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AN EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF GEORGE AS A QUEER IN C. ISHERWOOD'S *A SINGLE MAN*

HAMDI ALI SERDAR[1]
[1]Department of English Language and Literature, Pamukkale University, Denizli, Turkey
hserdar@pau.edu.tr

ABSTRACT. *The sense of social belonging has often been difficult to resist. It is almost always the case that we get to be defined by where we prefer to belong on a social level. There appears to be, however, very little public concern for those who prefer not to belong anywhere. Individual resistance to social imperatives to fit in a particular group by the standards of sex, for example, often meets with public resistance to grant social acceptance. The resulting effect of this is usually equated with a resolute choice not to belong anywhere—that is to say, to remain unnamed, uncategorized and undefined. It is for this reason that queerness does not easily lend itself to definitions. The aim of this study is thus to demonstrate with an example from literature, namely George as the central character in Christopher Isherwood's novel* A Single Man*, that queerness might as well be read from a phenomenological perspective in understanding the state of a queer being in between. Phenomenology has been chosen as the method of investigation into the way in which George as a homosexual male character can (not) relate to his environment, since it supplies ways to live an experience of someone 'out there' from within, rather than to make an attempt to observe the situation from afar. Central to the investigation has been a search for an answer to the question of what it is to be like George, rather than what George is like.*
Keywords*:* Queerness, belonging, phenomenology, gender, sex

1. **Introduction.** "Where do I belong?" This is the question that calls for an elucidation before an attempt is made to get at the heart of the matter about social roles that we tend to assume one way or another. It is highly debatable nowadays whether we choose to take on a select number of social roles appropriate to particular occasions, or we simply are misled by propagators of dominant discourses into thinking that we have been what we choose to become. Either way, it is highly evident from studies of recent social phenomena which have emerged over the last 30 years or so that we are not free from social constructs at all.

This question may actually bring us to the threshold of a new intellectual journey along attempts to redefine the notion of social belonging. Then the question above is fundamentally transformed into "Do I actually belong somewhere?" This new question will guide us through the corridors of recent philosophical enquiries into the nature of social categorizations. Among these enquiries can be included the following: Are there unquestionable universal criteria that construct manhood, womanhood, girlhood, boyhood, and etc.? How scientifically reliable is it to make a statement that we are all biologically programmed to play our roles as males or females? Are social roles rendered static from the very beginning, or are they liable to change over time? To what extent can we select the kind of identity that we aspire to be our own?

Thus, it now appears perfectly normal that the sense of belonging somewhere socially can be tested for its universal validity. It is at this point that the notion of queerness takes on its significance to mean to be somewhere in between. This in-betweenness as it is usually ascribed to those who tend to qualify themselves as queers leads to the birth of a state in which queerness is stripped of its descriptive one dimensionality and gains an expressive performativity instead. Added to this search for personal recognition as a queer—as someone whose construction of social identity defies cultural definitions of any kind—can be cited a personal endeavour to redraw the existential map of formative attempts to gain a fundamental sense of self.

Burdened with the sense of belonging to a socially defined category, and hence seeking a sense of existential liberation from it, George in Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man* (1964) turns out to be the modern character par excellence. However, it may not be as easy as it is believed to be to discern existential uneasiness of the kind that is often ascribed to Sartre or Heidegger in authors like Isherwood. George's existentialism is not explicitly pictured by his author in his novelistic one-day account of events. It is rather layered beneath his oscillation between his marginality as a homosexual and his social position as a college professor—that is to say, his search for the proper way to express his choice of where to belong and where not to belong. It is actually a question of where he should situate himself as a homosexual.

With all this in mind, this essay can now be considered to be an attempt to look at George from the phenomenological viewpoint of queer existentialism. Before we move onto the core of our argument, we will take a look at Isherwood's own reflections on his own novel, followed by similarities and differences that exist between the author and his fictional character. Our focus will afterwards be placed upon Judith Butler's phenomenological theory of performative acts as constituents of gendered identities. In order to elaborate upon Butler's choice of phenomenology as a method of philosophical investigation into the notion of gender, it will subsequently be followed by an attempt to introduce John Wild's notes on modern phenomenology as it has been developed in relation to existentialism. Based on this theoretical background, the particular case of George as a queer will be treated with special emphasis on his singleness, his poor performance of gender acts and his sense of belonging to a minority. Following final remarks about his unsuccessful attempt to give himself a second chance to make a new Jim out of Kenny, his student, this essay is brought to the conclusion that George has always been somewhere in between, even in his choice of the present, when he discarded the past and the future altogether.

