

ALIENATION IN *OSCAR DE PROFUNDIS* BY CATHERINE MAVRIKAKIS

DALIBOR ŽÍLA

Rockstar famous all around the world, Oscar de Profundis, the main protagonist of the eponymous novel by Québec contemporary author, Catherine Mavrikakis, returns to Montreal, the City where he was born, during his world tour. Ignorant of a plan of the Global Government which wants to quarantine the City because of an epidemic, he becomes a prisoner of the town he hates and hostage of a group of beggars who attempt to make the Government start negotiating with them in order to gain an antidote against the infection that seems killing no one but excluded persons. In this dystopic universe, threatened by a cosmological end, in which its government menaces all the humanities and culture, Oscar tries to save the world's cultural heritage before it will be destructed. Confronted in his impenetrable solitude by the beggars, he remains estranged, completely alienated and indifferent to apocalyptic scenery that meanwhile takes place in the City centre.

Oscar de Profundis was published in 2016 and has received many positive reviews since then. The story takes place in Montreal during the winter of the second half of the 21st century in a universe in which the planet is governed by somewhat a dictatorial regime of a so called „Global State” and its brutal capitalism (*capitalisme sauvage* - term studied by Pierre Bourdieu).

Numerous in this novel are intertextual and cultural allusions and a certain familiarity

with them helps us to approach and understand this text. Like for instance the opening quotation, taken from Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*, „For us there is only one season, the season of sorrow.”¹ This quotation sets the ambience of the novel. It is also in this very novel where

[...] Wilde assigns the greatest imaginative capabilities to sorrow. Sorrow is the „ultimate type both in life and art”² because it wears no mask: „there is no truth comparable to sorrow ... 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”.³

Other sources of inspiration are novels *Portrait of Dorian Gray* and *Against nature (À rebours)* by Joris Karl Huysmans. Last but not least, we must mention Charles Baudelaire's sonnet *De profundis clamavi* which Oscar let himself tattooed on his back as some sort of a memento. By reading it, we are able to perceive elementary traits of Oscar's personality such are existential void, boredom and melancholy. Essentially, we may talk about a fusion between the personality of Oscar Wilde and Baudelaire's poem which results in Oscar Méthot-Ashland alias Oscar De Profundis.

In the universe of the novel, Oscar stands above all the social clashes which are taking place there. He has constructed his proper universe as a refuge, an artificial paradise à la Des Esseintes, anti-hero of *Against Nature*. He lives in his own temporality that is different from the collective one since he does not resent having anything in common with the humanity. Oscar's personality is utterly defined by his alienation and otherworldliness. It is a cause of his self-alienation which often results from the loss of some element in the life of an individual,⁴ in his case from the loss of his younger brother Oliver, kidnapped and murdered. Trying to cope with this traumatising event, Oscar erased and suppressed all his memories, he destructed his past and thus the status of a victim. Upon alienating from it, he builds his new identity which seems, apart from his Francophilia, to be radically different from the environment where he grew up and was raised.

¹ Mavrikakis, Catherine, *Oscar De Profundis* (Paris: Sabine Wespieser éditeur, 2016), 7.

² Within this paragraph: Lesjak quotes Wilde, Oscar, *De Profundis and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 161.

³ Lesjak, Carolyn, „Utopia, Use, and the Everyday: Oscar Wilde and a New Economy of Pleasure”, *ELH*, Vol. 67, No. 1, Spring 2000, 195. [accessed 30th August 2019] <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30031910>

⁴Schacht, Richard and Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *Alienation* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), 42.

Like many singers, he wears a mask, a plurality of appearances, which protects him from the external chaos. Likewise Dorian Gray,⁵ the main goal in Oscar's life is to create a work of art from his life. Through his performances and his lifestyle, Oscar becomes a piece of art himself. However, he is no longer separable from the pose he acts publicly. Thus, he has become his own prisoner, hostage of his addictions but also a prisoner of the world because he is a victim of his proper fame. As it stands in the book:

Oscar had always kept himself far from the traces of life. The destiny of the planet interested him a little. He thought he would die before this pathetic story with the humanity comes to an end. And there, suddenly, he was lost, caught up by his time or his own past again. Since he had had enough money, he had lost interest in the lives of his contemporaries. He had decided not to introduce the horror of his times inside his own world. He was trying to live away from the roar of planetary worries, following Baudelaire's maxim *Anywhere out of the world*.⁶

Oscar wears a hermetic mask. He does not want to reveal his true personality likewise Oscar Wilde's Dorian. He is an old „junkie” who embodies all the stereotypes of a rock star. In his case, we may also speak about *alienation mentis* which is a „[...] paralysis or loss of one's mental powers or senses [...]”.⁷ This trait is emphasized, above all, by his drug abuse.

