THE CONFINED SELF

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Abstract

In the present paper we focus on the search for self and identity formation as reflected in Oscar Wilde's long letter written in prison, *De Profundis,* one of the most troubling confessions of the entire nineteenth century literature and art. Initially entitled *Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis,* the prose letter reveals Wilde's own imprisoning outside and inside the self, offering the reader a glimpse at the Wildean identity path.

Keywords: isolation, sin, fear, redemption, love

For Oscar Wilde, the Irish dandy, Victorianism (with its moral idealism, its concept of respectability and social conformity) represents a barrier that prevents him from the joys of free expression, from the promotion of the philosophy of aesthetics which frames his identity — the identity of an artist, but also of a homosexual, therefore a Victorian outcast. An identity which his contemporaries use as gravamen against the iconoclast who defied the imposed conventionalism, an identity which brings about the fall from "an eternity of fame" to "an eternity of infamy" (Wilde, *DP* 1), a fall in social disgrace, imprisonment and monologic comeback.

The break with his social identity which self-exposure and imprisonment brought about constitutes what at a surface level might seem as a break with his own sense of identity. Yet, at a deeper level, it represents a stage in his real spiritual initiation/formation that reaches its climax in the confined space of his prison cell and in the inner, symbolic space the written discourse provides. His own identity becomes a burden that ends up by transforming the act of writing, an act of creation that comes to condemn its artist, whose life turns out to be but "a long and lovely suicide."

Our analysis of what we call 'the Wildean *De Profundis* stage' follows three strong concepts of identity that impacted the sense of self of this Victorian outcast: love, fear and sin.

Sin, which we find fundamental in the approach to the issue of identity as considered in the present paper, is understood from the perspective of its impact (constructive and/or destructive) on the self, of the feeling of culpability it might result in. As a rule, the individual internalizes it either positively or negatively. Of paramount importance is the authority in relation to which sin as well as punishment are defined (the self, the other, God). We also consider the access to knowledge sin mediates (forbidden knowledge as the very nature of sin implies, in relation to personal versus social and religious understanding of sinful patterns of thought and behavior). We insist to a certain

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extent on the opening to metaphorical worlds that are revealed to the individual once the boundaries of sin are transgressed. On the other hand, sin results in the uncovering of a new self, a latent one. Yet, being the 'product' of so many lifetime influences, the individual might translate the experience of sin in either self-dissolution or in self-improvement (sin is understood constructively, fueling self-discovery).

The problem of sin is paramount in Oscar Wilde's work. In his pre-prison life sin is sensed as fundamental in transforming life into a work of art. However, reckless disregard of imposed moral limitations results in imprisonment, which implies a reconsideration of the past, rethinking of the values that define/should define his own existence (the artist considered as well). Wilde's understanding of life brought both sin (sinful love) and art together – one identity only, which ends up as a divided identity/self, the Victorian age clearly separating the identity of Wilde the man from the identity of Wilde the artist, imposing the reconsideration of the artist's aim and strategies, forcing him to re-evaluate the definition of sin from a social and religious perspective, rather than from a personal, artistic one.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, often perceived as a eulogy of sin, we discover a partial reflection of Wilde's real-life approach to this topic and its outcomes, a degrading reality of the soul that results in self-denial. The self, buried underneath layers of sin, is gradually brought to the surface in his prison life, beautified precisely by rethinking life in relation to sorrow – a period of spiritualization and distancing from sin (previously perceived as granting access to Art, but felt now as generating dissolution of the self).

Fear, another strong concept of identity, is discussed in its ambiguous nature, as Delumeau (1998: 277) advances, being perceived as either constructive or destructive. When internalized positively, in other words, when the individual faces it (a matter of courage), fear generates tension that results in action, as the scholar underlines, becoming "a summons to be" (ibid.), whereas allowing for a too strong impact on the self may result in dissolution.

