



NEGOTIATING PROBLEMATIC IDENTITY: THE QUEER VOYAGE IN THOMAS MANN'S *DEATH IN VENICE*

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ABSTRACT

The paper titled "Negotiating 'Problematic' Identity: The Queer Voyage in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*" is a phenomenological reading of queer experience in *Death in Venice*. The central character, Gustav Von Aschenbach is portrayed as having fallen a 'victim' of his own unnatural obsession with beautiful boy, Tadzio. His love for the boy is seen as the culmination of his decline both as an artist and as a human being.

Phenomenology is concerned with the ways in which people experience their lives and with the mental structures that give meaning to those experiences. Edmund Husserl believed that it is futile to attempt to understand either the mind or the world in isolation from one another. According to him, there exists an interdependent relationship between the mind and the world. He also says that it is the relationship in which mental states are defined by the objects of experience and the objects of experience are shaped by the mental states.

This paper focuses on the feelings, experiences, emotions and self-identification of Gustav Von Aschenbach as he voyages through the contours of his self and various objects of experiences. It attempts to place him in what Heidegger calls 'Dasein' ; thus, giving him a sense of identity (more exactly a queer identity). His conscious experience could be seen as 'Authentic Dasein'(as Heidegger calls it) with the full knowledge of its mortality.

Key words: Dasein, Being, phenomena, identity.

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INTRODUCTION

"The observations and encounters of a devotee of solitude and silence are at once less distinct and more penetrating than those of the sociable man; his thoughts are weightier, stranger and never without a tinge of sadness. Images and perceptions which might otherwise be easily dispelled by a glance, a laugh, an exchange of comments, concern him duly, they sink into mute depths, take on significance, become experiences, adventures, emotions."

Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*

This paper titled 'Negotiating Problematic Identity: The Queer Voyage in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*' is a phenomenological reading of queer experience in *Death in Venice*. The central character, Aschenbach is portrayed as having fallen a 'victim' of his own unnatural passion and obsession with the beautiful boy, Tadzio. His love with the boy is seen as the culmination of his decline and both as an artist and as a human being. The paper focuses on the feelings, experiences, imaginations, emotions and self-identification of

Gustav Von Aschenbach that give him a subjective consciousness of his own and his lover's queer consciousness. The paper also attempts to place Aschenbach in what Heidegger calls 'Dasein' that refers to the way in which humanity is situated in a web of relationships that include and define it, thus giving him a sense of identity (more exactly a queer identity). His conscious experience could be seen as 'Authentic Dasein' (as Heidegger calls it) with the full knowledge of its mortality.

Discussion

Phenomenology is concerned with the ways in which people experience their lives and with the mental structures that give meaning to those experiences. Edmund Husserl believed that "it is futile to attempt to understand either the mind or the world in isolation from one another" (*Literary Aesthetics: A Reader* 122). According to him, there exists an interdependent relationship between mind and the world. It is "a relationship in which mental states are defined by the objects of experience and the objects of experience are shaped by the mental states.... Heidegger designates the objects of everyday reality as beings and distinguishes them from Being (with a capital B) on the grounds that Being is the primordial ground of all possible beings" (122). At the beginning of the novel, Aschenbach is seen having lost his artistic vigour. He is filled with a desire to travel after noticing a tourist in the portico of the Byzantine building. The tourist with his 'bast hat' and red hair provides him objects of experience that compels him to travel.

When he turns back to look at the red-haired tourist, to his surprise, Aschenbach finds that the man has vanished. It could be his imagination or a mere illusion. But it does not matter. What matters is his experience of the strange tourist who indirectly motivates him to travel.

Aschenbach leaves Munich and boards a ship to Venice. He comes across a group of young men laughing and joking on board the ship. He notices an older man in the group who had applied rouge. He is dressed gaudily to appear younger. In fact, Aschenbach's queer voyage begins here. This incident is similar to Aschenbach's attempt to look younger in order to please Tadzio. He dyes his hair black, curls it (like that of Tadzio), put rouge to his

face and even plucks his eyebrows. Aschenbach's love with Tadzio is the starting point of his consciousness of his self. Out of uncontrolled passion for the boy, he begins to follow him. Tadzio also starts to return his attention. When Tadzio smiles back at him, Aschenbach realizes that he is in love with the boy. It is this conscious awareness that makes him murmur "I love you". He didn't say it to the boy but to himself, as if he is slowly becoming conscious of his queer identity.

Aschenbach's subjective experiences make him what he is. His encounter with the gondolier, tourist and the old man wearing make-up shape his consciousness. The gondolier doesn't ask him money for the ride and when Aschenbach returns after getting change to pay the gondolier, he finds him gone. The gondolier vanishes by giving him another experience that forms part of the stream of experiences in his (Aschenbach's) life. His experiences are true to him no matter whether it is his imagination, vision or illusion or whatever else.

