THE NOVELS OF CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

NARCISSUS OBSERVED AND OBSERVING:
THE NOVELS OF CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

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ABSTRACT

"Narcissis Observed and Observing: The Novels of Christopher Isherwood" deals with narcissism--both limitless and limited--as a constant theme running through the novels of Christopher Isherwood. Narcissism is examined in its mythical and psychoanalytical contexts, with special emphasis given to the writings of Freud and Marcuse. Particular attention is paid to the author's homosexuality and his various works that deal with homosexuality: an attempt is made to show how narcissism may function as a vital and invaluable creative asset for the homosexual author.

RESUME

"Narcisse observé et observant: Les Romans de Christopher Isherwood." Cet ouvrage démontre que le narcissisme (à la fois limité et sans limites) est un thème constant des romans de Christopher Isherwood. Le phénomène du narcissisme est analysé dans ses contextes mythiques et psychanalytiques avec une insistance particulière sur les oeuvres de Freud et de Marcuse. L'étude porte une attention spéciale à l'homosexualité de l'auteur et à ses oeuvres diverses et essaie de montrer comment le narcissisme peut être une source d'inspiration vitale et inestimable pour l'écrivain homosexuel.

PREFACE

I wish to thank Professor Donald Rubin for his help and suggestions concerning Isherwood's works and pertinent background material; also, Professor Bruce Garside for his guidance concerning narcissism and psychoanalytic theory.

Two previously published books on Isherwood--Carolyn Heilbrun's Christopher Isherwood (Columbia University Press, 1970) and Alan Wilde's Christopher Isherwood (Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1971) --provide excellent overviews of the author's works and point up pervasive themes in his novels. To my knowledge, narcissism as a theme in the works of Christopher Isherwood has not been dealt with previously.

William Aitken
August, 1974

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PUBLISHED WRITINGS

Principal Works

All the Conspirators. London, Jonathan Cape, 1928.

The Memorial. London, Hogarth Press, 1932.

Mr Norris Changes Trains. London, Hogarth Press, 1935. (Published in the United States as The Last of Mr Norris, 1935.)

Sally Bowles. London, Hogarth Press, 1937.

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The Berlin Stories (The Last of Mr Norris, Sally Bowles, Goodbye to Berlin). New York, New Directions, 1963.

The World In the Evening. New York, Random House, 1954.

Down There On a Visit. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1962.

A Single Man. New York. Simon & Schuster, 1964.

Exhumations. New York, Simon & Schuster.

A Meeting By the River. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1967.

Kathleen and Frank. New York, Curtis Books, 1971.

Works Written With W.H. Auden

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Works Relating to Vedanta

An Approach to Vedanta. Hollywood, Vedanta Press, 1963.

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Essentials of Vedanta. Hollywood, Vedanta Press, 1969.

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"What Vedanta Means to Me," What Vedanta Means to Me. John Yale (ed.). London, Rider & Co., 1961. Pp. 38-49.

Miscellaneous and Uncollected Works

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"The Day At La Verne," The Penguin New Writing, XIV (July-September, 1942), 12-14.

"Forward," "The Railway Accident," by Allen Chalmers (Edward Upward), New Directions in Prose and Poetry, XI. New York, New Directions, 1949. Pp. 184-85.

"German Literature in England," The New Republic, LXXXXVII (April 5, 1939), 254-55.

Great English Short Stories. Christopher Isherwood (ed.). New York: Dell Publishing Co. (Laurel Edition), 1957.

"High Valley Theatre," Theatre Arts, XXXI (June, 1947), 64-66.

The Intimate Journals of Charles Baudelaire. Translated by Christopher Isherwood. Hollywood, Marcel Rodd, 1947.

"Just a Gigolo," The Saturday Review, XXXV (April 12, 1952), 38.

"Notes On a Trip to Mexico," Harper's Bazaar, LXXXI (June, 1947), 80-81, 134-36.

"Souvenir des Vacances," Oxford Poetry. W.H. Auden, C. Day Lewis (eds.). Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1927. P. 48.

Threepenny Novel by Bertolt Brecht. Verses translated by Christopher Isherwood. New York, Grove Press, 1956.

"The Youth Movement in the New Germany," Action, I (December 10, 1931), 18.

CHRONOLOGY

1904 Born 26 August.

1914-18 Attends St. Edmund's School, meets Auden. Father killed in action, 1915.

1919-22 Attends Repton School, meets Edward Upward (Allen Chalmers).

1923-25 Corpus Christi College, Cambridge on scholarship. Begins Lions and Shadows, 1923.

1925 Secretary to Mangeot family.

1926-27 Private tutor, London. Poem "Souvenir des Vacances" published (anonymously) in Oxford Poetry, edited by Auden and C. Day Lewis.

1928-29 Medical student at King's College. All the Conspirators published, 1928. Leaves for Berlin, 1929.

1930 Translation of Baudelaire's Journaux Intimes published.

1930-33 Teaches English in Berlin. The Memorial published, 1932. Leaves Berlin, 1933.

1933-34 Works on screenplay Little Friend for Berthold Viertel.

1934-36 Travels, reviews for The Listener. Mr Norris Changes Trains and The Ascent of F 6 published, 1935.

1938 Lions and Shadows published.

1939 Leaves with Auden for America. Meets Gerald Heard and Aldous Huxley; they introduce him to Swami Prabhavananda. He becomes a pacifist. Journey to a War and Goodbye to Berlin published.

1940 Works in Hollywood for MGM.

1941-42 Serves as conscientious objector at American Friends Service Committee in Pennsylvania. Returns to Hollywood, translates Bhagavid-Gita with Prabhavananda.

1943-45 Edits Vedantist magazine, Vedanta and the West.

1945 Prater Violet published.

INTRODUCTION

> When the meal was over, we left. As my two friends were walking together, Wilde took me aside.
>
> "You listen with your eyes," he said to me rather abruptly. "That's why I'm going to tell you this story: When Narcissus died, the flowers of the field asked the river for some drops of water ~~to weep~~ for him. 'Oh!' answered the river, 'If all my drops of water were tears, I should not have enough to weep for Narcissus myself. I loved him!' 'Oh!' replied the flowers of the field, 'How could you not have loved Narcissus? He was beautiful.' 'Was he beautiful?' said the river. 'And who could know better than you? Each day, leaning over your bank, he beheld his beauty in your water . . . '"
>
> Wilde paused for a moment . . .
>
> "'If I loved him,' replied the river, 'It was because, when he leaned over my water, I saw the reflection of my waters in his eyes.'"
>
> Then Wilde, swelling up with a strange burst of laughter, added, "That's called The Disciple."
>
> --Andre Gide[1]

Christopher Isherwood, in 1974, does not cut an overly impressive figure in the literary world. A good number of his books are out of print in North America, and those that are in print are not in great demand. To the general reading public he is a minor British (or is it American?) novelist who wrote the book (books?) on which the film Cabaret was based. In academic circles he is mentioned, usually in passing, as Auden's "friend." Even considered on his own merits, that is on his eleven novels, assorted plays, poems and travel literature, Isherwood, one feels almost automatically, is a writer

who is too easy, too accessible to actually necessitate any thorough-going study--he suffers from the "fatal readability" Cyril Connolly once remarked upon.[2]

In attempting to deal with this paradoxical flaw of accessibility, one verges on wanting to argue the opposite, to prove that Isherwood's writings are filled with inobvious meanings and ambiguous intent: below this writer of surfaces lies a sensibility intriguingly complex and difficult. And, although this last is sometimes true--certainly Isherwood has been taken at face value too often (the famous "I am a camera" tagline is still sometimes treated as a bald statement of fact rather than as an at least partially ironic pose)--it would be a disservice to him and to his craft to cloud up his remarkable surfaces while trying to plumb murky depths that are not there.

One feels though that whatever else can be debated, obfuscated or rarefied about Isherwood's works, it cannot be denied that he has made two invaluable additions to English literature, the first of course being The Berlin Stories (a collection of two complete novels --The Last of Mr Norris and Goodbye to Berlin--originally published separately). If he never had written another line after its publication, Isherwood still would be remembered as having written the only novel that catches and preserves without embalming a place, time and mood that are forever gone--Berlin in the 1930's. There is a whole

fantastically tumultuous era that at least the English-speaking world sees and somehow comprehends through the eyes of one man.

Isherwood's other addition is A Single Man, a semi-autobiographical day-in-the-life examination of what it means to be homosexual in a heterosexual world. A Single Man obviously is not the first English novel to deal with homosexuality openly--since the end of World War Two male homosexuality has been dealt with by a variety of British and American authors (Gore Vidal and James Baldwin come immediately to mind; Forster's Maurice was published in 1971 but actually had been written in 1913-14)--but none has dealt with being homosexual with the direct intimacy and understanding and compelling accuracy that Isherwood brings to A Single Man.

This directness, it should be noted, has more than a little to do with Isherwood's own sexuality. If the world is seen from an oblique angle in A Single Man, it has something to do with the fact that Isherwood as a homosexual sees the world from a different angle. For nearly the past decade Isherwood has been openly gay[3] in both interviews and his own writing (Auden would admit to being gay but he refrained from writing or talking about it; Baldwin and Vidal have both written about gay characters and situations but are both bisexual themselves, a somewhat "safer" sexual orientation since they at least have one foot in the right camp; Forster came out posthumously); not that he was

ever that discreet in his writings even in the thirties.

Homosexuality crops up with some frequency in nearly all of Isherwood's novels, if only because nearly all his works are of highly autobiographical content (usually the main character or narrator of each of his works is called William Bradshaw or Christopher Isherwood--Isherwood was christened Christopher William Bradshaw-Isherwood --the central figure of A Single Man is named George, but the course of his life runs suspiciously close to that of his creator). If Isherwood has one central concern that runs through all his works, it is with himself as both a maturing creative individual and as a developing literary (and distinctly fictional) character. This is not to say that Isherwood is just another writer who hasn't the necessary skill to write himself out of a narrative he has synthesized from first-hand experience. On the contrary, Isherwood writes himself out of his books by deliberately writing himself into them, by writing about himself in the past as a separate and different entity. Although this entity certainly is sometimes named Christopher Isherwood, he is definitely not the Christopher Isherwood of the present, who is writing the story.

The smooth surfaces Isherwood composes are the bright hard surfaces of mirrors, a succession of mirrors reflecting not his present but rather his past. Looking into these mirrors he observes not himself in the present but rather his various changing selves in the past (and yet these selves are static because they are past). Isherwood's

preoccupation, then, with these past selves--their reflections, guises, distortions, metamorphoses--is essentially a narcissistic one, a creative turning inward. It should be noted, in conjunction with this narcissistic bent, that Isherwood as a homosexual seems to be, with his concern for self, exactly where he should be, according to Freud:

> In general, identification plays more of a role in homosexual love than in heterosexual love. Homosexual objects resemble the patient's own person more than heterosexual ones, which explains the intimate relationship between homosexuality and narcissism.4

One would assume Freud arrived at this position the same way he arrived at some of his postulations on women's anatomy is destiny--a man who loves another with the same sexual equipment as his own must by definition be narcissistic. The narcissism which Freud is referring to here is a form of regression on the part of the homosexual personality, a turning inward that is a turning back, a reversion to an earlier, presumably less mature state.

And yet, admitting Isherwood's essential narcissism, one can't help feeling this narcissism to be more than a regression, much more than a loss of maturity; one senses instead that narcissism functions as an entirely necessary and vital aspect of Isherwood's creativity, that his concern with self is not excessive but obligatory to his interpretation of reality. But in order to demonstrate this tendency, one must first more closely examine the term narcissism from both the mythical and the psychoanalytical standpoint (the former being

adopted and altered to fit the purposes of the latter).