Oscar is a solitary creature who contemplates the disaster of his life. His personal apocalypse translates as an expression of his decadence and as a part of a broader occidental apocalyptic, which Ernesto De Martino characterizes by „[...] the loss of sense and domesticity with the world, the downfall of the intersubjective human rapports, the threatening narrowing of the future's horizon to set up a collective way according to

⁵Levý, Jiří, „Wildův obraz Doriana Graye“, in Wilde, Oscar, *Obraz Doriana Graye*, translator: Jiří Zdeněk Novák (Praha: Mladá fronta, 1964), 252.

⁶„Oscar s'était toujours tenu bien loin des tracas de la vie. Le sort de la planète l'intéressait peu. Il pensait qu'il mourrait avant que cette histoire pathétique qu'est la vie humaine prenne fin. Et là, soudain, il était perdu, rattrapé par son époque ou par son propre passé... Dès qu'il avait eu assez d'argent, il s'était désintéressé de l'existence de ses contemporains. Il avait résolu de ne pas introduire l'horreur des temps à l'intérieur de son monde à lui. Il tentait de vivre loin de la rumeur des soucis planétaires, et il suivait à la lettre la maxime baudelairienne *Anywhere out of the world*.” (self-translation) in Mavrikakis, Catherine, *Oscar De Profundis*, 154.

⁷Schacht, Richard and Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *Alienation*, 2.

human freedom and dignity, [...].”⁸

In fact, he is a marginalised person, a stranger for the society he lives in, suffering from egomania, self-idealization and self-adoration. As Kenneth Keniston says: „Most usages of ‘alienation’ share the assumption that some relationship or connection that once existed, that is ‘natural’, desirable, or good, has been lost.”⁹ This cynical sympathiser of Huysmans fails in recreating his relationship towards the world and his past after the traumatising event of his childhood. As G. W. F. Hegel stands, according to Richard Schacht, the alienation „[...] is a condition which occurs when a certain change in a person’s self-conception takes place.”¹⁰ It is an awareness of otherness of something which is often connected with a detachment from a person’s close ones and from the society.¹¹ This notion is present in the Latin verb *alienare* which itself means to make something another’s, to take it away, to remove it.¹²

According to Schacht, Hegel rather employs „[...] the term Entfremdung in connection with ceasing to feel at one with the state and with the world.”¹³ We do observe a disparity between Oscar’s nature and his presence in time which is expressed by his imbalanced existence and by a loss of unity with his surroundings. This loss of unity is not a misfortune because it enables him to attain a higher and conscious unity.¹⁴

Oscar lives in a world that is long gone and in which he tries to save a cultural heritage that is about to disappear before an Apocalypse of a certain cultural memory. He is „[...] a refugee of a vanished world, condemned to a perpetual mourning.”¹⁵ In this world, it is the art which provides him consolation and refuge in his decadent lifestyle. His fantasies shape his identity. Likewise Oscar Wilde, who was an inveterate collector,¹⁶ Oscar Ashland also shares this passion with him. Mavrikakis comments it: „Oscar is both

⁸ „[...] apocalittica occidentale che è caratterizzata dalla perdita di senso e di domesticità del mondo, dal naufragio del rapporto intersoggettivo umano, dal minaccioso restringersi di qualsiasi orizzonte di un futuro operabile comunitariamente secondo umana libertà e dignità, [...]” (self-translation) in De Martino, Ernesto, *La fine del mondo : Contributo all’analisi delle apocalissi culturali* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002), 691.