2. **In-depth analysis**. It might be of a great help to consult Isherwood in the first place before referring to others' opinions about his own novel that he expressed in his 1972 interview with David J. Geherin. We learn from his interview that Isherwood does not consider himself as a homosexual writer who has written about homosexuality. He rather considers himself as a writer who has "introduced some homosexual characters" like George in *A Single Man*, which is the author's most favourite novel. In this respect, it would be wrong of us to label *A Single Man* as a novel of the post war era about homosexuality alone. It is rather about, as Isherwood himself explicitly states in his interview, "minority feelings" (152). It is noteworthy at this point to consider Isherwood's political leftist stance as well. As David Robb argued, Isherwood sought ways in his literary endeavours to take the viewpoint of "those living on the fringes of normal existence" (55), and George can doubtlessly be cited as one of them.

A Single Man appears to be an autobiographical work; however, it isn't. As Thom Gunn wrote, it is true that George is similar to his author, Isherwood, in that both were born in England but live in Southern California, and George works as a professor at a college where Isherwood had recently worked. Additionally, he is about fifty-eight years old, about the age of his author when *A Single Man* was written. However, as Jonathan H. Fryer argues, there is also dissimilarity between how Isherwood's personal life is structured around his real-life relations and how he tends to treat "the phenomenon of proper homosexual relations" in his novels:

> Considering Isherwood's personal life, which has included several longish relationships, including the latest with the artist Don Bachardy, that has lasted more than twenty years, it is more curious that he does not treat the phenomenon of proper homosexual relationships in his books. Nearly all homosexual encounters and couplings in his fiction are brief, animal affairs doomed to failure. The one happy homosexual 'marriage' in

his oeuvre is referred to in *A Single Man*, but even there George and Jim's bliss is shattered by Fate with the latter's untimely death. (350)

In addition to Fryer's remarks, Isherwood himself admits to being happy to express in his interview with Geherin that unlike him, George does not have "spiritual sources" and George's "predicament" is not the same as Isherwood's, because he doesn't live alone or suffer from the disadvantages that George is exposed to (153).

Isherwood's personal experience at California College provided him with a point of departure for his novel which was originally titled *An Englishwoman*, in which his focus was initially placed upon a female friend of his. However, as Isherwood pointed out in his interview with Geherin, his interest afterwards "progressively" shifted from her to George (151). We might now seek an answer to such a question as to why Isherwood might have thought of it as being of great significance to situate the professor of his novel at the centre. Thus, the contextual positioning of George at the centre in *A Single Man* requires first of all some theoretical familiarity with such terms as gender, sex and phenomenology. To begin with, it might be a good idea to seek the definition of gender in Butler's phenomenological inquiry into the constitution of gender:

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute an illusion of the abiding gendered self. (519)

Butler's choice of phenomenological theory of performative acts to read between the lines, as it were, relies heavily on her search for an explanation of the ordinary way in which social reality comes to be constructed by social agents through devices like "language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign" (519). Her performative theory of gender construction is intended to make a point about reiterated performances of daily acts by someone whose identity is covertly built around one of the existing living styles. It is "a stylistics of existence," as Butler cites Foucault's terminology, that the notion of gender construction grows into (Foucault qtd. in Butler, 521).

Butler's emphasis also appears to be placed upon the notion that things in general as we tend to take them for granted are actually historical phenomena constructed in a particular way over time. In other words, identities are constructed both horizontally and vertically. The horizontal construction of an identity is dependent on its spatial dimension, while the vertical one is built upon its temporal dimension. Therefore, identities can be considered as spatiotemporally intertwined products of a given culture. Gender is similarly processed along the same line of production. Historical definitions of womanhood versus manhood as they appear in their social contexts are imbued with cultural signs that help to create what Butler prefers to term "the cultural survival," which gender as a project is meant to achieve (522).

Butler's theory derives its power from Simone de Beauvoir. She is widely known for her argument that "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (qtd. in Wittig 1638). Both Beauvoir and Butler alike seem to point out that the gendered existence materializes in the way in which a sexed body is radically transformed into a gendered identity through the cultural significance affixed to it. It all starts, in other words, with the cultural structuring of a sexed body that leads to the birth of a gendered identity. The reproductive attempts to keep a particular gendered identity alive are construed as gendered acts as they are performed mundanely over and over again.