Narcissus in Ovid's retelling of the story was a boy of fifteen who one day looked into a stream and fell in love with his own image reflected there, at the same time not immediately recognizing that:

> He is the partie whoome he wooes, and suter that doth wooe,
> He is the flame that settes on fire and thing that burneth tooe.5

Upon at last recognizing himself and simultaneously the futility of his love, he wastes away pining for the unattainable and eventually dies. Once in Hell he goes immediately, ". . . to the Well of Styx, and there both day and night,/Stands looking on his shadow fondely as before."[6]

Although Freud was not the first to apply the myth to the workings of the human personality (according to his own "Narcissism: An Introduction," the term was first used by P. Nacke in 1899 to indicate "a person who treats his own body in the same way as otherwise the body of a sexual object is treated"; Havelock Ellis also employed the term[7]), he was the first to recognize the pervasiveness of its influence in the workings of the mind and to utilize it as a specific phase of psychological development. For Freud narcissism essentially is an early and necessary phase of psychosexual development in which the sexual object is the self.[8]

This phase of primary or limitless narcissism occurs in early childhood and is characterized by a primary ego-feeling that is at once self-absorbed, auto-erotic and at one with the external world; that is, the ego is all-inclusive and distinguishes no boundaries between itself and the external world.[9]

The child feels no limitations on his ego and experiences what Freud refers to as an "oceanic feeling," the ideational content of which is oneness with the universe. But as the child grows and learns to differentiate between his ego and the "outside" world sufficiently to also experience some fear of that outside world, he gradually gives up his limitless narcissism for the protection of the father; he recognizes an ego other than his own and acknowledges its superior strength and power.[10] In some individuals, however, male homosexuals for instance, because of difficulties with resolution of Oedipal desires, the individual reverts to what may, for the sake of convenience, be referred to as limited narcissism; that is, self-obsession and auto-eroticism without the undifferentiated ego, without the feeling of oneness with the universe:

> Homosexuality represents, so to speak, a state between the love of oneself and the love of a heterosexual object. In a regression to narcissism, the level of homosexuality is an intermediary step, where the regression may temporarily stop; and a person who has regressed to the level of narcissism, in striving to recover and return to the objective world, may fail to get beyond a homosexual level.[11]

The homosexual then is stranded somewhere between narcissism and heterosexuality; if he becomes more narcissistic, he regresses; if,

however, he becomes more heterosexual, he advances and thereby enters "the objective world."

Is there any advantage to being outside the objective world? Is there perhaps a positive aspect to not being heterosexual? Could there be any rational reason to regress toward narcissism rather than advance toward heterosexuality? Freud himself speaks of the narcissistic individual who desires to meet his own ego,[12] and also comments on " . . . the charm of a child" arising from " . . .his narcissism, his self-sufficiency and inaccessibility."[13] It also should be noted in passing that Freud was ambiguous about whether his own various psychosexual stages actually denoted steps on the way to psychosexual maturation or whether they in reality were manifestations of the furtherance of an individual's sexual repression by society.

Similarly, Freud was not unaware of the extent to which narcissism influences everyone, homosexual and heterosexual alike. As Philip Rieff points out in Freud: The Mind of the Moralist, Freud viewed the history of the sexual impulse as one of dissatisfaction, simply because love always begins in self-love and is forever after centripetal and self-deluded:

> Loving, the body is loved, and thus any object is absorbed into the subject; even adult loves retain their autistic and self-regarding character. That love must serve the self or the self will shrink from it, that the self may chase love round an object back to itself again--this is Freud's brilliant and true insight . . . All loves are masked as self-satisfactions: from the love of the child for the for the parent-provider, to the love of the spouses which reincarnates these parent-images, to the parent's "narcissistic" love for his own children. The duplicity of erotic sentiment is Freud's theme.14

Nearly every adult then, homosexual and heterosexual alike, experiences a form of limited narcissism; the adult ego, though, is "only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive--indeed, an all-embracing--feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it." Some adult egos, Freud goes on to admit, manage to preserve this primary ego-feeling, are able to maintain the feeling "of limitlessness and of a bond with the universe." These intimations of the infinite dimensions of one's ego again provide that sensation Freud describes as the oceanic feeling.[15]

The adult, having as a child sacrificed the oceanic feeling for the protection the father offers against the "superior power of Fate," somehow (and Freud does not elaborate on this) accomplishes a partial "restoration of limitless narcissism." But "oneness with the universe" and a regression (although in the following sentences Freud seems to be talking in terms of advance rather than retreat) to narcissism becomes connected with religion:

> The 'oneness with the universe' which constitutes the ideational content sounds like a first attempt at a religious consolation, as though it were another way of disclaiming the danger which the ego recognizes as threatening it from the external world.16

Here narcissism is not simply a neurotic symptom; here rather it composes what Marcuse in Eros and Civilization calls "a striking paradox": narcissism, defined by Freud and others as an egotistic withdrawal from reality in Civilization and Its Discontents suddenly becomes connected with oneness with the

universe, revealing "the new depth of the conception: beyond all immature auto-eroticism, narcissism denotes a fundamental relatedness to reality which may generate a comprehensive existential order."[17] Narcissism not only co-exists with the mature reality ego, it also creates order and meaning for that ego. In other words, according to Marcuse, narcissism may offer the beginnings of a new reality principle:

> . . . the libidinal cathexis of the ego (one's own body) may become the source and reservoir for a new libidinal cathexis of the objective world--transforming this world into a new mode of being.[18]

All of this seems to leave the homosexual in a rather peculiar position: stranded between narcissism and heterosexuality, he can either reject his homosexuality and go over to the admittedly restrictive "objective reality" of heterosexuality (and, according to Freud, be plagued forevermore by his now-latent homosexuality), or he may attempt to embrace limitless narcissism and thereby create his own version of reality. To accomplish this one must quite naturally proceed beyond limited narcissism, beyond simple auto-eroticism and self-obsession. Concentrating all his psychic energy upon his own ego, the individual must fully recognize that ego and also recognize and trace its boundaries; by so doing he may then set out to systematically break down and destroy these boundaries, thereby re-uniting his ego with external reality.

Of course by re-uniting his ego with external reality he is in some ways creating a new reality (for his ego), but in many ways

he is only re-discovering the reality his childhood ego once experienced. For in childhood, Freud reminds us, there is an "inseparable connection of the ego with the external world. A return to or a re-establishment of limitless narcissism 'engulfs the "environment," integrating the narcissistic ego with the . . . world. The normal antagonistic relation between ego and external reality is only a later form and stage of the relation between ego and reality."[19]

By turning his psychic energy inward to find and destroy the boundaries of the ego, the individual ultimately is turning his energy outward by re-uniting his ego with external reality. And this, once accomplished, leaves the ego--because it respects no pre-established lines of demarcation--free to confront and merge with the egos of others. It can be said then that the individual has liberated himself to encounter his own ego in the world around him, in the egos of others: by looking so deeply into himself, into his own ego, he ends up looking out. (One should add that the homosexual leans toward limitless narcissism just as he leans away from limiting heterosexuality; were the homosexual actually to "embrace" narcissism fully, he would no longer be a homosexual at all, but rather a total narcissist.)

It is the contention of this paper that Christopher Isherwood as a homosexual and especially as a homosexual author has progressed, in terms of his novels, through four distinct phases, all of which

are deeply rooted in the author's steadily increasing awareness of narcissism as it functions in both his personal and his creative life. Because the facts, events and situations of his private and his literary life are remarkably congruent, one can trace these four phases with some accuracy through both areas.

The first phase--marked in his private life by the years between his birth in England in 1904 and his departure for Berlin in 1929, and covered in the novels All the Conspirators, The Memorial and Lions and Shadows--is one of recognition of his essential differences from the objective world of heterosexuality. It is during this period that Isherwood comes to realize his position as an outsider, as a person isolated by his sexuality. At first involuntarily separated from the objective world and its institutions, he soon begins, in his isolation, to examine himself, initially to question the reasons for his exile and later to consciously accept and actually prefer that exile and even profit by it. He revolts against what Freud calls the censorial institution in order to "liberate himself from all these influences, beginning with that of his parents, and from his withdrawal of homosexual libido from those influences."[20] Eventually accepting and even understanding his inherent separateness, he decides to make his separation complete and leaves England altogther, in search of an exile that will be more than merely symbolic.

Isherwood's arrival in Berlin in 1929 and the resultant collection The Berlin Stories set off the second phase of his life

and works. This period is marked by his attempts to move beyond the limited narcissism of self-examination to recapture the limitless narcissism of his childhood. It is with The Berlin Stories that Isherwood develops himself as a persona--by looking so deeply in that he ends looking out--that he observes all those around him. It is in Berlin that his persona sets up a camera to photograph the world about him and ends up photographing himself in an infinity of mirrors. The personality becomes diffuse; and the oceanic feeling of childhood is rediscovered.

Prater Violet and Down There On a Visit represent a retreat from limitless narcissism, a drawing back from "oneness with the universe," perhaps a spiritual seasickness caused by that oceanic feeling. These novels encompass a period of extreme disorientation and confusion. With The Berlin Stories the demarcations between his own ego and the external world had been diminished to the point where the ego of Christopher Isherwood, character and author, was in danger of disappearing. In these two novels, written over a space of nearly twenty years, Isherwood gropes for an equilibrium, a balance that will allow his ego to coexist with the external world. Down There On a Visit presents Isherwood's personal solution to his dilemma, and his oneness with the universe actually does lead to "a first attempt at a religious religious consolation . . . another way of disclaiming the danger the ego recognizes as threatening it from the external world." Isherwood converts to

Vedantism, and although the result is not initially beneficial to his writing, it seems to have been his only possible alternative.

Despite his retreat from limitless narcissism in his personal life, Isherwood sends his persona on (although giving him a new name: George) to follow the trajectory of the author's fictional life. A Single Man presents what the Isherwood character would have become had the author not converted to Vedantism. George is the ultimate narcissist, obligingly taking on the forms all those around him expect to see. He is Narcissus grown old and cursed with what he feels to be near-immortality. By concentrating his psychic energy upon himself, he sees himself in the world around him and meets his own image in the images of others. Alone and apart, he struggles to create his own reality separate from the objective reality of heterosexuality. Alone and dying, he struggles to formulate a comprehensive existential order. The he ultimately fails is a sign not of his surrender but rather of his mortality.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Richard Ellmann (ed.), Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), pp. 41-2.

[2]Cyril Connolly, Enemies of Promise and Other Essays (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company/Anchor Books, 1960), p. 112.

[3]Although in their strictest senses "homosexuality" is a clinical term indicating sexual orientation and "gay" actually indicates a life-style related to being openly homosexual, the terms are used fairly interchangeably here.

[4]Otto Fenichel, The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1945), p. 337.

[5]John Frederick Nims (ed.), Ovid's Metamorphoses, The Arthur Golding Translation (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pé 76.

[6]Ibid., p. 78.

[7]John Rickman (ed.), A General Selection From the Works of Freud (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1957), p. 104.

[8]David Cole Gordon, Self-Love (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1972), p. 36.

[9]Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1963), p. 5.

[10]Ibid., p. 9.

[11]Fenichel, The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis, pp. 427-28.

[12]Ibid., p. 429.

[13]Rickman, A General Selection From the Works of Freud, p. 113.

[14]Philip Rieff, Freud: The Mind of the Moralist (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959), p. 174.

[15]Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, p. 5.

[16]Ibid., p. 9.

[17]Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry Into Freud (New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 1962), p. 153.

[18]Ibid., p. 154.

[19]Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, p. 13.

[20]Rickman, A General Selection From the Works of Freud, p. 119.