Dorian Gray, Wilde's strangely prophetic character/id, fears and at the same time longs for sin, which is felt as a part of his nature (of human nature) and a means of self-realization. His sins are borrowed (*TPDG* 18), yet familiar – his own. He internalizes culpability negatively, he fears the marks of sin and the loss of beauty and youth which he relates to the body, whereas the roots go deeper than that: the youth and beauty of the soul which he fails to acknowledge. Whether it takes place in the mind only (if we were to follow Oscar Wilde's assertion in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*) or it becomes a sin of the body, it will inevitably leave its scars on both soul and body as Wilde's life and artistic creation show.

In *De Profundis*, Wilde reveals his new approach to sin, love, fear and art: culpability leads to positive outcomes in that it becomes an incentive to self-discovery. His different perspective on life is also framed by a different perspective on sin (in relation to both ethics and aesthetics), a philosophy of life that fuels regeneration of the self (seen as a means of survival).

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In prison, Wilde experiences multi-faceted fear but the one he dreads, as an artist mostly, is the fear of meaningless suffering, which would burden the self and lead to its dissolution, implying in fact the annulling of one's meaningful past and present. He faces fear and reconsiders life, even if his suffering proved, to some extent, meaningless: on being released, his life shows Wilde the man and the artist as an outcast who has lost his beauty and youth of both body and soul (disillusionment considered), his reason to live and pleasure to create.

Out of the three strong concepts of identity, *love* (which we approach in two of the forms provided by the Greek vision, distinguishing between Eros and Agape) is understood as the strongest, due to its power to redefine sin and its ability to transform it into an incentive to self-discovery/creation, due to its power to confront and quiet down fear, but also due to its destructive power if its boundaries are transgressed (passion/lust, obsession, self-love).

Gasset (2006: 11) discusses love as opposed to desire/lust. The former is seen as fecund, dynamic, implying the gravitation of the one in love towards the loved one, acknowledging and sheltering the other's distinctiveness, whereas the latter is seen as passive, implying a need to possess, which we see as an attempt to convert distinctiveness into sameness. Oscar Wilde's rise and fall (as both man and artist) are conditioned by his understanding of love seen as the ultimate expression of Art, an equation which did not include ethics — a bitter lesson imposing new coordinates on Wilde's identity quest defined by love and sin, a narcissistic, thoughtless, passionate search that turns into a troubling attempt of finding / discovering the self, rooted in existential crisis.

To Wilde, love takes mostly the shape of deviant physical experience, residing in a continuous search for youth and beauty (of the body when it relates to the Other, and of the spirit when it relates to himself). Dorian Gray epitomizes self-love, the narcissistic approach to one's own sense of self limited to its external framing, and its destructive outcomes as well. The relation to Lord Henry Wotton is one of self-love, in which a narcissist He is in love with the power/influence he exerts on the others' boundaries of the self. The narcissistic pattern applies, though to a lesser extent, to Basil Hallward as well, the artist who sees in his masterpiece – the portrait, not only Dorian's representation and interpretation, but also a representation, an echo of his own self. Love understood in the rapport between reality and illusion as depicted in the relation Dorian – Sybil Vane is reduced to a mere failure in self-understanding and self-improvement in relation to the Other, whereas Dorian Gray is in love with the very idea of love and art.

The other approach to love is mirrored in *De Profundis*, identity is shaped as Agape (a form that finds its completion in Wilde's *The Ballad of the Reading Gaol*), a selfless feeling rooted in Christ's love for people.

De Profundis, the letter written during imprisonment, is "in large part an effort to find a way of rationalizing his suffering" (Graham 2008); the written word conditions Wilde's struggle to survive and mirrors the immersion in the inner world of the one who,

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as a result of his choices, had to reconsider his past, to accept and understand the present, and in doing so he discovers his true self.