In order to get a clearer understanding of Butler's gender theory of performative acts which relies heavily on phenomenology, John Wild's 1960 essay on "Existentialism as a Philosophy" comes readily to our assistance, since in it he espouses existential phenomenology for a subjective reading of the lived human experience as it is lived from the inside. Wild describes existential phenomenology as a new mode of philosophizing that has its origins in a mixture of Husserl's phenomenology and Kierkegaard's existentialism. According to Wild, the aim of a phenomenologist is to grasp worldly phenomena as they are being experienced by an individual subjectively in his/her own *lebenswelt*, or life-world, a technical term that Wild

borrows from German Philosopher Edmund Husserl. Wild further describes a human being as "a network of intentions or references" which form his/her past, present and future in his/her *lebenswelt* (48). Wild also structures the lived existence around its two dimensions: space and the lived body. He makes a differentiation between "the lived space of our everybody existence" and the objectively measured, geometric space (53). He defines geometric space as something that has no natural centre and is utterly arbitrary, whereas he tends to place the body at the centre in lived space:

Geometric space has no natural centre. Any point is like any other, and it is entirely arbitrary which one in particular is chosen as the centre of a coordinate system. In lived space, my body is the natural centre with reference to which I establish all external places and directions. Objective distance, which is measured in terms of yards and meters and eliminated by mere motion, is not the same as the lived distance which is measured by care, and eliminated by approach. Thus a friend many miles away may be actually "closer" to me than a distant acquaintance in the next room. (54)

Wild continues with his notes on modern phenomenology and stresses a fundamental difference that has been discovered between "the objective body as it is observed from the outside by a detached spectator, and my body as it is lived from the inside by me as I pursue my projects in the world of which it is the centre" (54).

With all this theoretical information supplied, a reading of *A Single Man* from the phenomenological perspective of queer existentialism can now be initiated. To start with, the opening pages of Isherwood's *A Single Man* is evocative of such a reading: Before Isherwood proceeds to the point of presenting the reader with George readily as a whole, he introduces the reader to a body whose sex is not yet revealed to be a *he* or a *she*. It is only a body at this preliminary stage that recognizes itself as existing in a world of its own and at a particular moment which it tends to call now. It does not have a temporal connection with the past or the future yet. It only recognizes itself as an *I* who can claim to be here at home. It obeys such orders as to wash, shave and brush that come from the central control mechanism: the cortex. At this point it comes to possess an understanding of itself as being named George. George's existence gains its sexual dimension as a he only after he gets dressed. He can't remain naked, because he will need others' recognition of his behavioural self as acceptable in the world outside. As hinted at above, George's identity starts to be constructed both horizontally (the temporal dimension) and vertically (the spatial dimension) well before he even knows that he is George. Isherwood appears to be collecting one piece after another to reach a whole, which is 'I am now here at home.' In other words, Isherwood's construction of identity as a whole that belongs to George in particular can be taken as verifiable proof that identity is a construct spatiotemporally situated and there are stages to its construction. It begins with a body which is sexless and subsequently moves on to the stage where it becomes a sexed body. Most importantly, Isherwood appears to be deploying a kind of phenomenological reading when he portrays the birth of George into his sexed body.

Isherwood's novel ends in a similar way. He suggests supposing that George's body dies the way that Isherwood pictures it in the final pages of his novel. It is noteworthy that it is not George but his body whose death is depicted in stages. And it is also remarkable that Isherwood does his own kind of phenomenological reading of death when he describes the scene of George's bodily death, just as he had done at the onset of his novel. He supposes that what causes George to have a heart attack and to die of it is the atheromatous plague which started to form "slowly, invisibly, with the utmost discretion and without the slightest hint to those ole fussers in the brain" when George met Jim at The Starboard Side years ago (151). That is to say, Isherwood supposes a link to exist between the cause of his death and the moment when he met Jim for the first time. Let us now take a closer look at Isherwood's longish description of George's bodily death and try to see his phenomenology at work:

Here we have this body known as George's body, asleep on this bed and snoring quite loud.

…

Within this body on the bed, the great pump works on and on, needing no rest.

…

Very well – let us suppose that this is the night, and the hour, and the appointed minute.