CHAPTER ONE

LEAVING HOME

On His Queerness

When I was young and wanted to see the sights
They told me: 'Cast an eye over the Roman Camp
If you care to,
But plan to spend most of your day at the Aquarium--
Because, after all, the Aquarium--
Well, I mean to say, the Aquarium--
Till you've seen the Aquarium you ain't seen nothing.'

So I cast an eye over
The Roman Camp--
And that old Roman Camp
That old, old Roman Camp
Got me
Interested.

So that, now, near closing-time
I find that I still know nothing--
And am not even sorry that I know nothing--
About fish.

--Christopher Isherwood[1]

There is obviously no way of talking about the novels of Christopher Isherwood without talking about Isherwood himself, as he is the chief topic of so many of his books. At least six of his novels --The Last of Mr Norris, Lions and Shadows, Sally Bowles, Goodbye to Berlin, Prater Violet, Down There On a Visit--have as central character a figure named either Christopher Isherwood or William Bradshaw, three --The Memorial, A Single Man, A Meeting By the River--play variations on the theme of author as character; even Kathleen and Frank, a

biography of his parents, ends by noting, "Perhaps, on closer examination, this book too may prove to be about Christopher."[2] (Kathleen and Frank may express the height of the author/character paradox: Isherwood refers to himself throughout in the third person.)

While it is evident that his novels are autobiographical, they do not in any real sense compose an actual autobiography for the primary fact that they are fictional. We can, though, for the sake of convenience, divide Isherwood's life into four fairly distinct stages that correspond roughly to the four phases his novels exhibit, as pointed out in the introduction. These phases are naturally quite fluid, dates indicating the duration of each being of necessity somewhat arbitrary. This chapter then concerns itself basically with the years 1904-1929, from birth through departure for Berlin.

Kathleen Isherwood was as bourgeois and complacent a figure as Victorian England could have hoped to produce; her husband Frank came from a well-to-do country family (one of his ancestors, John Bradshaw, was Lord President of the High Court that sentenced Charles I to death) and was a professional soldier. Christopher had the usual education for a boy of his class--St. Edmund's School and Repton (where, incidentally, he first met Auden). He was fourteen and at Repton when word came that his father had been killed in action in World War One. Frank's death supplied the first, and by no means last, dramatic change in Christopher's rather comfortable life; the

changes however were more psychological and emotional than material. Christopher, Isherwood writes in Kathleen and Frank:

> . . . revolted early and passionately against the cult of the Past. As an adolescent orphan he was subjected to reminders by schoolmasters and other busybodies of his obligations to Frank, his Hero-Father. So he learned to hate and fear the past because it threatened to swallow his future.3

The obligations to a dead father made Christopher feel guilty, but he soon began to react against his guilt, to deny the guilt "The Others" would have him feel:

> . . . he rejected their Hero-Father. Such a rejection leads to a much larger one. By denying your duty toward the Hero-Father, you deny the authority of the Flag, the Old School Tie, the Unknown Soldier, the Land That Bore You and the God of Battles. Christopher's realization that he had done this --and that he must tell The Others he had done it--came to him only by degrees and not until he was nearly grown up. The rejection caused him much anxiety at first and some moments of panic; later it gave him immense relief and even a little courage.4

And so, by degrees, the stage was set. Isherwood went up to Cambridge, had a moderately good time, and came down again, having deliberately failed his Tripos by answering questions with hidden rhymes, puns and even by criticizing the syntax of the questions themselves.[5] Between 1925 and 1929 he wrote and published his first novel, All the Conspirators, and wrote, but did not publish until 1932, The Memorial. He also served as secretary, at one pound per week, to a string quartet and put in two terms as a medical student.

The period between the end of Repton and his departure for

Berlin Isherwood covered exhaustively in 1938 with Lions and Shadows: An Education In the Twenties, more particularly a novel concerning "the education of a novelist."[6] One deals with this novel--Isherwood's fifth--first for obvious reasons, not the least of which being Isherwood's candor about a specific period in his life and the two novels produced during that time.

All the Conspirators and The Memorial as novels seem more noteworthy in the attempt than in the accomplishment; they are highly ambitious attempts both intensified and marred by that ambition. Perhaps their greatest contribution lies in their clear demonstration of Isherwood's early development as a novelist (and as his own persona) and in their wealth of autobiographical information and misinformation. At first not apparently autobiographical in content (at least no more so than the works of any very young writer--Isherwood was twenty-four when All the Conspirators was published), these novels yield up telling glimpses of how the author gradually learned to alter by exaggeration, by deprecation, by radical objectification the facts of his life to fit his fiction.

We learn from Lions and Shadows that Isherwood began leaving home in 1918, after the death of his father. That it took him over ten years to actually go is a tribute to the enforced solidarity of the Victorian/Edwardian family. Freud's censoral institution was much less diverse in 1918 than it is today; if one was middle-class (as Isherwood puts it: "an upper-middle-class Puritan, cautious, a bit stingy, with a stake in the land"[7]), it must have been difficult

to see beyond the hermetically sealed coziness and overstuffed furniture of the Victorian household, to recognize anything but the family as the censorial institution. For a young man with homosexual inclinations-- and Isherwood seems to have recognized his gayness early on[8]--the powerful influence of family life and heterosexuality must have been nearly overwhelming. Shelley's "great war between the old and young" was the only one being waged. The stakes were high, especially for the young, since "the vanquished became love-starved old maids, taciturn bitter bachelors, chronic invalids, harmless lunatics; or they died, if they were lucky."[9]

Perhaps Frank's death was a lucky stroke for Isherwood; had he lived, especially considering the erotic attraction Christopher even as a very young child felt for his father,[10] Isherwood could very well have become a taciturn bitter bachelor. Instead, he revolted against the Hero-Father and all the institutions of the patriarchy. (That this all seems hopelessly Freudian and passé cannot be denied, nor can it be dismissed, for Isherwood and his generation grew up on Freud, and references to him and his theories are legion in the early novels. Whether or not his theories are accurate or not matters little; what does matter is Freud's undeniable and unavoidable influence on Isherwood's life and, of course, on ours.) As early as his last year at Repton, Isherwood linked up with Allen Chalmers, "a natural anarchist, a born romantic revolutionary" who "had refused to be

confirmed." Chalmers was the spiritual brother to unite with in the struggle against the Hero-Father and The Others (Chalmers is a pseudonym for Edward Upward).[11]

Whether their friendship was just a close one or actually had sexual aspects as well Isherwood does not make completely clear; he and Chalmers as undergraduates shared the view that " . . . Sexual love was the torture chamber, the loathsome charnel-house, the bottomless abyss. The one valid sexual pleasure was to be found in the consciousness of doing evil." They were, in other words, both virgins; Isherwood adds, "in every possible meaning of the word."[12] If not strictly speaking homosexual they were certainly not overly attracted to heterosexuality or its objective world. And so at Repton and later at Cambridge, they created a private world, an elaborate richly drawn Other Town. They withdrew here to watch Cambridge and its petty concerns--"the Poshocracy, the dons, the rags, the tea parties . . . "; they even invented a macabre imaginary figure, "The Watcher in Spanish," who watched them mutely, a constant judge of whether their conduct wavered toward The Others.[13]

Observed then and observing, Isherwood and Chalmers became "psychic tourists" travelling through one world while creating another, rejecting one and withdrawing further and further into the other. From this vantage point, reading with Chalmers Wilfred Owen, Katherine Mansfield, Emily Brontë ("Wilfred, Kathy and Emmy"),

Isherwood reached the inevitable conclusion that the time had come for him to write a novel. He called it Lions and Shadows, the title coming from C.E. Montague's Fiery Particles: "arrant lovers of living, mighty hunters of lions and shadows." Montague was a writer of war stories; Lions and Shadows, at least on the surface, had nothing to do with war. But Isherwood notes in the version of Lions and Shadows he eventually published that War--specifically World War One, the war Isherwood and his generation missed out on and the one they felt guilty about missing--represented The Test. And The Test was "Are you really a man?" Understandably, Isherwood rejected War, The Test and, by implication, heterosexuality.[14]

Isherwood, going on to reject yet another test, was "requested to leave" Cambridge. Even away from Cambridge he and Chalmers keep up the fantasy of the Other Town, having at last given it a name: Mortmere. They also invent a young writer who goes to Mortmere where he observes his neighbors and then writes about them, distorting their quirks and foibles until he has developed an "extravagant and lurid fable." Somehow the villagers come upon the book and read it. Soon they are imitating themselves as caricaturized and brutalized by the author. The author, horrified, nevertheless can do nothing to stop the villagers from working out the plot he has begun. The village is destroyed and the author alone remains "from first to last, a quiet and undistinguished ordinary young man."[15]

Isherwood and Chalmers had been reading too much Gide. After finishing Les Faux Monnayeurs and exploring sufficiently its possibilities, the two abandoned Mortmere. The original Lions and Shadows also long abandoned, Isherwood turned to something called Seascape With Figures, which soon evolved into All the Conspirators (the title is from Julius Caesar: "All the conspirators save only he/Did that they did in envy of great Caesar . . ."; it has nothing to do with the plot of the novel).[16] It is a novel concerned with The Family and a young man who fails to escape it. The central character Philip is not notably Isherwood-like (he is named after one of Isherwood's close friends; another character is called Allen Chalmers); he seems more to be the author's worst fears about himself and his future made concrete--he is what the author could or might become.

Briefly, the plot details Philip's unsuccessful attempt at leaving home, at escaping from the domination of his long-widowed mother. The young Isherwood takes this essentially simple and straightforward conflict and embellishes it with stylistic flourishes which tend to distract and confuse the reader more than they clarify and give impetus to content. Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the novel lies in its passages of Joycean stream of consciousness; the limited scope of the novel does not appear to warrant the sophistication of this technique, and frequently the intent and matter of these passages become incomprehensible. Isherwood himself later referred to the "repressed aggression . . . of obscurity" in All the Conspirators.

The two other major influences evident in the novel--those of Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster--function in a more salutary manner. Woolf's use of multiple viewpoints, particularly as in Jacob's Room, The Waves and To the Lighthouse, allows Isherwood a freedom of movement and perspective that contrasts with the predetermined stasis of Philip. The novel begins by presenting events from Philip's vantage point and then proceeds to show how drastically Philip's self-image differs from the images others--in especial, Allen Chalmers--see. Point of view in fact effectively foreshadows Philip's ultimate pathetic doom.

A Forster technique Isherwood refers to in Lions and Shadows as "tea-tabling"--that is, the deliberate playing down of a novel's most dramatic scenes--at times liberates Isherwood from his already pronounced penchant for melodrama. Thus, the most important confrontation in the novel, the battle of wills that decides Philip on escape, takes place at the dinnertable and deals with the unlikeliest of subjects:

> 'What have you been doing to your Chesterfield, Philip?'
> 'Do you mean my sofa?'
> Items in her drawing-room culture upset her patience in a moment. She laughed:
> 'Whatever you like to call it. The thing in front of the fireplace. It's broken.'
> 'So I saw. Somebody must have smashed it.'
> Again she laughed.
> 'Are you quite sure that somebody wasn't you?'
> 'Quite. When I went out this morning, it was perfectly all right.'
> 'But nobody's been in since, except the maids.'
> 'Well then, they did it.'
> 'But Philip, how could they have? I always tell them to be so careful.'

'I daresay they saw one of my letters lying underneath it and lost their heads in the excitement.'

'Philip, you have absolutely no right to say such things against people.'

'No, of course not. Not when it's your precious servants. When you accuse me of breaking a thing, of course, it doesn't matter.'

'I wasn't saying that you broke it. I was only asking if you knew anything about how it came to be like that.'