Buckler (1989) sees *De Profundis* as "a climactic melding of sustained argument for and imaginative illustration of his aesthetic of the self", while Graham calls it "a curious document" whose theme is "tragedy, its expression and possibility", whereas the tone is "of one who feels himself to be speaking from the depths of potentially final defeat":

> It is a curious document: part apologia, part aesthetic discourse, part religious testimonial, part retort to religion, a letter that addresses a private recipient and was written for public view, but that despite these layers of performance has a strange inward quality; this is a letter from Wilde to himself. (Graham 2008)

Prison, perceived from the point of view of constructing or deconstructing one's identity, represents a turning point for Wilde, implying introspection, rediscovery of the self as well as the emergence of a new one, and vulnerability brought about by exposure. All that before imprisonment represented an identity pillar (family, wealth, audience) is denied to him now. He cannot find resources within, so he finds the needed support and alleviation outside himself, in the others whom he does no longer seek to impress, to seduce - the imprisoned ones (his peers) and their suffering.

Sympathy is what prevents Wilde from putting an end to his life, as he confesses to Andre Gide (in Wilde, 1996: 11); it is the sympathy he feels for the others and which makes him forget about his own suffering and, at the same time, makes him reconcile with his past, as well as with his present.

The self is, thus, defined in relation to the others (bound together by sorrow), an encounter that is fundamentally different from the one he indulged in during his life before prison. And it had to be so. The selfish 'I' is now incorporated into 'we', a safer group identity that would help in the healing and reconstruction of personal identity reduced to 'prisoner C.3.3'.

Being allowed to write represented Wilde's way of preserving mental equilibrium in a space where monotony proves destructive to the creative mind, a space that challenges sanity (together with memory and imagination); the act of writing is, then, to be viewed as a sort of contact with the real world, a medium of communication which the man and artist desperately needed so that he could defeat silence and motionlessness.

On reading his letters from jail, we sense his need to preserve the contact with the world that mirrored his own reflection and fueled his creativity, vitality and also need for novelty generated by his curiosity. In the translated edition of *De Profundis* (Wilde, 1996: 23-24), his letter dated March, 10th 1896 reveals a self whose only emotions are but despair, fear of poverty, silence and death.

Referring to the self as represented in this letter Wilde addressed to Lord Alfred Douglas, Regenia Gagnier asserts that it is a self "constructed in a particular imaginative act of *resistance* against *insanity* and against the *material matrix of prison space and time* – that is,

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confined, segmented space and timelessness" (1986: 179, emphasis added). Gagnier further emphasises that the letter constantly shifts between romance and realism seen as psychological functions→ while romance helps Wilde envision a future, realism brings the past into present: "romance dreams a future for the prisoner and resists the temporal regimentation of prison life; realism, in its patient enumeration of details, reconstructs the past obliterated by the sterile prison space" (op.cit. 179).

Silence is stigmatized as mediating the suppression of the self by evil, its gradual tainting, for it is in this forced-upon silence that the self cannot heal and escape destructive pondering. Yet, the introspection that isolation initiates gradually makes Wilde find a spiritual balance; writing proves to have a cathartic function, becoming his way of freeing himself from the demons of his sorrow. The act of writing contains in itself the audience he needs, a medium of communication vital to finding his equilibrium, and it also reflects the very condition of the artist whose existence depends on his ability to express himself.

Once a Narcissus in need of an audience that would fuel his self-love, Wilde finds himself deprived of this temptation. And it had to be so, as initiation can begin only in isolation, only when the masks begin to fall. However, Wilde turns the absent audience into the addressee of his letter. Gagnier calls *De Profundis* "the only work he wrote without an audience" and adds that Douglas was Wilde's way to "fill the place of the absent audience, writing a self-serving biography of Douglas in order to write an autobiography that explained Wilde to the world. Douglas was for Wilde the image of all unworthy audiences: once he was demystified he could be forgiven, and Wilde could go on to demystify and forgive the whole society he had played to" (1986: 180).

As previously insisted on, in his *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde advances the idea that not voicing thoughts and attempting to oppose temptations leads to the emerging of sins which, as his Lord Henry asserts, take place in the mind. We come across the same idea of silence altering the self in another letter (in Wilde, 1996: 27) which shows Wilde's need to open up, to free his spirit by sharing his torment and breaking away from those burdening thoughts that, just like "poisonous things" "grow in the dark" and wither one's spirit.