⁹Keniston, Kenneth, *The Uncommitted : Alienated Youth in American Society* (New York: Harcourt, 1965), 452.

¹⁰Schacht, Richard and Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *Alienation*, 36.

¹¹Kaufmann, Walter, “The inevitability of alienation” in Schacht, Richard and Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *Alienation* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), xxxiv.

¹²Schacht, Richard and Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *Alienation*, 1.

¹³*Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵ „[...] le réfugié d’un monde disparu, un condamné au deuil perpétuel.” (self-translation), in Mavrikakis, Catherine, *Oscar De Profundis*, 214.

¹⁶Lesjak, Carolyn, „Utopia, Use, and the Everyday: Oscar Wilde and a New Economy of Pleasure”, 184.

endearing and insupportable. He's a crazy character who does not see the reality. Even if he is a part of the destructive capitalism. He tries to save the culture, a bit in spite of himself. He flaunts with his money but he still acts as a patron of arts."¹⁷

Throughout the novel, Mavrikakis tries to promote a critical voice on the destruction of the planet by the industrialised society and its alienated and dehumanised brutal capitalism, unstoppable in his pursuit for a gain. She critiques this malfunctioning globalised society and its social division. Once all the beggars are eradicated, the rich citizens will receive the town sanitized and clean for them to live their utopia of the last men till the end of the world. Thus, it is the end of the class conflict that brings with himself the end of the history as well.

This class struggle is also the one of the *entfremdete* class¹⁸ which is also confirmed by the utilisation of a designation „*les damnés de la terre*”,¹⁹ the words present in the opening line of *L'Internationale*, to describe the beggars in the text. The *Entfremdung* of the Government translates by its dehumanisation towards all the citizens, even the rich and servile ones who are now nothing but an *entäußerte*, disinvested, class, in service of this greedy system. As it stays in the novel: „The smart ones saw rather a plot of the Global State to effortlessly get rid of all these undesirable ones who demonstrated the reverse, necessary to this capitalism, greed for the pain of the humans.”²⁰

We may speculate whether Mavrikakis is attempting to copy Wilde's views or promote her own leftist ones since Carolyn Lesjak mentions that „[...] Wilde is best situated within a particular strand of Marxism, a utopianism whose basis lies not in valorising labour (as in much Socialist thought) but in a liberation from labour.”²¹

In what regards the end of the world, Oscar praises the Apocalypse. The idea of an inevitable end consoles him because he has always desired to no longer be and never to

¹⁷ „Oscar est à la fois attachant et insupportable. C'est un personnage un peu fou qui ne voit pas la réalité. Même s'il fait partie du capital destructeur, il essaie de sauver la culture, un peu malgré lui. Il est obscène avec son argent, mais il agit quand même comme un mécène.” (self-translation) in Laroche, Samuel, ed. “»Oscar De Profundis«: la surprise apocalyptique de Catherine Mavrikakis”, *Le Huffington Post Québec*, 29th August 2016, [accessed 2nd September 2019], https://quebec.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/08/29/oscar-de-profundis-catherine-mavrikakis_n_11761632.html

¹⁸Kaufmann, Walter, „The inevitability of alienation”, xlv.

¹⁹ Mavrikakis, Catherine, *Oscar De Profundis*, 57.

²⁰ „Les futés voyaient plutôt un complot de l'État mondial pour se débarrasser sans trop faire de remous de tous ces indésirables qui montraient le revers nécessaire du capitalisme avide de la douleur des humains. (self-translation) in in Mavrikakis, Catherine, *Oscar De Profundis*, 50.

²¹Lesjak, Carolyn, „Utopia, Use, and the Everyday: Oscar Wilde and a New Economy of Pleasure”, 195.

have been. In fact, it is a creative destruction of the Apocalypse that he dreams about. He intends to release an album based on the end of the world which would result in an advent of the last man: a hermaphrodite creature that survived a global cataclysm and was able to generate a new humankind.

The end of the world, as how the novel depicts it, is the end of a certain universe, the historical one, which is followed by an apparition of the last men who will live in the age a post-history. Nevertheless, the hopeless outcome of the cosmological end of this world and annihilation of the humanity will be total and inevitable. The collapse of the world is absolute. It is this long agony of the planet which marries here with Oscar's state of mind.