'I suppose you think I bit the legs off like a mad dog.'

'Philip, that's not funny.'[17]

And so on. The effect is monotonously claustrophobic, the air close, hopeless--the precise embodiment of the barely post-Victorian home with its moral stuffiness and deeply engrained materialism. The scene presented above also illustrates the difficulty that remains even when Isherwood manages to avoid melodrama: the difficulty of maintaining an ironic tone that does not irritate by its omniscience. Forster always seems to get away with melodrama--and one thinks reflexively of the controlled ending of Where Angels Fear to Tread--simply because he can "tea-table" even the most colorfully dramatic scenes with an irony that is at once all-knowing and compassionate, detached and clearheaded. Isherwood, though, in All the Conspirators and The Memorial (and even to a certain degree in The Last of Mr. Norris) cannot achieve the proper balance, cannot stage-manage his scenes of passion and despair without revealing his hand. There is an element about his irony that is brutally cold and unforgiving, and beneath that irony, simple ungovernable anger.

The dramatic climax of the novel--Philip's flight from home--and the denouement--Philip's return to home and humiliation--combine to summarize the author's least attractive and yet most pronounced early tendencies. Philip, slamming the door on his mother, heads

straight for London's East End. The scene has great comic possibilities: solid middle class youth, frightened and appalled by the slums of London, returns chastened to the maternal bosom. But the young Isherwood, who has not yet left home himself and gained the needed perspective by doing so, plays the East End visit exactly as he shouldn't--as straight melodrama heightened by unconvincing pathos. Philip is not at home in the East End, and neither is Isherwood (Isherwood admits elsewhere to having "slummed" in the East End for a few days during his early twenties). The final view we have of Philip--semi-invalid, semi-hypochondriac, attended by his sister, doted on by his jubilant mother--is excessively bitter and dangerously pat. Because the conclusion of the novel is forgone from the start (the reader never really believes Philip has the fortitude to leave home or the tenacity to stay away for good), the fury that informs Isherwood's irony makes points best left unscored.

At the same time, one does not leave the novel unaffacted: the anger behind the irony is convincing and tells much about Isherwood's fears as a writer and an individual struggling to break free from the influences that have formed him and the influences that could keep him as he is. Although a great deal of the suppressed rage in All the Conspirators is directed toward The Family and its minions, it seems apparent that the real anger in the novel is Isherwood's toward himself. He hates The Family for not letting him go, but he hates himself more for wanting to stay; his revulsion

for his family simultaneously feeds and arises from his revulsion for himself. Philip is the character Isherwood fears he is, or is becoming, the longer he stays at home.

Isherwood by this point in time already had decided that:

> It was hopeless. As long as I remained at home, I could never expect to escape from my familiar, tiresome, despicable self. Very well, then: I would leave home. I would start all over again, among new people who didn't know me. I would never see any of my old friends again--well, at any rate, not for ten years.19

Slowly loosening the bonds of family, Isherwood began to realize that without its shelter he, as both an artist and a gay person, had no real place in the scheme of society. He was not exactly pleased at the prospect of remaining in permanent opposition to the objective world, a social misfit for the rest of his life. He needed a place, he thought, or else his writing would never be any good:"The most I shall ever achieve . . . will be to learn to spy upon them, unnoticed. Henceforward, my problem is how to perfect a disguise."[20]

In The Memorial the disguise does not seem to have been perfected yet. Quite similar in many ways to All the Conspirators, The Memorial is subtitled "Portrait of a Family." The family of course is, more or less, Isherwood's own; it was an attempt, the author noted later, "to make the Isherwoods seem more interesting."[21] On the whole it is a much better written book than All the Conspirators, The healthy influence of Forster is apparent on almost every page. But one can't help preferring All the Conspirators, simply because it seems, for all its failed attempts at flashiness, a much more exact portrait of

a family than is The Memorial. This probably has a great deal to do with the scope of the two novels: All the Conspirators deals primarily with only four characters--Philip, his sister, his mother and Allen Chalmers. The Memorial on the other hand was conceived to be an epic, in fact, "a potted epic; an epic disguised as a drawing-room comedy."[22]

This disguise does not get quite perfected either. The problem of point of view dogs Isherwood relentlessly throughout the novel; again following the lead of Virginia Woolf, he attempts nearly a score of divergent viewpoints, shifting emphasis and perspective from one character to another and back again in the space of a page or a paragraph, even though his style has not yet the fluidity or precision to encompass such technical virtuousity. His method of structuring time, moreover, aggravates an already confused and confusing situation; certain that all epics have dull beginnings, Isherwood decided to remedy that failing by starting his epic in the middle; he would then go backwards and forwards so the reader would come upon the dullness halfway through the book when he would be more interested in the characters--"the fish holds its tail in its mouth, and time is circular, which sounds Einstein-ish and brilliantly modern." Having conceived a circular structure, Isherwood then decided to do away with narrative altogether, to write the story in self-contained scenes like a play or "an epic in an album of snapshots."[23]

Within this convoluted time structure Isherwood arranges his snapshots in meticulously repeating patterns; events occur and re-occur,

overlap; characters meet and part and meet again following the concentric rings of events on a time structure that is more a gyre than a circle. And these characters, especially Lily (read "Kathleen"), are overdrawn to the point of caricature; judging from the rest of the cast--Eric, Lily's stuttering over-protected son; John, the senile country squire; Maurice, the madcap pagan undergraduate; Edward, the morose homosexual friend of the family--Isherwood's epic verges on mock-epic: nearly every character appearing is an all too recognizable British type.

But, as Isherwood learned from a painter friend, "The pattern evolved from the reality is more important than the reality itself."[24] Isherwood has failed in The Memorial to get the reality of his family (or any other) right, and yet the pattern he has distilled from that family is of especial interest, particularly concerning the evolution of Christopher Isherwood as a fictional character. For the first time in Isherwood's writing, the topic of homosexuality arises; in The Memorial two characters--Eric and Edward--are homosexual, and what is curious about them both are the facts that first, Isherwood radically changes his own viewpoint toward each throughout the course of the book, and second, that the two characters together ultimately represent Isherwood himself--the author at the time of writing of The Memorial, the author as he envisions himself in the distant future, the author as he actually is in the future, and the

author looking at himself in the past.

The Eric we meet at the start of The Memorial is a literary reincarnation of Philip from All the Conspirators. But this Eric is more complex than Philip and certainly more interesting; at the same time he is a horrible prig, a self-pitying intellectual snob who hasn't the courage to leave home but has the temerity to blame his family for keeping him there. And, following a time-honored novelistic custom of dealing with homosexuality in as veiled a manner as possible--that is, using a physical disability to stand for a sexual one (for instance, Somerset Maugham and Forster homosexuals, in Of Human Bondage and The Longest Journey introduce autobiographical characters that are both clubfooted), Isherwood denotes Eric's (and his own) "affliction" with a stutter.

But in the first half of The Memorial the narrator's and the reader's sympathy is with Eric, prig though he is, for the author takes us into Eric's psyche and shows us around, lets us share Eric's anguish and diffuse hate. And it is through Eric's eyes that we first encounter and dismiss Edward. Edward, despite the cover of his amicable arrangement with a woman, is obviously homosexual, stands irrevocably outside the objective world of heterosexuality. He has no roots, no center, travelling most of the time abroad, every few months finding a new companion. Eric, still safely but perhaps uncomfortably within the heterosexual world, pities and despises (two coinciding emotions) the outcast Edward, and so do we.

But an odd thing happens to the characters of Edward and Eric as the book nears its end. And this change is more than simply novelistic development of character. (One recalls the counter-balanced metamorphoses of the Diver's in Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night). What Edward becomes at the end of the novel is in no way prepared for at the beginning, and the ambivalence of authorial attitude toward Eric and Edward is striking indeed. Isherwood wrote the first version of The Memorial while still in England; his final revisions were made several years later in 1931 in Berlin. In the earlier chapters of The Memorial, Isherwood seems to regard Edward as the discouraging future that awaits him once he breaks his ties with home and country, once he becomes an actual and a sexual exile. Edward's lonely peregrinations across the continent appear to beckon to and appal both Isherwood and Eric.

Toward the end of the novel, however, comes a scene that reverses our perceptions of Eric and Edward. Edward, on one of his rare visits to England, engages in a mild flirtation with Maurice, Eric's irrepressibly pagan cousin (Maurice seems to have been modeled on Stephen Spender, on "Stephen Savage" as Isherwood calls him in Lions & Shadows). The flirtation may or may not extend to sexual involvement; one guesses it is all the same to Maurice, if not to Edward. Eric, though (and we view the dalliance between Edward and Maurice and the scenes that follow through Eric's eyes), feels he must warn Edward off Maurice,

must protect Maurice from the corrupting influences of a lecherous homosexual. The complexity of the confrontation between Edward and Eric, the levels of irony and the shadings of comprehension, illuminate and redeem the entire book.

Eric comes to Edward first because Eric is half in love with Maurice. Maurice is everything Eric would like to be: wild, uninhibited, polymorphously sexual. Equally, Eric is disturbed because these very qualities attract Edward to Maurice rather than to Eric. Eric has repressed his hostilities, his aggressions, his sexuality, and all that's left is his impotent self-loathing, his anguish, his stutter. His warning to Edward is at once sincere--he cannot tolerate the idea of Edward doing with Maurice what Eric himself would not dare attempt--and insincere--Eric wants to be Maurice, wants to be madcap and guiltless, wants, most of all, to be seduced by Edward. Eric does all the talking when he faces Edward; Edward offers up no defense; and yet suddenly, almost imperceptibly, he joins Edward in his isolation, the isolation he has chosen. We listen to Eric's rush of uncomprehending accusations and we watch Eric watch his own reflection in Edward's eyes. The scene is a subtly powerful one--tea-tabled to the point where we almost miss it as it glides by. We at last take in the scope of Eric's pathetic cowardice and the scale of Edward's quiet bravery. At the start of the book we see the world and Edward through the eyes of young Isherwood who has not yet left home; we see Edward as what Isherwood fears he is doomed to

become once he does leave. At the end of the book, although the viewpoint is still Eric's, we see Eric through Edward's eyes; we are in Edward's other place, outside the objective world, the mature and evidently resignedly homosexual Isherwood confronting his immature and frightened self as he had written him in Eric while still in England some three years previous.

Having finished in 1928 the first draft of The Memorial, Isherwood was more dissatisfied with himself than ever. Aware of his separateness first as a homosexual and second as an artist, he was tired of the pose both roles forced him to assume among his family and friends:

> Isherwood the Artist was still striking an attitude on his lonely rock. But his black Byronic cloak failed to impress me any longer--just plain, cold, uninteresting funk.26

Could he hope to perfect his disguise, to be able to stand outside the pale and spy upon its inhabitants when nearly everyone around him knew him so well that his disguise was as apparent as a Byronic cloak? The solution obviously was to go abroad and live where one would not be recognized at all and would therefore not need much of a disguise. Auden in 1929 was teaching in Berlin; he convinced Isherwood to join him. On the train heading for Berlin, Isherwood decides:

> One day I should re-write The Memorial, and all those other books I'd planned. But for the moment I was only a traveler, given over, mind and body, to the will of the dominant, eastward-speeding train; happy in the mere knowledge that yet another stage of my journey had begun.27

By the time he is on that eastward-speeding train, Isherwood has almost entirely withdrawn from the objective world of England.

