OSCAR WILDE: SPACE AND THE IMPRISONED SELF

Cristina Nicolae, Assist., PhD, "Petru Maior" University of Tîrgu-Mureş

Abstract: The present article brings forth the issue of space as reflected in Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray and De Profundis. Forgotten spaces, the attic and the prison cell, become preservers of memories (realities of the past) impacting the sense of self at both character level (Dorian Gray) and the level of the artist (Oscar Wilde). It is the metamorphosis of the individual that we follow in our analysis, with a focus on space seen as either facilitating self-discovery or witnessing the dissolution of the self.

Keywords: space, metamorphosis, self, acceptance, knowledge, memory

In our analysis, we approach Oscar Wilde not only as the artist who strives to survive a foreign space by means of writing *De Profundis*, but also as the writer/individual mirrored in the character(s) brought to life in the pages of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The autobiographical element is, thus, understood as the foundation the written discourse was built on, paralleled by the desire and need to create a literary aesthetic world in which the intellectual's creative spirit finds its completion and liberation. It is a discourse rooted in the need to represent the world within and, to some extent, to recreate the outside world, revealing Wilde's art as a representation of the self.

Wilde needed to come out of the imposed life-pattern; his writing became not only a strategy for avoiding the uniformising identity frame, resisting conventions, social appropriateness, but also a stratagem for conquering the world of art which "has made us myriad-minded" (*DP* 247), and which he eagerly explored and found himself in – his own voyage within. It was precisely his art of writing that provided *the existential space* where he could be whoever and wherever he dreamt of being, enjoying the freedom and intellectual challenge of the written word.

The written discourse does indeed offer an existential space where not only creation is possible, but where change/metamorphosis is accounted for, while the text becomes a representation of the self and the unlocked door to memory. The present article, however, deals with two symbolic places, a created/fictional one – the playroom/study/attic in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the real space of the prison cell where *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis* (i.e. *De Profundis*) came into being.

In "The symbolism of place: a geography of relationships between space, power and identity", J. Monnet asserts that symbolization "endows a portion of space with a name, an identity, a permanence, a reason for existing, and a particular relationship with *certain values and meanings*. […] The symbolic dimension of space […] gives *internal coherency* to the living space of each person." (emphasis added) Following this line of thought, we see both spaces we employ for our analysis, the study and the prison cell, as endowed with meaning while relating to different realities.

In our reading, the study becomes the metaphor for a forgotten soul, a soul which the individual places into oblivion since the reality it mirrors proves too much for a self defined by aesthetics rather than ethics. As a playroom, this space stands for the innocence and playfulness childhood is characterized by, whereas as a study it suggests the thirst for

knowledge, a space which eventually hides the outcome of Gray's knowledge rooted in "the leprosies of sin" (*TPDG* 125).

This space where Dorian Gray needs to hide his portrait is the only choice he can make and it carries a symbolic meaning: it stands for the dusty space of memories, of oblivion, a preserver of feelings/thoughts/experiences buried in the past. Placing the portrait in this space implies eluding the threatening present, moving it in an apparently safe (protected and protective) place, concealed from the others' prying eyes, as well as from Dorian's morbid curiosity: "full of dust", "covered with cobwebs", "large, well-proportioned", with its "huge Italian cassone", its "satinwood bookcase" and the "ragged Flemish tapestry", crammed with the memories of his lonely childhood, recalling "the stainless *purity* of his boyish life" (*TPDG* 95, 97, 98, emphasis added), a purity that is now shadowed by the corruption of his soul, the sins that "seemed to be already stirring in spirit and in flesh" (98). What in the past represented "his refuge and a symbol of his purity", as Kohl states, has turned into "the scene of his crime and of his morbid delight in his growing depravity, and in the future is to be the setting for his suicide and the re-establishment of his identity in death" (Kohl, 2011: 150).

The room is now a space where reality is concealed, or more appropriately, postponed, a room which "was to keep for him the curious secret of his life and hide his soul from the eyes of men" (*TPDG* 97).