Also in this space of imposed isolation where the self is forced to redefine its boundaries and its perspective on reality (whether inward or outward), Wilde removes the masks of his former existence outside the prison cell, where people are deceived by the illusions of a life in a perpetual motion (op.cit. 31), contributing to its unreality. Following the analogy with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the space Wilde is forced to inhabit could be paralleled with the room his character hid his degrading portrait in: the prison cell becomes the dusted space where the society hides away what it is ashamed or afraid of, it places prisoners in this place of oblivion, leaving them prey to their own memories, longings and remorse. Wilde/the individual becomes the self-portrait of the Victorian society, a Dorian Gray repenting for his/its sins.

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Nevertheless, the stillness in prison, says Wilde, gives rise to an accurate perception of reality and to the understanding of truth which, to him, is conveyed by sorrow only seen as "the ultimate type both in life and art", the unity of the inward and outward, of the soul and body (*DP* 15):

> Truth in art is not any correspondence between the essential idea and the accidental existence; it is not the resemblance of shape to shadow, or of the form mirrored in the crystal to the form itself; it is no echo coming from a hollow hill, any more than it is a silver well of water in the valley that shows the moon to the moon and Narcissus to Narcissus. Truth in art is *the unity of a thing with itself*: the outward rendered expressive of the inward: the soul made incarnate: the body instinct with spirit. For this reason there is no truth comparable to sorrow. There are times when sorrow seems to me to be the only truth. Other things may be illusions of the eye or the appetite, made to blind the one and cloy the other, but out of sorrow have the worlds been built, and at the birth of a child or a star there is pain. (ibid., emphasis added)

De Profundis shows the impact of Wilde's social fall on him (Wilde the artist and the individual) (in Wilde, 1996: 35); the very first sentence of the book brings into the foreground Wilde's inner turmoil and also the very distinction between objective and subjective time: "suffering is one very long moment" (*DP* 3). The individual deprived of what was to him the source of his vitality and narcissism, turns to himself time loses the imposed coordinates, its passage being perceived from the subjective dimension of the individual, given by the profundity of his mental and emotional experiences.

Motionlessness seems to frame this enclosed, chained and chaining space where time is paralysed and "does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle round one centre of pain." (*DP* 3). Novelty is replaced by a monotonously-patterned life that allows, even forces the individual's introspection, nothing from the outside distracting his quest. Temporal and behavioral sameness is imposed, change is obliterated, differences flattened out and Wilde comes to discover not only group identity but also his real, previously concealed self. Motionless time and thought turn memories into a lasting present that is subject to the individual's self-analysis: "And in the sphere of thought, no less than in the sphere of time, motion is no more. The thing that you personally have long ago forgotten, or can easily forget, is happening to me now, and will happen to me again to-morrow" (*DP* 3).

In expressing anguish and shame, language seems to fail Wilde as well, echoing his *unshared* inner turmoil ("but I, once a lord of language, have no words in which to express my anguish and my shame" [*DP* 3]); for a while he can no longer find words to voice his pain, to mirror his inward reality – nothing would go as deep. He now finds meaning not in the words that so easily conceal the real, but in one's actions, in one's power to understand the others' suffering, to feel compassion and to show to that burdened soul

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that life is worth living, despite humiliation and loss; such is Wilde's memory of that simple man who raised his hat when Wilde, handcuffed, passed him by:

> Men have gone to heaven for smaller things than that. (4)
> When wisdom has been profitless to me, philosophy barren, and the proverbs and phrases of those who have sought to give me consolation as dust and ashes in my mouth, the memory of that little, lovely, silent act of love has unsealed for me all the wells of pity: made the desert blossom like a rose, and brought me out of the bitterness of lonely exile into harmony with the wounded, broken, and great heart of the world. (*DP* 5)

The poor and the rich, as Wilde feels, understand the life of an imprisoned one differently: while the poor show compassion perceived as an expression of *love* for the tragedy the individual goes through, the rich turn him into a pariah, with "hardly any right to air and sun" (*DP* 5), an outcast that needs to be kept away, being condemned by his society to loneliness. Wilde's fault, as he confesses, is to have pushed his age into acknowledging his symbolic relations to art and culture.