By leaving England he has carried his revolt against the Hero-Father and the affiliated institutions one radical step further. Rejecting the guilt called for by The Others, he moves toward a recognition of his essential perversion (in the eyes of society), his gayness. Marcuse notes that all perversions "express rebellion against the subjugation of sexuality under the order of procreation, and against the institutions which guarantee this order."[28]

The perversions, Marcuse goes on, reject the guilt that accompanies sexual repression and revolt directly against the performance principle and also show a deep affinity to fantasy as the one mental activity which "was kept free from reality-testing and remained subordinated to the pleasure principle alone."[29] Isherwood, in moving away from guilt and sexual repression, moves toward homosexuality and the pleasure principle. He withdraws to become more auto-erotic, to love his own body by way of its reflection in the bodies of others. And concomitantly, he becomes the traveler, going abroad in search of his own ego.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Ian Young, The Male Muse: A Gay Anthology (Trumansburg, N.Y.: The Crossing Press, 1972), p. 52.

[2]Christopher Isherwood, Kathleen and Frank (New York: Curtis Books, 1971), p. 292.

[3]Ibid., p. 10.

[4]Ibid., p. 502.

[5]Christopher Isherwood, Lions and Shadows (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1947), p. 131.

[6]Ibid., p. 5.

[7]Ibid., p. 18.

[8]"As Heathcliff he imagined himself standing all night in a storm outside Catherine Linton's window; Catherine being for the moment a blond boy with a charming grin and long legs, who played hockey . . . At St. Edmond's . . .wrestling soon became a conscious sex pleasure. He found boxing sexy too. even though he usually got knocked about. If they had played Rugby football instead of soccer, he would have enjoyed the body contact of the scrums and perhaps not so much minded the kicks." Isherwood, Kathleen and Frank, pp. 255-56.

[9]Christopher Isherwood, All the Conspirators (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), p. 3.

[10]Isherwood, Kathleen and Frank, p. 349.

[11]Isherwood, Lions and Shadows, p. 19.

[12]Ibid., p. 35.

[13]Ibid., pp. 53-64.

[14] Ibid., pp. 72-75.

[15] Ibid., pp. 165-66.

[16] Ibid., p. 178.

[17] Isherwood, All the Conspirators, pp. 127-28.

[18] Ibid., p. 1.

[19] Isherwood, Lions and Shadows, p. 195.

[20] Ibid., pp. 247-48.

[21] Isherwood, Kathleen and Frank, p. 305.

[22] Isherwood, Lions and Shadows, p. 297.

[23] Ibid., p. 297.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Christopher Isherwood, The Memorial (London: Hogarth Press, 1932), pp. 220-25.

[26] Isherwood, Lions and Shadows, p. 304.

[27] Ibid., p. 312.

[28] Herbert Marcuse, Civilization and Its Discontents: A Philosophical Inquiry Into Freud (New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 1962), p. 154.

[29] Ibid., p. 150.

CHAPTER II

BERLIN

> "Is Berlin so bad?" I asked, trying not to sound too interested.
>
> "Christopher--in the whole of the Thousand Nights and One Night, in the most shameless rituals of the Tantra, in the carvings on the Black Pagoda, in the Japanese brothel-pictures, in the vilest perversions of the oriental mind, you couldn't find anything more nauseating than what goes on there, quite openly, every day. That city is doomed, more surely than Sodom ever was. Those people don't even realize how low they have sunk. Evil doesn't know itself there. The most terrible of all devils rules--the Devil without a face. You've led a sheltered life, Christopher. Thank God for it. You could never imagine such things."
>
> "No--I'm sure I couldn't," I said meekly. And then and there I made a decision--one that was to have a very important effect on the rest of my life. I decided that, no matter how, I would get to Berlin just as soon as ever I could and that I would stay there a long long time.
>
> --Down There On a Visit[1]

If England offered the young Christopher Isherwood a seemingly limitless number of repressive forces--from family to school to church to the stultifying order of a rigid class system--Berlin of 1929 must have appeared to be totally without any censorial institutions at all. Over ten years had passed since the humiliating end of the nightmare that was World War One (Germany lost nearly two million men, more than any other nation involved[2]), but Berlin and all of Germany were still reeling from its incessantly appearing side-effects.

To many, and particularly one would assume to the civilian population, the war may not have seemed half so bad as the events

which followed it in quick dizzying succession: the Treaty of Versailles and the resultant loss of face, territory and gold; the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II and the short-lived socialist revolution; establishment of a social democrat republic which seemed to have no coherent policies, domestic or foreign, other than the continual desperate struggle to keep itself and Germany from sliding into total irredeemable chaos; incessant poverty and widespread malnutrition and starvation, the inevitable results of defeat immediately aggravated by runaway inflation and heavy taxation; a nearly endless list of government scandals small and large, not to mention the greater than usual quota of political assassinations; and, certainly most ominous of all--especially for Berlin, a city that listed toward the left--the inexorable rise to power of Hitler and his Nazis.[3]

Berlin in the 1920's functioned as the center--political, artistic, scientific, financial, moral--of Germany. Here gathered artists and intellectuals, politicians and financiers from all over the continent. And yet Berlin had been, at least until 1900, a cultural backwater among European cities. Founded in the fourteenth century, Berlin remained "a minor cross roads" while London, Paris, Vienna, Venice, Amsterdam and even Hamburg flourished and established tradition, stability, permanence. But in the latter half of the nineteenth century industrialization and the railroads had their widespread effect on all of Europe, and Berlin suddenly was truly

a metropolitan cross roads.[4]

In a period of less than thirty years, 1871 to 1900, Berlin's population tripled to two-and-a-half million people; during the pre-war Kaiserzeit Berlin caught up with and eventually surpassed Munich as the center for German culture and by the twenties ranked second only to Paris as the place to be if one was an aspiring anything--artist, musician, writer, technician, philosopher, film-maker, singer. The endless list of the famous who made Berlin their home between the wars runs from Einstein to Brecht to Hans Arp, Alban Berg, Mies van der Rohe, Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph von Sternberg, Walter Gropius, Rudolf Serkin, Max Planck, Emil Jannings and so on.

None of these luminaries, it should be noted, was a native-born Berliner; the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city arose from the simple fact that a great number of Berlin's citizens were foreigners--the displaced, the expatriated, the exiled, the fugitive--from Russia, Italy, France, Hungary and, of course, from England. Berlin actually was a city of immigrants and transients, a circumstance which must account for the fabled brashness and reckless vitality and verve of its inhabitants and, at the same time, for their inherent suspicious natures and inbred cynicism: they had seen it all and were beyond surprise, but should the opportunity for surprise arise, they were prepared and more than willing.

Berlin then in 1929 was a "new" city in nearly every

sense of the word, a city of foreigners, people with pasts they'd rather forget and futures they'd prefer not to contemplate: Berlin was a city living in the present tense. What better place could Isherwood have chosen for his self-exile, what better place to perfect his disguise, to clean up his act as an observer, an outsider looking in? An outsider among outsiders, an exile among exiles (his black Byronic cloak hardly conspicuous at all), the blessed anonymity of similarity: all that he sees around him are ceaseless variations of himself, strangers diligently striving to improve their own disguises.

The Berlin Stories really isn't a novel at all; instead it is an afterthought, a collection of novellas and short stories all published previously and separately. The Berlin Stories, apparently for convenience, is divided into two books, The Last of Mr. Norris and Goodbye to Berlin. The latter is composed of one previously published novella, Sally Bowles (1937), and three vignettes, "The Nowaks," "The Landauers," "Berlin Diary: Autumn 1930," all first published in literary impresario John Lehmann's The Penguin New Writing during the early thirties. In 1939 Isherwood combined the three stories and Sally Bowles into Goodbye to Berlin. The Last of Mr. Norris on first publication in England in 1935 was called Mr. Norris Changes Trains. American publishers seemed to find this somewhat obscure and perhaps too tentative and therefore gave Mr. Norris a rather unambiguous (not to mention unwarranted) end. Finally, in 1946, New Directions compiled from all these sources

The Berlin Stories.

As it turns out, The Berlin Stories stands as an ironic fulfillment of an early intention Isherwood later wished to deny. In 1930 when he first began writing about Berlin and his numerous friends there, he determined to write a genuine full-fledged epic (one recalls The Memorial, his potted epic) to be entitled The Lost, or the more "wonderfully ominous" Die Verlorenen. He envisioned a magnificently broad compassionate novel of proportions to rival Balzac, a novel with such breadth and sweep it would capture forever the essence of Berlin and all Berliners. "The task," Isherwood notes in his 1954 introduction to The Berlin Stories, "was quite beyond my powers . . . Thank goodness I never did write The Lost!"[5] And yet for all of that, one approaches The Berlin Stories as a complete novel in some indefinable way, despite its obvious fragments, its disjointed time sequence, its sometimes contradictory narrative and even its table of contents indication that this is indeed at least two novels. For the sake of clarity I shall deal with The Berlin Stories as two novels, but the debate as to how separate and distinct they are will be continued throughout this chapter.

"My first impression was that the stranger's eyes were of an unusually light blue. They met mine for several blank seconds, vacant, unmistakably scared. Startled and innocent, they half

reminded me of an incident I couldn't quite place . . . " Thus in the first sentence of The Last of Mr Norris we meet Mr Norris himself, seated across from the narrator on a train speeding toward the last border before arrival in Berlin. Of the narrator, at least for the first several chapters (although some would maintain, for the entire novel) we learn precious little. His name, William Bradshaw, makes us assume this must be simply a slightly veiled way of saying Christopher Isherwood, since his complete name is Christopher William Bradshaw-Isherwood.

But as the novel moves along, one can't help wondering, Who is this William Bradshaw? We see a complete world entirely through his eyes, much as we see Dublin through those of Stephen Dedalus. But with Dedalus we end learning as much if not more about him as we do about his city; with The Last of Mr Norris we can only surmise and puzzle about the mysterious William Bradshaw. A few facts we know for sure: William is British, he teaches English to Berliners, he has a great deal of time on his hands. But other than that . . . we rarely know what he's thinking but are continually aware of what he observes. There's something journalistic about his style of narration, a heavy note of uncluttered realism, as if he were filing this whole story installment by installment for the papers back home. And yet the story we piece together from his regular installments is crammed with novelistic incidents, characters and situations that easily could fill the pages of several highly melodramatic works.

Isherwood himself, in an interview conducted nearly forty years after its writing, notes, "I rather deplore the story of Mr Norris; I think it's far too melodramatic. It should have been quieter, you know . . . "[6] Isherwood is right, much of what William observes is too melodramatic: one suspects Isherwood succumbed to the temptation of writing the truth too frequently in The Last of Mr Norris. As Wilde puts it, if you tell the truth too often, you're bound to be found out. Mr Norris, the nervous man on the train, is based on an actual person (he was an Anglo-Irish journalist named Gerald Hamilton; several years after the appearance of The Last of Mr Norris, he published a book called Mr Norris and I to which Isherwood added a preface), and Isherwood at times seems to be merely writing down outlandish actualities rather than adapting them into believable fiction.

We never find out why Mr Norris becomes increasingly more nervous the closer he and William get to the border and its inquisitive guards. Perhaps his disquietude has to do with his rather disreputable import/export business or maybe one of his many creditors has informed against him to the authorities or is it that . . . well, with Arthur Norris it could be any number of things. At first a courtly, almost diffident little man with a barely perceptible toupee, Mr Norris over the course of the novel develops into a man of many talents--he smuggles, spies, writes books (Miss Smith's Torture Chamber), makes stirring speeches

(for the Arbeiterfront gegen Fascismus und Krieg)--and many friends--the Baron Kuno von Pregnitz, an aristocrat with fantasies of an island populated by only himself and hordes of bronze young men; Fraulein Anni, indefatigable employee of Madame Olga who wields a mean whip (much to Arthur's delight); the mysterious Margot who may be pregnant, maybe by Arthur. Arthur skitters through the netherworld of Berlin, pursuing and pursued by intrigue, eccentric, terrified and, somehow, innocent to the last.