While in Venice, he is fully conscious of his mortality when he comes to know of the spread of cholera. He doesn't want to escape the disease because he feels that he comes in close contact with his self/identity only in relation with his love, Tadzio. His 'Dasein' is shaped by his love for Tadzio. He gets his identity – a queer identity when he is in the presence of Tadzio.

He experiences his 'Dasein' when he gets a smile or a mere look from Tadzio. 'Being-ness' is celebrated in the most 'gayer' aspects. His drinking of pomegranate juice, images of travelling, the sight of old man wearing rouge, imagination of Socrates wooing Phaedrus under a tree in Athens, of the Greek myth about Hyacinthus, Apollo and Zephyrus are all objects of experience that relate and define his queer consciousness with that of Tadzio. These are the objects of experiences that culminate in the ultimate 'being'. We could see a gradual process of becoming as far as Aschenbach is concerned. He tries to come to terms with his queer identity when he imagines the conversation between Socrates and the beautiful Phaedrus. Thus, we could say that mind is in relation with the world. This is an apt example of the fact that he is fully conscious of his queer identity. He tries to shape a 'being' for him.

This 'being' that he gets/ ultimately formed is not out of his own action but because of the particular way of responding to the objects of experiences that he comes across.

Aschenbach is a 'victim' of his own conscious experience of his queer consciousness. He couldn't escape from these objects of experience. Whenever he tries to escape (from the tourist, the gondolier and Tadzio), he finds himself more and more immersed in his subjective consciousness of his knowledge about his conscious experience.

"Nothing is stranger or more ticklish than a relationship between people who know each other only by sight, who meet and observe each other daily- no- hourly- and are nevertheless compelled to keep up the pose of an indifferent stranger, neither greeting nor addressing each other, whether out of etiquette or their own whim" (*Thomas Mann's Death in Venice: A Reference Guide* 32).

Here, Aschenbach and Tadzio don't even greet or address each other. Aschenbach is filled with joy when he gets the boy's attention; for he now knows that his love is not unrequited. They know each other and understand the feelings, emotions and deep and intense longing that they have for each other. There is no need of greeting each other because they are connected to the web of queer consciousness that gives them meaning and identity to their 'Dasein' (being there). "Husserl proposes that consciousness is a unified intentional act. By "intentional" he does not mean that it is deliberately willed, but that it is always directed to an "object"; in other words, to be conscious is always to be conscious of something. Husserl's claim is that in this unitary act of consciousness, the thinking subject and the object it "intends", or is aware of, are interinvolved and reciprocally implicative." (M. H. Abrams, 289).

According to Heidegger, the world of everyday objects is not the ultimate expressions of reality but only possible forms of experience that may be configured in different ways. Particular beings emerge from Being through a process of becoming and both this process and Being itself are inexhaustible. Everything that had occurred in Aschenbach's life together with his subjective consciousness forms his identity. He experiences his

'being' (queer being) only in the presence of Tadzio. He experiences a sense of liberation (in his mind he follows Tadzio) at the time of his death.

Aschenbach watches Tadzio play with his friends at the beach:

"a remote and isolated figure, with floating locks, out there in sea and wind, against the misty inane. Once more he paused to look: with a sudden recollection, or by an impulse, he turned from the waist up, in an exquisite movement, one hand resting on his hip, and looked over his shoulder at the shore. (...) It seemed to him [Aschenbach] the pale and lovely Summoner out there smiled at him and beckoned; as though, with the hand he lifted from his hip, he pointed outward as he hovered on before into an immensity of richest expectations." (*Death in Venice* 73).

Conclusion

Aschenbach imagines Tadzio as a lovely Summoner who smiles and beckons at him. At that moment he decides to follow Tadzio because he is no longer ashamed of his queer identity. It is also the moment of the consummation of his love and his acceptance of his queer being. Thus, the final section of the novel could be seen as a culmination of everything in his life. When his beloved Tadzio smiles at him, he suddenly experiences his queer consciousness/identity. He reaches a state of fulfillment when it seems to him that Tadzio is calling him to come near him. It is with this consciousness that he dies. With this, the queer voyage of Aschenbach comes to an end. He finally arrives at the shores of fulfillment of his queer consciousness.

Thus, Aschenbach's 'Dasein' is shaped by his conscious experience of his queer identity. It is in turn made possible by the splits of seconds or minutes or hours that he had shared with Tadzio. And, the objects of experience that he comes across form a stream of experiences that pave the way to this consciousness. To him, it is this consciousness that creates his world.

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