Just like his Dorian Gray, Wilde's pursuit was one of the senses, a hedonistic quest that brought him from "the heights […] to the depths in the search for new sensation" (*DP* 6), wasting his youth (the soul's) and his genius, becoming indifferent to the others, revolving around his need for performing, for an applauding audience, and for passion, all perceived from the perspective of the narcissist. All these paths he followed brought about changes of the self (identity seen as a matter of becoming), burdening it, anesthetizing its integrity and power to empathize, and feeding its hunger for the forbidden: "I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber one has some day to cry aloud on the housetop. I ceased to be lord over myself" (*DP* 6).

At the beginning, prison meant for the self but despair, grief, rage, anguish, misery, sorrow, "bitterness and scorn", and fear (6) – fear of meaningless suffering. It is later that meaning is revealed to him in the form of humility (7). Wilde the artist and the man perceives suffering as a revelation, "the type and test of all great art" (14), an emotion in which the body and the soul are one, in which inward reality is reflected in the outward one: "What the artist is always looking for is the mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward is expressive of the inward: in which form reveals" (14).

One by one, Wilde removes the layers of suffering, knowing himself and understanding the others. Love is given a new acceptation, and in its turn it generates meaning for one's individualism, therefore redefining the boundaries of the self and the encounter with the other; in *De Profundis*, love takes the form of *agape*, the one that is rooted in Christ's love for people. Once freed from the roots of suffering and bitterness, Wilde will be able to accept himself and to create again.

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Jean Delumeau (1998: 277) asserts that *fear* is ambiguous: it can be either constructive or destructive (while it displays degrees ranging from, let us say, reasonable to excessive fear); if faced, adds Delumeau, it becomes a "summons to be", whereas a too deep fear together with a too strong "language of culpability", as he calls it, can paralyze the individual, discourage him, lead to his dissolution. Delumeau goes on by stating that the concept of *sin* itself generates *self-fear*, which might be fecund if *culpability is lived positively*, thus generating a certain *tension* that can: lead to salvation through action, generate a creative anxiety, cultivate responsibility, reveal by means of introspection the 'richness' hidden deep inside us.

Taking into account the perspective employed by Delumeau and applying it to our analysis on Wilde, it is indeed sin that brings about self-annihilation and/or self-emergence; fear is experienced in its various forms and forces the individual into an existence that is framed by limits that can/cannot be transgressed.

In Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, fear is insisted on as being destructive for the individual, the discovered otherness proving annihilating to Dorian Gray. At the beginning, while undergoing transition from a state of innocence to the awareness of his own beauty, he begins to fear old age, loss of youth and beauty; the decadent hedonism he embraces brings with it all the changes which the portrait-like self displays, resulting in felt degrees of fear of death, of his own self (the other that he fosters),of past, present and future – all his deeds that cannot be undone (the past), together with the fear of recognition (the present and future – the outcome of such recognition; fear of acknowledging the changes his soul-portrait reveals, as well as the others' recognition of him, culminating with the paranoid fear of Sybil Vane's brother).

If fear proved annihilating for Wilde's character, in Oscar Wilde's case it reveals a continued identity, having a positive, constructive impact on the self. The fear Wilde experiences while being imprisoned is multi-faceted: he fears poverty, silence, death, insanity, and meaningless suffering. Yet, on facing fear, Wilde undergoes a process of initiation that leads to the unveiling of the meaning (as previously mentioned) in the form of humility, a spiritual body Wilde discovers once reconsidering his past and accepting his punishment, integrating ethics into his philosophy of aesthetics.