Arthur's flights from and returns to Berlin, his constant difficulties and scandals, his eccentric collection of friends make for fantastic exploits, leave the reader astonished, disbelieving. Regardless though of how melodramatically Mr. Norris is presented, his figure is admirably counterbalanced by that of William Bradshaw. Surrounded by an incredible swirl of strange occurrences, William stands at the center of the maelstrom, taciturn, remarkably passive, even a bit cold. He tells us what he sees, what he does, even what he says, but we rarely have a clue as to why someone so evidently unobtrusive and self-assured as he is is attracted to personalities as varied and flamboyant as those of Arthur and his friends. Of all the characters in The Last of Mr. Norris, William seems, at first glance, to have the least interesting personality; he seems distinctly set apart from the circle of people he describes, even a bit drab and colorless in comparison.

In a novel that is so filled with physical descriptions of

other people--one is given quite vivid descriptions of Arthur (Isherwood stresses every detail, from the almost-indetectable toupée to the well-manicured fluttering hands), wholesome healthy Otto, Fraulein Anni and her high leather boots--it is odd that we know nothing of how Herr Bradshaw looks. Arthur has sparkling blue eyes, Otto's hair is Germanically blond, ~~Fraulein Schroeder's~~ breasts sag to her waist, but William Bradshaw is the character without a face, without physical presence; at points he is so physically disinvolved--even when in the embrace of an exuberant young man at a New Year's revel--that he seems a third- rather than a first-person narrator.

When, eventually, Arthur betrays William and tangentially the Baron and the Arbeiterfront, William remains remarkably calm. He expresses his anger at Arthur through coldness and withdrawal of affection, as one might express disapproval to a small child. Then, quite suddenly, when he almost has broken off his friendship with Arthur, William recapitulates, surrenders to Arthur's considerable charm. And one realizes that in many ways William admires Arthur and the honesty of his dishonesty. Arthur is a totally self-absorbed childish figure, delighted by his own foolish unnecessary adventures; but the adventures are necessary because he is, above all, a survivor, quite instinctively looking out for himself ~~before all others. This recognized (through William's eyes of~~ course), we simultaneously, and for the first time, see William clearly:

William, the cold center of the novel, the embodiment of the quietude Isherwood in retrospect wished for more of, this William is himself cold and quiet and unfeeling because he is self-involved, as devoted to his own predicament as Arthur Norris is to his. In dispassionately observing Arthur Norris, William unintentionally observes himself. He continually refers to Mr. Norris as a schoolboy "surprised in the act of breaking the rules,"[7] as "a most amazing old crook. . . audacious and self-reliant, reckless and calm. . . all of which in reality, he only too painfully and obviously wasn't."[8]

William simultaneously condescends to and glorifies Arthur Norris, makes him into what he is not. But why? Could it be that William romanticizes Arthur to his friends (just as Isherwood tends to romanticize him to his readers) in order to render his own life more exciting, more scandalous? In a curious way William sees what he is not in what Mr. Norris likewise is not but nevertheless tries to be; William derives vicarious satisfaction from the ill-fated machinations and intrigues of his older friend, for William is too much a product of his own class--too reserved and correct to live the life Arthur chooses. But he can watch, aid and abet that life, and in watching suddenly glimpse himself.

Sometime before Arthur's ultimate betrayal, William pays a visit to Ludwig Bayer, leader of the Arbeiterfront and certainly

(through Bradshaw's eyes) the noblest German of them all. Offering to help Bayer, making his first and obligatory gesture against his own class, William suddenly notices Bayer studying and assessing him just as he has so many times studied and assessed Arthur Norris:

> His eyes measured me for the first time. No, he was not impressed. Equally, he did not condemn. A young bourgeois intellectual, he thought. Enthusiastic, within certain limits. Capable of response if appealed to in terms of his own class-language. Of some small use: everybody can do something. I felt myself blushing deeply.9

Looking into Bayer's eyes, William sees his own image reflected there: this time he is the schoolboy, William, in offering his services to the anti-fascist cause, expected to be congratulated, commended, patted on the head; he sees his gesture as romantically daring, as a slap in the face of the censorial institution, a brave apostasy of the ruling class. It is Bayer's reaction to his gesture that eventually leads William to forgive Arthur's betrayal: his final, slightly grudging acceptance of Arthur Norris has as much to do with his acceptance of narcissism in himself as it does with the particular self-centeredness of Mr. Norris.

The Last of Mr. Norris, the reader must remind himself constantly, is set against the backdrop of Berlin, a city:

> . . . in a stage of civil war. Hate exploded suddenly, without warning, out of nowhere; at street corners, in restaurants, cinemas, dance halls, swimming-baths; at mid-

> night, after breakfast, in the middle of the afternoon. Knives were whipped out, blows were dealt with spiked rings, beer-mugs, chair-legs or leaded clubs; bullets slashed the advertisements on the poster-columns, rebounded from the iron roofs of latrines. In the middle of a crowded street a young man would be attacked, stripped, thrashed and left bleeding on the pavement; in fifteen seconds it was all over and the assailants had disappeared . . .7

Anarchy in the streets, Hitler on the rise, and Arthur plays his polite circumspect games of flattery and petty (and not so petty) betrayal, the Baron continues to embellish his boy-island fantasy, William follows close behind checking it all out and writing it all down. The further one reads in The Last of Mr Norris and on into Goodbye to Berlin, the more one has the feeling Berlin is a giant kindergarten, filled with delightful funny children perpetually young and innocent and forever involved in a continuous round of pleasant harmless games. And of course all of this, despite (and yes, because of) the threatening surroundings, actually is quite lovely to watch--these children are all so charming, for their charm lies, as Freud would have it, in their "narcissism . . . self-sufficiency and inaccessibility."[8]

William stands then at the center of all activity, but does that make him less child-like, considering his unwarranted seriousness and self-preoccupation? Here the narrator William Bradshaw collides head-on with the descriptions we have of Isherwood at that point in time from Stephen Spender's autobiography, World Within World:

> . . . I was disappointed that Christopher's dramas rarely ended in catharsis. All the people who had fallen into disgrace were sooner or later taken back into favour, for

> Christopher, so far from being the self-effacing spectator he depicts in his novels, was really the centre of his characters, and neither could they exist without him nor he without them.9

Spender also is right with his reference to the lack of catharsis. No resolution or purgation comes in The Last of Mr Norris; one senses that catharsis, like everything else of major importance--fate, the future, survival--is out of the hands of the people who populate Berlin. The people of Berlin and William their observer and chronicler recognize that they are taking part in a drama over which they have no control. Things fell apart so long ago there's no center left to hold, In their stupefying helplessness one can read the presentiment that when catharsis finally arrives, it will be purification by blood and fire and its scope will be beyond the limits of a young Englishman's novel.

The Last of Mr Norris could be called a preparation for or even a prologue to Goodbye to Berlin, as though Isherwood were merely warming up to his subject in the former, trying out his perceptions and attitudes to see how accurately they might cope with the variety of sensations and experiences, pleasant and horrifying, that Berlin in the early thirties had to offer. For without denigrating the quality of The Last of Mr Norris, one cannot ignore the substantial changes of tone, style and even of viewpoint that occur in Goodbye to Berlin.

There is something essentially unapproachable about

William Bradshaw that keeps us from actually entering his world; seeing his subtle condescension toward Arthur and friends, we find ourselves drawing back from him in order perhaps to avoid his disapproval. If one gets too close to this William Bradshaw, one is certain to be scrutinized, analyzed, toyed with and finally dismissed. But with Goodbye to Berlin William Bradshaw evolves into a character called Christopher Isherwood. The change is for the better, as if the author has given up one disguise because it has become too confining and taken up another with which he can be more comfortable, more at ease and at the same time perhaps even better disguised, less easily recognizable. To make oneself a fictional character is to assume a role which allows more freedom than even purely autobiographical works allow; one may use the truth and the facts to start with, but one is never confined by them.

The opening phrases then of Goodbye to Berlin: "I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking . . . Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed . . . "[10]--are somehow brilliantly misleading, duplicitous and clever. We are to assume--that is, the author seems to want us to assume--that we have been tipped off on both style and point of view right from the start. Here we have a documentary novel, reportorial in tone. There will be no judgments, moral or otherwise, no forays into analysis or opinion, just the facts presented in an objective fashion. But as the opening page of

Goodbye to Berlin continues, we learn that this camera records:

> . . . the little hotel on the corner, where you can hire a room by the hour. And soon the whistling will begin. Young men are calling their girls. Standing down there in the cold, they whistle up at the lighted windows of warm rooms where the beds are already turned down for the night. They want to be let in. Their signals echo down the deep hollow street, lascivious and private and sad. Because of the whistling, I do not care to stay here in the evenings . . . Sometimes I determine not to listen to it, pick up a book, try to read. But soon a call is sure to sound, so piercing, so insistent, so despairingly human, that at last I have to get up and peep through the slats of the venetian blind to make quite sure that it is not--as I know very well it could not possibly be--for me.11

Thus the camera pose is established and disposed of in the first few pages of the novel. And we have the curious stance of an author writing about a character who is and is not the author attempting to write an objective account of the loneliness of the people about him, but failing because of his own particular loneliness. There exists a perfect balance of irony and pathos here, the character/author observing from his lofty perspective the suffering of others and feeling first detached but nevertheless compassionate, then despairing and filled with self-pity and unease. This character/author in turn is watched by Christopher Isherwood, the actual author observing the self he once was and now has re-created, now allowing the tone of his character/author to comment upon the distance between fiction and reality.

~~This character named Christopher Isherwood appears~~ infinitely more vulnerable than William Bradshaw; he remains an

observer, involved or unconcerned at will, but nevertheless observing himself as well as others. By the end of Goodbye to Berlin we have learned as much about him as we have about Sally Bowles, Fräulein Schröder, Otto Nowak, the Landauers or Fritz Wendel. This Christopher, certainly as self-assured and confident as William Bradshaw when interacting with his friends, often in private is siezed by gnawing doubts and fears. Living in a seedy boardinghouse run by the indomitable Fräulein Schroder, he spends his days laughing or commiserating with her boarders, hoarding up their inconsequential chatter, getting lost among their repetitious catch-words and speculations, until he finds himself:

> . . . lapsing into a curious trance-like state of depression . . . Where, in another ten years, shall I be . . . Certainly not here. How many seas and frontiers shall I have to cross to reach that distant day . . . How much food must I gradually, wearily consume on my way? How many pairs of shoes shall I wear out? How many thousands of cigarettes shall I smoke?12

Christopher is driven into this state of world-weariness by the boarders and yet he also goes back to them to be pulled out of it, to be distracted or amused by their petty concerns. Sally Bowles, Fräulein Schroder's star boarder, an English girl of nineteen who looks twenty-five, prattles away, mixing her fantasies with her actualities so well that even Christopher can't tell the difference. Almost doll-like, Sally begs to be toyed with, used, tossed about. And Christopher to some extent obliges; if he were to refrain from doing so, one suspects their friendship could not

last, for Sally too toys with Christopher in a variety of quasi-sadistic ways.

At first, though, Sally and Chris make up an exclusive mutual admiration society. Sally, with her emerald-painted nails, her nicotine-stained hands ("as dirty as a little girl's"[16]), her execrable German ("Ist dass Du, mein Liebling? . . . Was wollen wir machen, Morgen Abend?") cannot exist without Christopher, neither can he exist without her. Together they are giggly as schoolgirls, scandalized by how scandalous they are. When first encountered, Sally captures Christopher's attention in much the same way as Mr. Norris initially intrigued William Bradshaw:

> She was really beautiful, with her little dark head, big eyes and finely arched nose and so absurdly conscious of all those features. There she lay, as complacently feminine as a turtle-dove, with her poised self-conscious head and daintily arranged hands.17

Sally initially plays at being a golddigger, sleeping with whatever old man seems to have money--she is a notoriously poor judge of wealth; Christopher plays at watching her, encouraging her, reflecting her delight or disappointment as the occasion warrants. Their relationship is never sexual; platonic to the end, they merely love themselves in each other.