> Every moment of his lonely childhood came back to him as he looked round. He recalled the stainless purity of his boyish life, and it seemed horrible to him that it was here the fatal portrait was to be hidden away. How little he had thought, in those days, of all that was in store for him! (97-98)

According to Raagland-Sullivan (1986: 120), the picture represents "the hidden, the repressed", whereas Dorian becomes "a victim of the portrait's gaze" who needs to hide it in this space – the attic seen as a "metaphor for the Lacanian unconscious":

> Full of remnants and traces of Dorian's childhood, it is not easily accessible. Not only is it physically distant within the house, it is also dusky, dusty, and eerie just as the Lacanian unconscious, with its archaic accounts of the past, is opaque. Only occasionally does it surface into view – into the light – and just as quickly it shuts back on itself. (Raagland-Sullivan, 1986: 120-121)

The locked door of the attic/study, the blocked access to Dorian's present bearing the scars of past choices is a means of fighting fear, a means of indulging in the illusion of having control over his life.

Memory is suppressed: such experiences are or should be kept in the past. Offering them the status of reality by means of voicing/verbalizing them would bring them back into the present, while placing them in the past and seeking oblivion would be a strategy of survival for the self; yet, Dorian Gray reduces it to an excuse for his anesthetized conscience and displayed indifference to the others' suffering and/or death.

Wilde's Dorian Gray recalls the image of Woolf's Orlando, the androgyne who contemplates his identity roots, his inheritance, in his journey/walk along the gallery of portraits, or that image of an Orlando that adorns his house with exquisite objects, his

treasures - nothing else but means of forgetfulness that would help him escape the burden of a traumatizing past: "He loved to stroll through the gaunt cold picture-gallery of his country house and look at the various portraits of those whose blood flowed in his veins" (*TPDG 114*).

Gray's quest takes him through religion, music, jewels, perfumes, textile and embroidered work, even ecclesiastical vestments, a voyage in time and space that he takes in pursuit of knowledge that would refine his senses, his house becoming the preserver of the gathered treasures which Dorian indulges in so that he could forget and thus break away from the fear that limits his freedom and spoils the delight he takes in all his discoveries: "means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape, for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne" (TPDG 112, emphasis added). His fear now is one of recognition on the portrait being found and of his subsequent rejection by the others.

Why cannot Wilde's character, Dorian Gray, save himself? He believes in beauty only, the moral principles are abolished and the concept of sin changes its understanding, becoming a lax, elusive one. His creed is one of a decadent hedonism that separates aesthetics and ethics, and does not presuppose spiritual growth, but regression, burdening of the self; it is not a cathartic religion, but, by the ephemeral nature of beauty and youth that Dorian Gray longs for, a religion that is subject to passing, decrease, degradation accelerated by the corrosive nature of sin. Beauty and youth are not enough to save one's soul, whereas the healing power of love and faith (the prayer of repentance, 125) is denied.

Going back to the autobiographical element one senses in Wilde's novel, we view the space that 'witnessed' the character's degradation as a metaphorical prison cell of the self anticipating Wilde's struggle to survive imprisonment inside and outside the self as revealed in *De Profundis*, "his theologically imbued autobiography" (Prewitt Brown xviii).

From a general perspective, the prison cell is seen as the image of shame and social punishment inflicted on the individual, a space where the imposed-on isolation either triggers dissolution of the self (if the individual internalizes isolation negatively and is not able to adapt to the new coordinates that frame their identity) or becomes a stage of the individual's spiritual initiation (if it is positively internalized and the individual is able to adapt to the imposed-on change; the individual's capacity and willingness to 're-create' himself by coming to terms with his past and present). In Oscar Wilde's case, despite the terrifying facets of fear it brings about, prison comes to facilitate self-discovery and writing proves a cathartic experience.

In one of my articles on Wilde, I draw an analogy between the space Wilde is sentenced to inhabit and the room where his character hid his degrading portrait: the prison cell becomes the dusty space of concealed realities, a space where the Victorian society places into oblivion what they are ashamed or afraid of, leaving the convicts prey to their own memories, longings and remorse (see Nicolae in *Studia Universitatis "Petru Maior", Philologia 14*). Therefore, Wilde's imprisonment is to be seen not only as the social punishment of an individual who flouted the Victorian laws, but also as the 'caging' of an ideology the Victorians rejected.