Now—

> The body on the bed stirs slightly, perhaps; but it does not cry out, does not wake. It shows no outward sign of the instant, annihilating shock. Cortex and brain-stem are murdered in the blackout with the speed of an India strangler. Throttled out of its oxygen, the heart clenches and stops. The lungs go dead, their power-line cut. All over the body, the arterials contract. Had this blockage not been absolute, had the occlusion occurred in one of the smaller branches of the artery, the skeleton crew could have dealt with it; they are capable of engineering miracles. Given time, they could have rigged up bypasses, channelled out new collateral communications, sealed off the damaged area with a scar. But there is no time at all.
> For a few minutes, maybe, life lingers in the tissues of some outlying regions of the body. Then, one by one, the lights go out and there is total blackness. And if some part of the non-entity we called George has indeed been absent at this moment of terminal shock, away out there on the deep waters, then it will return to find itself homeless. For it can associate no longer with what lies here, unsnoring, on the bed. This is now cousin to the garbage on the back porch. Both will have to be carted away and disposed of, before too long. (149-152)

Isherwood is like the kind of phenomenologist that Wild tends to describe in his article. The body is stripped of its sexual dimension, and George is reduced to a non-entity whose bodily existence has terminated. It is for this reason that the ending of *A Single Man* can just be taken as an excellent example of a phenomenology of death—death as experienced and lived out from within—just as Wild tried to explain it in his article.

Now that we have seen the novelist's phenomenological construction and deconstruction of George, we may now move on the next step of introducing his three basic personality traits: His singleness, his poor performance of socially expected gender acts and his view of himself as belonging to a minority.

First, George is single. As the title of the novel suggests, singleness stands out as the foregrounding feature of Isherwood's professor character. The moment George faces up to his singleness is when Isherwood introduces the reader to George's neighbours early in the novel: The Strunks and the Garfeins. Isherwood describes George's neighbours as "co-owners of the American utopia, the kingdom of the good life upon earth […] who are none the less ready to purge and starve themselves for generations, in the hopeless hope of inheriting it" (15). However, George thinks that they appear to be afraid of something—something which Isherwood attempts to define as follows:

> They are afraid of what they know is somewhere in the darkness around them, of what may at any moment emerge into the undeniable light of their flashlamps, nevermore to be ignored, explained away. The fiend that won't fit into their statistics, the gorgon that refuses their plastic surgery, the vampire drinking blood with tactless uncultured slurps, the bad-smelling beast that doesn't use their deodorants, the unspeakable that insists, despite all their shushing, on speaking its name. Among many other kinds of monster, George says, they are afraid of little me. (15)

There is now no doubt that George is different from them. What causes him to be different from them renders him alone in his existence as well. It is, surprisingly enough, a reduction of George by his neighbours to a status of a queer:

> Mr Strunk, George supposes, tries to nail him down with a word. *Queer*, he doubtless growls. But, since this is after all the year nineteen sixty-two, even he may be expected to add, I don't give a damn what he does just as long as he stays away from me. (15)

George's neighbours appear to be resistant to the idea that a queer like George who has, for instance, no family in the traditional sense of the word can share their sphere as well. He has no wife, no children, and no grandchildren. Unlike his neighbours, he does not perform his gender well as he is supposed to. He only used to have Jim, a male partner, until recently. After he lost Jim in a car accident, George has begun to experience his loneliness twofold. His lonely position has been further intensified with the addition of another dimension to his existence, which is namely, singleness after the death of Jim, who supplied George with a locus that held things together for the maintenance of his existence as a whole.

Second, he performs his gender poorly. Regarding the way in which gender-related acts are

performed by the characters of *A Single Man*, Isherwood presents the reader early in his novel with a brief scene in which members of traditional families like George's neighbours perform their genders well. Mrs Strunk performs as both a housewife and a mother, while Mr Strunk performs as businessmen, husbands and fathers. The boys and girls perform as sons and daughters when at home, as students at school. Each member of a family acts out his or her gender as appropriate to a particular social occasion. As Butler argues, performing a gender the wrong way meets with punitive measurements. Identities are constantly changed from one case to another, compulsorily, as would Adrienne Rich argue in her famous essay on compulsory heterosexuality. However, changes are kept within the limits of a strictly defined social domain. A woman would be outcast, for instance, should she perform as father or husband. On the other hand, it is completely a different case with George, since he refuses to perform as a father or a husband, as he has already done ever since. He remains unidentifiable by the standards that claim to have a right govern the way sexes are socially regulated.