In the Oscar's universe, humanities are menaced to stop exist and books are mostly banned. Mavrikakis is fascinated by a possibility of eradicating whole the culture and studies this topic through Oscar who is himself the last man of a certain cultural heritage that is already gone or about to disappear. No one will replace him and continue in his oeuvre since he has no posterity. The question is for whom or for what is he constructing all the subterranean bunkers, sorts of gigantic time capsules full of art, than for his own caprice.

The thinking about the end itself is characterized by the theme of a dissolution of a domesticity with the world linked to the crisis of newness²². Maria Maestrutti claims that

The experiences of depersonalisation, derealisation, schizophrenia of the end of the world or the delusion of negation characteristic for a melancholia remain, however, more of the individual and subjective symptoms of a „bare crisis" deprived of cultural reintegration than instruments for understanding the ends of the cultural and collective worlds.²³

In conclusion, this novel brings us into Oscar de Profundis' world. An anti-hero who may be misunderstood as a superficial being, a symbol of success and fortune in opposition to the beggardom. In her excessively intertextual fiction, Catherine Mavrikakis decided,

²² „Les vécus de dépersonnalisation, de déréalisation, de délire schizophrénique de la fin du monde ou de délire de négation caractéristique de la mélancolie restent cependant plus des symptômes individuels et subjectifs d'une « crise nue » privée de toute réintégration culturelle que des instruments pour comprendre les fins des mondes culturelles et collectives." (self-translation) in Maestrutti, Marina, „Retour sur La fine del mondo d'Ernesto De Martino", *Socioanthropologie* [Online], 28, 2013, 75. [accessed 30th August 2019] <http://socioanthropologie.revues.org/1552>

²³*Ibidem*.

however, to apply a different approach and makes out of her character a fragile being, built on a painful past, alienated from the contemporary world, who is living in an artificial paradise. Mavrikakis portrays an individual who lives in a dreamlike world of illusions among his memories and ideals which became his refuge far from the historical era he lives in. We do observe a disparity between Oscar's nature and his presence in time which is expressed by his imbalanced existence and by the loss of unity with his surroundings.

Nevertheless, the message of the novel *Oscar de Profundis* remains ambiguous, was Mavrikakis' ambition to write a novel using her erudition of a professor of Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Montreal and be it somewhat a literary exercise? Did she attempt to describe her fears concerning the current state of our society? Or was her intention to demonstrate her political stands? One may also ask whether it was Mavrikakis' aim to transpose Oscar Wilde into, almost, our days.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baudelaire, Charles. *Les fleurs du mal*. Paris: Booking International, 1993.
- De Martino, Ernesto. *La fine del mondo: Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali*. Turin: Einaudi, 2002.
- Keniston, Kenneth. *The Uncommitted: Alienated Youth in American Society*. New York: Harcourt, 1965.
- Larochelle, Samuel. "EDT "Oscar De Profundis": la surprise apocalyptique de Catherine Mavrikakis (ENTREVUE)". Le Huffington Post Québec, 29th August 2016. [accessed 2nd September 2019] https://quebec.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/08/29/oscar-de-profundis-catherine-mavrikakis_n_11761632.html
- Lesjak, Carolyn. "Utopia, Use, and the Everyday: Oscar Wilde and a New Economy of Pleasure". ELH, Vol. 67, No. 1, Spring 2000, 179-204. [accessed 30th August 2019] <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30031910>
- Levý, Jiří, "Wildův obraz Dorian Graye", in Wilde, Oscar, *Obraz Dorian Graye*, Praha: Mladá fronta, 1964.
- Maestrutti, Marina. "Retour sur La fine del mondo d'Ernesto De Martino". *Socioanthropologie* [Online], 28, 2013. [accessed 30th August 2019]

<http://socioanthropologie.revues.org/1552>

Mavrikakis, Catherine. *Oscar De Profundis*. Paris: Sabine Wespieser éditeur, 2016.

Schacht, Richard and Walter Arnold Kaufmann. *Alienation*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971.

Wilde, Oscar. *De Profundis and Other Writings*. London: Penguin Books, 1986.