In *The Self in the Cell: Narrating the Victorian Prisoner*, Sean Grass refers to "the prison's terrible power to transform and scar the psychological self" (144), also stating that "imprisonment can only be narrated as the first-person account of the self in the cell" (138). In

Oscar Wilde's case, this "private narrative of the self" (145) takes the form of *De Profundis*, a most troubling confession mirroring the trial of the self in the prison cell.

Julia Prewitt Brown calls the letter "a work in which he gave expression to every sensation of shame and sorrow that was new to him" (22), but there is more to it: *De Profundis* brings together not only shame and sorrow, but love and fear as well, suffering and humility ("the starting-point for a fresh development" [*DP* 223]), aesthetics and ethics. It is the means by which this "disgraced and ruined man" (*DP* 151) opposes the annihilation of the self under the power of the secluding space; it is the attempt to initiate meaningful action which would oppose the immobility of thought that burdens the individual in such a place ("a slave of the calendar and of a system of regulations admitting of no exception" [Prewitt Brown 22]), resisting the erosion of the self, "the perturbed and fitful nights of anguish", "the long monotonous days of pain" (*DP* 151); it is a means of voicing inner reality in an attempt to fight insanity; it is the written proof of Wilde's spiritual quest, an odyssey bringing about the recovery of the psychological self.

> I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me. The plank bed, the loathsome food, the hard ropes shredded into oakum till one's finger-tips grow dull with pain, the menial offices with which each day begins and finishes, the harsh orders that routine seems to necessitate, the dreadful dress that makes sorrow grotesque to look at, the silence, the solitude, the shame – each of all these things I had to transform into a spiritual experience. There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualising of the soul. (*DP* 226-227)

Both spaces bring forth the issues of memory, sin and change. Childhood memories and Dorian's portrait 'inhabit' the fictional space in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which becomes the *passive* witness of the changes brought about by sin (transgression of ethical norms), of the degradation of the soul culminating in murder/suicide. The room stands for the individual's memory and for a present which echoes past choices, yet it is a place of intended oblivion where the troubling present has to be hidden, denied for aesthetical and not ethical reasons.

The inhabiter of the real space of prison is Wilde himself, trying to escape from an identity which the outraged Victorian society imposed on him, that of a narcissistic homosexual disregarding ethics. The prison cell stands for society's memory, as well as that of the individual: a place of oblivion where the society needs to hide the 'portrait' of individual and societal sin (Oscar Wilde), a 'fragment' of its identity which needs to be hidden for ethical and not aesthetical reasons, yet a place where the individual is forced to remember, to re-live past experiences, to face and pacify one's demons. Therefore, the prison cell is viewed as generating change, not only witnessing transformation but also triggering it.

The inhabited space could, thus, be seen as an extension of the self, while the self comes to be molded by the space it inhabits.

> What lies before me is my past. I have got to make myself look on that with different eyes, to make the world look on it with different eyes, to make God look on it with different eyes. This I cannot do by ignoring it, or slighting it, or praising it, or denying it. It is only to be done fully by accepting it as an inevitable part of the evolution of my life and character: by bowing my head to everything that I have suffered. (*DP* 301)

Bibliography

Grass, Sean. 2003. *The Self in the Cell: Narrating the Victorian Prisoner*. New York: Routledge

Kohl, Norbert, 2011. *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*. Translated by David Henry Wilson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Monnet, Jérôme **"**The symbolism of place: a geography of relationships between space, power and identity" http://cybergeo.revues.org/24747; 3.12.2013

Prewitt Brown, Julia. 1999. *Cosmopolitan Criticism. Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art*. University Press of Virginia

Ragland-Sullivan, Ellie. "The Phenomenon of Aging in Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*: A Lacanian View" in Woodward, Kathleen; Schwartz, Murray M., (eds.), 1986. *Memory and Desire. Aging – Literature – Psychoanalysis*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Woodward, Kathleen; Schwartz, Murray M., (eds.), 1986. *Memory and Desire. Aging – Literature – Psychoanalysis*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Wilde, Oscar, 1992. *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* With an introduction by Dr. Joseph Bristow. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics

Wilde, Oscar. 1979. *De Profundis* in *Selections from Oscar Wilde. Volume 2*. Moscow: Progress Publishers

Abbreviations

TPDG - The Picture of Dorian Gray
DP - De Profundis