered “insides” (“thoughts”). In effect, Wilde’s Preface “theorizes what the book’s design embodies concretely” (151-152).

Throughout the novel, Dorian Gray admires books far less for their content than for their decorative appeal, and he even takes pains to redecorate his favorite book nine times, covering it in a variety of exotic bindings. Frankel argues that Dorian’s attention to—his affection for, one might fairly say—book design echoes the effects of all of Wilde’s decorated books, which, like Dorian’s favorite novel, enact a radical self-absorption, a kind of disappearance-into-themselves that reminds us again of the triumph of form over content, of surface over depth. The title page alone “is shot through with a knowledge of its own perversity” (143): as “obtrusive leaves . . . announce the book’s decorative pretensions,” its “lettering, . . . an autographic simulacrum of a mechanical typeface complete with serifs” alerts the reader to the blur between the usual distinctions that separate printing-press from hand-made books, and thus the book’s title page calls attention to its pretended mechanization as a trick of hand-drawn artistry. Such decorative effects “[turn] the usual order of the book on its head, calling attention to what appears unwritten, and assigning to the visual and material features of the book a prominence we would normally reserve to language alone” (147).
Frankel's final full-length chapter, the aptly titled "Excavating The Sphinx," considers the Ricketts-designed printing of Wilde's poem as an object almost wholly lost to modern view, and one whose recovery proves crucial to any reader's understanding of the force of the effect of the poem-as-production upon its release in 1894, when The Sphinx was greeted with a number of hostile reviews motivated less by the poem's language than by its look, a "decorated condition" that "clearly raised considerable problems so far as delineating and circumscribing the poetic text was concerned" (157). "One of the most striking books produced in the nineteenth century, in many ways a more radical and successful experiment in text production than some of the Kelmscott Press books that helped inspire it" (159), The Sphinx comes closest to Ada Leverson's famous call for Wilde to write a book of all margin, and thus its nearly blank pages aspire to the pinnacle of the aesthetic book Leverson imagined. Frankel considers this the most important of Wilde's decorated books because The Sphinx achieves most fully and consistently the goals toward which all of the decorated books aspire: The Sphinx moves away from language-as-content and turns its attention instead to form, to decorative embodiment, in a way that repeats exactly the "falling away" in the poem of the object from its "reader," of the cold, unknowable, unconquerable sphinx from the speaker. Modern printings of the poem as text obfuscate the original book's effect, transforming the book into "the sphinx itself, embodying a pure decorativity that the poem by contrast can only attempt to grasp adequately" (169); by contrast, the decorated book "[denies] the poem any priority in its own right and . . . [stresses] instead its interdependency with the larger bibliographic whole" (160). In its original form, then, The Sphinx "raises considerable problems for the concept of literature" by asking its readers to reconceptualize literature as part of a decorative whole, as something clearly other than "our notion of it as something immaterial" (175), and to see the decorated book instead as something that cannot—indeed, must not—be set apart from, and reproduced in the absence of, its original decorative effects without quite startling losses in both meaning and value.

Throughout Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books, Frankel insists that "Wilde's devotion to a world of appearances . . . forces us to rethink some of our most basic assumptions about what constitutes a literary text and how such a text might be read" (22). Such attention to decorative intentions and effects—to surfaces—claims kinship with Wilde's assertion in the Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray that to "go beneath the surface" is to risk "peril"; Frankel, instead, chooses to remain "safely at the level of the work's surface because . . . there is no 'beneath the surface' to descend to" (177). For Frankel, and for readers who accept his findings, Wilde's works "escalate the idea of the book to a limit previously unthinkable. . . . a writing of the margin or the ekstasis of the literary imagination: literature accelerated by its own image into a kind of hyperliterature—literature simply beside itself" (179). Frankel's masterfully written and quite beautifully illustrated study adds much to the canon of Wilde scholarship and offers a valuable contribution to the fields of bibliography and book studies, both narrowly and broadly defined. Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books will enrich any Wilde scholar's understanding of the importance of the aesthetics of book publishing in the 1890s, and it will enlighten and enliven conversations about the materiality—both physical and ideological—of books among scholars in a wide range of fields.