"Sorrow and suffering are now experienced as revelations of the creative purpose" (Knight in Bloom, 1985: 41), and Wilde indulges in the understanding of the world through the perspective of Christianity, perceiving Christ as "the supreme artist", "the first and greatest romantic" (op.cit. 41): "the wholeness of his own drama is accepted and ratified; the deep insights of his parables, which he recalls, are lived. There is no repentance, no morality in any usual sense, but there is a lengthy concentration on Christ" (ibidem).

His quest is his own responsibility, and just like he acknowledges, "neither religion, morality, nor reason can help" him (*DP* 8). Meaning has to come from the inside, and not imposed from the outside, and his ordeal (his transition from "an eternity of fame" to "an eternity of infamy" [11]) must be understood as a spiritual experience. Unlike in the

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creation of his character Dorian Gray (representing an earlier stage in Wilde's process of defining his identity), the degradation of the soul is given a higher meaning in prison as it must result in the "spiritualizing of the soul" (9). Therefore, his life now is to be seen not as a new one, but as the continuation of his pre-prison life, revealing a new facet of his identity without denying the former, but building on it, drawing the edges of a latent identity that could not have been explored before.

Memory is again brought into the foreground: forgetting who you are endangers one's identity quest; the past (regardless of how humiliating or frustrating it may be) is part of one's identity, it tells one who he is, it gives him roots that sometimes, just like in Wilde's case, must be reconsidered in order to be able to accept the present and construct a future; the denial of the past, says Wilde, is nothing else than the denial of the soul: "To deny one's own experiences is to put a lie into the lips of one's own life. It is no less than a denial of the soul" (10).

The ones he now needs and seeks are but artists ("who know what beauty is" [12]) and people who have experienced suffering ("who know what sorrow is" [12]). As Wilde confesses, he has to understand his punishment, free himself of the feeling of shame, "learn" to be happy, and see his repentance as initiation and a way of changing the past by perceiving it differently (repentance considered): "Now I am approaching life from a completely new standpoint, and even to conceive happiness is often extremely difficult for me" (12), "The moment of repentance is the moment of initiation. More than that: it is the means by which one alters one's past" (31).

Imagination to Wilde is "simply a manifestation of love, and it is love and the capacity for it that distinguishes one human being from another" (31).To some extent, he recalls one of Virginia Woolf's characters in *The Waves*, Bernard, who loses his power to build on the structure of imagination and to paint the world in the colours of his choice, who once found his vision in the attempt to adorn and re-create reality, a vision that has now withered.

Paralleling the prophetic life of his character, Dorian Gray, and his own, we see in Wilde's trials and sentence to prison the equivalent of the stabbing of the portrait in the novel. Not only Dorian Gray's rotten soul is finally revealed, but Wilde's own decay is brought to the surface, tarnishing his image/portrait of a dandy he has 'painted' during his pre-prison life; if Dorian's portrait comes to reflect again the beauty and youth of its sitter, thus returning to its status of a work of art (with a focus on aesthetics), it is not Wilde but his own art that comes to be offered the youth the artist longed for, now that he has become an outcast having drawn attention on himself. Yet, unlike his character, Wilde is given the chance to repent: his life which he thought to have lived as a work of art, becomes a work of art precisely due to his imprisonment (and the reconsideration of life implied) seen as a transition to a deeper understanding of life and art, now understood from the perspective of both aesthetics and ethics.

On being released, he is the perfect image of that Wilde he portrayed in one of his letters to Robert Ross (in Wilde, 1996: 28, 30): a visitor – an unwanted one – in a world

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that does not need him any more, a "revenant" disfigured by suffering, who finds himself in another prison. Nevertheless, it is now that he can see reality, human nature as it really is. The extravagant dandy, the narcissist in search for an audience on which to exert his skills as a raconteur is now but aged, sadened, broken, yet a man who still strives to survive. Once rich and famous, he is now poor and ostracized, carrying outside the prison cell his stigma of having been in prison and having ignored the moral legacy of his age — a prisoner of his time.

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