As this section of Goodbye to Berlin progresses, the characters of Christopher and Sally gradually and imperceptibly merge: their bantering dialogues become monologues of mutual

self-delight. Christopher knows Sally because he knows himself ("You're naturally rather shy with strangers, I think: so you've got into this trick of trying to bounce strangers into approving or disapproving of you, violently. I know, because I try it myself, sometimes."[18]); Sally likewise sees her own search for wealth and fame in Christopher (". . . people imagine they can fairly swindle you as much as they want--and then you sit down and write a book about them which fairly shows them what swine they all are, and it's the most terrific success and you make pots of money."[19])

The two become so united, each so much a part of the other,that they even join forces at golddigging, and this time round they are, for a time, successful. They meet and have an extended affair with Clive, a wealthy American with a "big schoolboyish laugh."[20] When Clive, after promising to keep them both for an unmentioned length of time, suddenly departs, Christopher and Sally are left with each other and no money. Their betrayal by Clive leads each to betray the other, for they both realize they must survive, and survival they obviously cannot manage successfully together.

It is Sally who leaves Christopher, who is cold to Christopher when he tries to continue their relationship. No longer a naive golddigger, Sally becomes a call-girl, a somehow

less glamourous profession. What she had been doing for fun and excitement she is now doing in earnest; she is ashamed of the realities she is forced to recognize and she puts Christopher off, even insults him, to prevent his own recognition. Christopher is hurt by her rejection, uncomprehending:

> What an utter little bitch she is, I thought . . . I'd flattered myself--why not be frank about it?--that she was fond of me . . . I was so absurdly upset that I began to wonder whether I hadn't . . . been in love with Sally myself.
>
> But no, it wasn't love either--it was worse. It was the cheapest, most childish kind of wounded vanity.21

Christopher is wounded not because he loves Sally but rather because he thought she loved him; he is so myopically self-involved that he fails to notice that Sally has left him because she can no longer afford to play at schoolgirl games. And so, with unthinking vengefulness, Christopher blithely and cruelly punishes Sally.

Christopher's revenge for his injured vanity has a particularly brutal quality about it, for his reaction is as reflexive and naked as that of a wronged child. The act's brutality lies in its unpremeditated nature; it is especially nasty because it is aimed at Sally's innocence, at her preposterous gullibility. But for all of that, once Christopher's revenge has run its course and once Sally has been wounded, the two are reunited, murmuring sounds of forgiveness and consolation,

silly children who've forgotten why they've quarreled and why they've hurt each other (their reunion is remarkably similar to William Bradshaw's final acceptance of Mr. Norris and of himself). Sally Bowles ends with Christopher and Sally giggling together--the two like "a naughty child which has unintentionally succeeded in amusing the grown-ups.[22]

There is little gentleness and less sentimentality coursing among the Berliners who populate Isherwood's world. Again, as in The Last of Mr. Norris, there's the air of a delightful, if slightly frantic, children's party, each guest pursuing his or her special fantasy. The political realities intrude with increasingly alarming frequency, but Fräulein Schröder still spends her time worrying over whether Bobby the bartender is sleeping with Fräulein Kost. Sally plays at being a gold-digger but sleeps with anything that comes along. Otto Nowak, the working-class hustler Christopher befriends, bullies and makes heavy demands on his consumptive mother. Bernhard Landauer, son of the Jewish department store family, alternately throws elaborate parties or hides in his rooms among oriental statuary. All these people seem divorced from the fundamental realities of Germany and simultaneously separated from each other. Christopher at times seems to establish contact with one of his friends on more than just a superficial level, but quickly either he or the friend is swept away by whim or chance. Characters appear and recede, return only to disappear again, and although their arrivals are remarked (if only by Christopher), their departures usually are not.

In presenting all these separate fleeting entities, the author tends to give nearly equal weight to each section of the book--"A Berlin Diary: 1930," "Sally Bowles," "On Ruegen Island (Summer 1931)" (a slightly altered version of the previously published "The Nowaks"), "The Landauers" and "A Berlin Diary (Winter 1932-3)"--one small section, the visit to Otto's mother at the state sanitorium, in many ways composes a microcosm of both Goodbye to Berlin and Berlin itself.

The visit to the sanitorium naturally sets off echoes of Mann's Der Zauberberg, but Isherwood's use of a hospital sanitorium attempts neither the scope of Mann's work nor the political and moral allegory. Instead the author presents simply and briefly as possible Christopher and Otto's afternoon visit. Frau Nowak, much improved by her month's stay, introduces the three women who share her room: Old Muttchen, "a nice old lady, but somehow slightly obscene, like an old dog with sores"; Erna, a woman of thirty-five who keeps returning to the sanitorium because she can't get enough to eat at home; and Erika, "a weedy blond girl of eighteen." As the afternoon progresses, Erika and Otto begin bold flirtations, while Erna latches on to Christopher--"her big dark eyes fastened on to mine like hooks."[23]

As evening comes on, Christopher and Otto dance with Erna and Erika in the darkening ward: "When I held Erna in my arms I felt her shivering all over. It was almost dark now, but nobody suggested turning on the light." After a while the dancing stops and they sit around in a circle on the beds, and Frau Nowak tells

stories of her childhood. In the darkness, Erna fumbles for Christopher's hand and draws him to her:

> My mouth pressed against Erna's hot dry lips. I had no particular sensation of contact: all this was part of the long, rather sinister symbolic dream which I seemed to have been dreaming throughout the day. "I'm so happy, this evening. . . "Erna whispered.
>
> "The postmaster's son used to play the fiddle," said Frau Nowak. "He played beautifully. . . it made you want to cry. . ."
>
> From the bed on which Erika and Otto were sitting came sounds of scuffling and a loud snicker: "Otto, you naughty boy. . . I'm surprised at you! I shall tell your mother!"24

Five minutes later Christopher and Otto must leave. Frau Nowak, sobbing as she kisses Otto goodbye, begins to cough, "her body seemed to break in half like a hinged doll." Erna pleads with Christopher with "a terrifying intensity of unashamed despair" to write.

For an instant Christopher entertains the absurd fear that the patients are going to attack the busload of departing visitors:

> But the moment passed. They drew back--harmless, after all, as mere ghosts--into the darkness, while our bus, with a great churning of its wheels, lurched forward towards the city. . .25

One doesn't ever really leave that sanitorium or that darkened ward, for this place becomes not so much a symbol as an embodiment of Berlin, a place where people sit in close proximity enveloped in their own concerns, scarcely heeding each other, aware only of the ache and loneliness they have come to recognize as themselves. Like

Erna, they are not reaching out for love but rather for satisfaction of desire and longing. They--the patients at the sanitorium, Fräulein Schröder's boarders, the people of Berlin, Christopher (somehow especially Christopher)--are all profoundly selfish, determinedly narcissistic, not so much by choice as by circumstance, much like Freud's person suffering organic pain and discomfort who:

> . . . relinquishes his interest in the things of the outside world, in so far as they do not concern his suffering. Closer observation teaches us that at the same time he withdraws libidinal interest from his love-objects; so long as he suffers, he ceases to love.26

There is no love in Goodbye to Berlin (one senses the author's fondness for his characters, but that has a great deal to do with the fact that they are characters, his creations really), there's no place for it, no time. There's no time really to think about anything or anybody, people vanish and appear too quickly to be grasped. Besides, if one spends too much time contemplating the political situation or the economy one ends in the midst of a most fearsome muddle. So when one thinks, one thinks of oneself and of how one is to manage, to live, to survive. Christopher tutors English, Sally and Otto sell themselves, Fraulein Schroder rents out her rooms--everyone scrapes by as best he or she can, grabbing meagre amounts of pleasure and satisfaction along the way.

In reconsidering this interpretation of Goodbye to Berlin, one finds oneself almost not recognizing the novel, for it seems

so unrelievedly serious and despairing. One recalls laughing a great deal on first reading Goodbye to Berlin--such thorough enjoyment of any novel is rare enough to be distinctly memorable. On subsequent readings the enjoyment remains, but it has changed into an appreciation of the author's style and superlative technique and tempered by his underlying elegaic sadness: the characters and situations he presents are no longer such a lark as one glimpses the pockets of gloom and malaise beneath the sparkling surfaces.

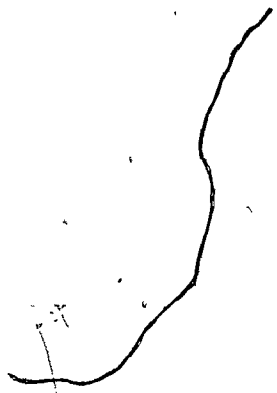
Goodbye to Berlin, however, if it must be classified at all, essentially is a comic work, for all its desperate undercurrents. Its characters brilliantly and acutely observed are certainly not tragic figures. Isherwood's tone too for the most part refrains from excessive pathos and Weltschmertz; Christopher makes for a brisk narrator, usually candid and self-possessed. In terms of when the novel was published, Goodbye to Berlin is an exceedingly frank and yet unsensationalistic work: this balance--the careful intermingling of documentary-style narrative and markedly outlandish theatrical characters--may be one of Isherwood's greatest achievements. In dealing with topics that were at the time considered sordid or repugnant (including Christopher's own bald and quite funny admission of his homosexuality to a bumptious American tourist out to see the local decadence) and in setting these topics against a social and political background that is a priori melodramatically menacing, Isherwood has exercised almost superhuman

restraint and tact. If he exaggerates at all, it is in the attempt to render his characters happier than they really are.

Inevitably though one is recalled to the after-image Goodbye to Berlin leaves on the mind's eye, an image of all Isherwood's delightful lovely characters, each one so intensely alive and struggling, each so self-absorbed and separate from the other. They are all, like Christopher with his camera, foreign, adrift, cut off from the stability and false comfort of whatever censorial institution they could not bear. They have withdrawn so far into themselves that they end desperately huddled together, each watching his own reflection in the eyes of the other, seeking reinforcement, comfort, assurance that the oceanic feeling, the intimations of infinity, are not so frightening as they seem.

This after-image left by Goodbye to Berlin is almost ineffably sad: people condemned to each other's company and yet separated by invisible barriers. One thinks of Forster and his later novels, of the supreme importance of "connecting." But Forster's characters, especially in A Passage to India, could not connect, could only briefly touch and then part, misunderstood, misinterpreted, unintentionally misused. One senses that Christopher, like Mrs Moore in A Passage to India, has looked into the abyss, stared at the menacing infinity of future time and observed the abyss staring back. Everyone is a camera with its shutter open sitting high above the street, quite passive, recording, not thinking, waiting for the whistling to begin, the young men

calling their girls, wanting to be let in. And you sitting alone in your room, trying to read, trying not to hear, but at last getting up to peer through the venetian blinds, " . . . to make quite sure that it is not--as I know very well it could not possibly be--for me."



FOOTNOTES

[1]Christopher Isherwood, Down There On a Visit (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1962), p. 35.

[2]Otto Friedrich, Before the Deluge (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 15.

[3]Ibid., p. 6.

[4]Ibid., p. 5.

[5]Christopher Isherwood, The Berlin Stories (New York: New Directions, 1945), p.v.

[6]Daniel Halpern, "A Conversation With Christopher Isherwood," Antaeus, 13/24 (Spring.Summer, 1974), 143.