Third, he considers himself as belonging to a minority. Socially reduced to the status of a queer, George feels that there is not a fundamental difference between the Jews and queers like him when both groups are approached from the perspective of minorities. It is clear from George's remarks on the distinction a minority versus a majority that a minority is regarded as a minority when it is socially believed to pose a threat to the majority. He afterwards advises his students to be frank about their feelings towards those that they consider belong to the minority (53-54). In other words, he is searching for social recognition as "a dirty old man" without being discriminated against at the same time (141). He even admits to himself that his strength lies in his being "crazy," something which he keeps a secret to himself (147).

George is now fully aware that he is a single member of a queer minority who performs his gender badly. His performance is poor and below the socially accepted expectations. However, he does not think of improving his gender performance to meet the expectations. He rather gives himself a further chance and seeks to find himself once again as "an outsider homosexual" (Wilson 325). When he spends a night with Kenny, one of his students, he actually does it with a view towards verifying whether or not Kenny could take the place of Jim and join him in his existence as a queer. The chances are that if it were not for Kenny's girlfriend, Lois, it would probably have worked for George and Kenny, because Kenny feels that he has to go back and form a family union. When, however, Kenny challenges George to dive into the ocean at night, he feels happy and accepts the challenge, because George thinks for a moment that Kenny might be the new Jim for him.

For a new relationship of the kind that used to exist between George and Jim once to emerge between him and Kenny this time, both Kenny and George need to go through a process of purification from values falsely affixed to them. Their dive into the ocean at midnight thus becomes symbolic of purification:

> Intent upon his own rites of purification, George staggers out once more, wide-open-armed, to receive the stunning baptism of the surf. Giving himself to it utterly, he washes away thought, speech, mood, desire, whole selves, entire lifetimes; again and again he returns, becoming always cleaner, freer, less. He is perfectly happy by himself; it's enough to know that Kenny and he are the sole sharers of the element. The waves and the night and the noise exist only for their play. (132)

Purification as it is symbolically depicted in this passage invokes Butler's thoughts about the need for removal of cultural definitions from everyday life to deconstruct identities to their basic constituents. A deconstruction of this kind might possibly give him a chance to build his identity anew. George therefore seeks to find a new Jim in his usual *lebenswelt* to start his sexual identity afresh. Similarly, he does not seek a way to retain what has been left of the past; quite the contrary, he is oriented towards finding solace in the present moment alone. He associates Jim with death because he is in the past; and he further associates the future with Kenny and the kids he is likely to have when he gets married. George also discards the idea of forming a new relationship with Kenny because Kenny is not the right person to understand his motives. With all this in his mind, George makes a decision to cling to the present alone.

As Jill E. Anderson argues, the reason that George chooses not to care about the past and the future lies in his opposition to "the heteronormative fixation on the future" (55). George perceives the pursuit of

future dreams as exclusively belonging to a heterosexual system of thought—a point which prompts Isherwood to comment that George sets himself off from his neighbours and students, for instance, by discarding the commonly-held future-oriented sense of time. Eventually, he acts in pursuit of attaining his goal of finding a new Jim only now; however, his lifetime draws nearer to an end, leaving him with fewer chances to meet with his new Jim.

3. **Conclusion**. In conclusion, it is now perfectly safe to argue that George's positioning of himself has been outside the socially accepted daily life. Instead he has always had his own life-world. And this paper has been written in an attempt to approach his life-world from a phenomenological perspective. Just as Butler and Monique Wittig relied heavily on thoughts articulated by Simone de Beauvoir when they conducted their philosophical investigations to prove that gender is not something that gets affixed naturally to a baby the moment he or she is born but rather it is developed and acquired over time, Isherwood also introduced George not as someone who is born but who becomes, step by step, the George who is single and queer. Apart from his in-betweenness as a queer in his choice of gender acts to perform, George has also been a queer in his choice to belong only to the present, discarding both the past and the future altogether. However, when his attempted hold on to the present failed, Isherwood brought his existence to an end, at least, imaginatively. Whether he died a real death or not, George has been true to himself as a queer by consistently rejecting every possible imposition upon him of culturally defined values appertaining to the constitution of gender identities.

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