[7]Christopher Isherwood, The Last of Mr. Norris (New York: New Directions, 1945), p. 1.

[8]Ibid., p. 36.

[9]Ibid., p. 64.

[10]Ibid., p. 86

[11]John Rickman (ed.), A General Selection From the Works of Sigmund Freud (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1957), p. 113.

[12]Stephen Spender, World Within World (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 124.

[13]Christopher Isherwood, Goodbye to Berlin (New York: New Directions, 1945), p. 1.

[14]Ibid., pp. 1-2.

[15]Ibid.,

[16]Ibid., p. 22.

[17]Ibid., p. 27.

[18]Ibid., p. 33.

[19]Ibid., p. 44.

[20]Ibid., p. 46.

[21]Ibid., p. 65.

[22]Ibid., p. 74

[23]Ibid., pp. 132-36.

[24]Ibid., p. 138.

[25]Ibid., p. 139.

[26]Rickman, A General Selection From the Works of Sigmund Freud, p. 108.

CHAPTER III

ADRIFT

> . . . Christopher lived in this apartment surrounded by the models for his creations, like one of those portraits of a writer by a bad painter, in which the writer is depicted meditating in his chair whilst the characters of his novels radiate round him under a glowing cloud of dirty varnish, not unlike the mote-laden lighting of Fraulein Thurau's apartment.
>
> --Stephen Spender
> World Within World[1]

> They the Auden-Isherwood-C. Day Lewis axis have been great egotists. When everything is rocking around one, the only person who remains comparatively stable is oneself . . . So they write about themselves.
>
> --Virginia Woolf,
> The Moment and Other Essays[2]

1933 must have been a propitious time to get out of Berlin--for Jews, for leftists, for anyone sufficiently alerted to the rising tide; in short, for Christopher Isherwood. But where does one go, what does one become? Again a foreigner, exiled from his chosen place of exile, Isherwood travelled, first to Greece, then on to various Mediterranean islands; soon, much to his dismay and perhaps equally to his inward relief, he returned to England and even to his family, with whom he was to live for nearly a year while he did some writing and also worked for a film company.

Prater Violet, published in 1945, forms a partial account of that year spent in England, the England of The Others. Again

he seems to be the same egocentric, admirably balanced, slightly stand-offish young man of The Berlin Stories, always sympathetic, ever observant, inevitably ironic. And yet we cannot help but sense (that is, we cannot help but pick up the author's carefully scattered clues) that changes of some magnitude have occurred. The most obvious outward change must be the centrality of Christopher as a defined character rather than as just a semi-detached observer. The author turns the camera on himself in Prater Violet, and what he discovers there in many ways equals the images encountered when the camera was turned outward, not inward.

Prater Violet is a nearly flawless book (the title is also the title of the film the book is about), deceptively simple in narrative and limited in scope. At first the book, at 128 pages the shortest of Isherwood's novels, appears to be a straightforward character study of one Friedrich Bergmann, a German film director forced by political circumstance to work in England (Isherwood's model for Bergmann was Berthold Viertel; the actual title of the picture they worked on was Little Friend, not Prater Violet).[3] Bergmann, seen through Christopher's eyes, is ample material for a much longer work. Complex, temperamental, expansive, demanding, Bergmann dominates all, whatever the setting, whoever the supporting players. Isherwood sees him variously as "a tragic Punch,"[4] a rotund man with the face of an emperor and "eyes . . . the dark mocking eyes of his slave"[5]--in essence, an emperor-slave-clown with

"the face of a political situation, an epoch. The face of Central Europe."[6] The face of Central Europe in England, in exile, alone.

Our attention soon gets rivetted on Bergmann's supremely theatrical personality. Watching him act out the Reichstag fire trial--all principal players, from Goebbels to Dimitrov--following his admirably eccentric guided tour of London and environs, we are mesmerized, enchanted to the extent that we have forgotten our self-effacing narrator. But gradually, insistently, reminders briefly appear and vanish, likewise hints of reciprocity of interest, Bergmann perhaps as fascinated with Christopher as Christopher is with Bergmann. We are held spellbound by Bergmann because of his captivating influence on Christopher, but we are well under the power of Christopher too, the ultimate observer who determines what we see and how we shall evaluate what we are allowed to see.

And it occurs to us: why is Christopher showing us this temperamental, nearly megalomaniacal man?--can this be just another faultlessly executed character sketch for its own sake, minor product of a well-practiced lapidary? Careful reconsideration of the book leads us to conclude to the contrary that the author has set up a blind in the person of Bergmann in order to disguise his intent--he is presenting us himself as much as he is presenting Bergmann.

It is with Christopher that Prater Violet starts, and it is with him that it will end. It is a tribute to the author's technical

skill and wily diffident sensibility that one can read Prater Violet straight through and fully understand (almost subliminally) the character of Christopher while at the same time barely noticing he's actually there, an integral part of the story.

But Christopher is there, with a vengeance, directing a movie in which he himself acts as the central performer (and in doind so employing a conceit that today crops up all too frequently in vaguely avant-garde movies: making a movie about making a movie). From the first few pages of Prater Violet--where he gives, for the entertainment of his mother and brother at the breakfast table, a touching performance of the beleaguered artist, pressured to sell his talent and perhaps his soul to the crass commercial movie-makers--Christopher narrates in terms of drama, sets up encounters and tours de force of viewpoint in grand cinematic fashion, writing his own screenplay for us about writing a screenplay for someone else, in this case, Friedrich Bergmann and Imperial Bulldog Pictures.

The colorful character of Bergmann may steal all the scenes, but in retrospect it is Christopher who steals the show. Almost abruptly, when the novel and the movie have nearly run their parallel course, Christopher unabashedly takes center-screen, and the heretofore barely perceptible rumblings of personal despair mount to a startling roar of anguish. Exhausted by Bergmann's incessant demands, by the unsrupulous heartless

manipulations of the studio bosses, terrified by the inexorable approach of war and destruction echoing in from Europe, Christopher suddenly goes numb:

> Perhaps I had traveled too much, left my heart in too many places. I knew what I was supposed to feel, what it was fashionable for my generation to feel. We cared about everything: fascism in Germany and Italy, the seizure of Manchuria, Indian nationalism, the Irish question, the workers, the Negroes, the Jews. We had spread our feelings over the whole world; and I know that mine were spread very thin. I cared--oh yes, I certainly cared . . . But did I care as much as I said I did, tried to imagine I did? No, not nearly as much . . . What is the use of caring at all, if you aren't prepared to dedicate your life, to die? Well, perhaps it was of some use. Very, very little.7

Christopher the traveller, even at home, the eternal tourist even in London guided by a German. He has spread himself too thin: the portrait Spender envisages of Isherwood surrounded by the aura of his characters is as well a portrait of Christopher's ego. In Berlin, on his own, unhampered by repressive forces, British instincts for order and stability laid aside, Christopher let down the barriers of his ego, spread himself too thin. Plumbing the pains, the aching vulnerabilities of lonely people, he discovered the depths of his own loneliness and separateness; his documentary of foreigners expanded to include himself.

Christopher left Berlin because he was afraid, but his fear was fed by more than the threat of a Nazi holocaust. The demarcations between his ego and the egos of others was becoming imperceptible, and Christopher was in danger of losing himself,

his ego, his own personality. Through nearly limitless narcissism, through seeing his reflection in everything he beheld, Christopher's narcissism metamorphosed into an all-embracing, all-inclusive limitlessness, rendering him too much aware of the infinite exhausting dimensions of his own ego. He had travelled too much, but it was his ego, not his heart, he left in too many places.

The return to England, and even his indenture to Bergmann, represent retreat for Christopher, a drawing back, an attempt to re-establish ego and self-definition. It very nearly marks a surrender too, a giving in to the censorial institution, a frightened plea to be taken back into the fold, to be protected. Limitless narcissism and the accompanying "oceanic feeling" of which Freud speaks, have left Christopher adrift, without bearings. He clings to England like a life preserver.

England, however, will not save Christopher, nor will his mother, or Bergmann, or a new lover:

> . . . J. and I were only trophies, hung up in the museums of each other's vanities . . . After J., there would be K. and L. and M., right down the alphabet. It's no use being sentimentally cynical about this, or cynically sentimental. Because J. isn't really what I want. J. has only the value of being now. J. will pass, the need will remain. The need to get back into the dark, into the bed, into the warm naked embrace, where J. is no more J. than K., L., or M. Where there is nothing but the nearness, and the painful hopelessness of clasping the naked body in your arms. The pain of hunger beneath everything. And the end of all love-making, the dreamless sleep after the orgasm, which is like death.8

Although he realizes the nature of his attraction to and dependence on Bergmann--"He was my father. I was his son. And I loved him

very much"[9]--Christopher recognizes there is nothing in England to save him from tomorrow or the next day or the next, no arms to pull him back from loneliness. He requires something people and things cannot provide; knowing at last that retreat is impossible, he has but one other way to go; but to "take that other way would mean I should lose myself. I should no longer be a person. I should no longer be Christopher Isherwood. No. No. That's more terrible than the bombs. More terrible than having no lover. That I can never face."[10]

Ultimately, though, Christopher knows this is the only choice left him: rather than retreat to the safety of a carefully defined ego, rather than retreat to the supervised security of his distinct personality, he must instead set himself adrift once again in order to break down the barriers of his mind. Otherwise, over and over, he knows he will find himself walking beside someone he loves (this time his name is Bergmann), longing to turn and ask:

> "Who are you? Who am I? What are we doing here?" But actors cannot ask such questions during the performance. We had written each other's parts, Christopher's Freidrich, Friedrich's Christopher, and we had to go on playing them, as long as we were together.[11]

In 1934 after finishing work on the film Little Friend, Isherwood left England. The next five years he was to spend travelling and writing, collaborating (with Auden) and publishing; works published during this period include: Mr Norris Changes Trains (1935), Sally Bowles (1937), Lions and Shadows (1938), Goodbye to Berlin (1939); plus those works written with Auden: Journey to a

War (1939) and On the Frontier (1938), both books dealing with their much-publicized trip to China, and The Dog Beneath the Skin (1935) and The Ascent of F 6 (1936), two verse plays handled in what might be called cabaret style.

These five years obviously were highly productive ones, to the point where one wonders how frenetic Isherwood's life must have been. And, wondering that, one wonders why he seems to have filled up his days with so much activity. Then abruptly, before one can formulate clever reasons for all this busy-ness, Isherwood and Auden left England for America. The public outcry was great (even old friend Cyril Connolly couldn't resist a few well-aimed jabs), but both men had the tact and integrity not to reply or attempt a defense. Instead they avoided the public and, in Isherwood's case in particular, nearly ceased from publishing at all. Prater Violet appeared in 1945 at the end of the war but deals with a period in his life some twelve years earlier; then he published nothing in the way of fiction (The Condor and the Cows, a travel book on South America, appeared in 1949) until The World In the Evening in 1954. This novel received uniformly bad reviews, and Isherwood did not publish again until 1962, with Down There On a Visit.

Down There On a Visit--similar in structure to Goodbye to Berlin, similar in tone to the latter pages of Prater Violet--covers more chronological time than either Goodbye to Berlin or Prater Violet: from 1928 to 1953, twenty-five years in fact. One chooses

to deal with it and skip over The World In the Evening for a variety of reasons, the primary one being that The World In the Evening is not autobiographical in the sense that it is not narrated in the first person by a character who is meant to stand for Christopher Isherwood (the main character, Stephen Monk, bears marked similarities to Isherwood, but he does not narrate). A secondary reason should also be added: The World In the Evening deserved its bad reviews. The book is, quite baldly stated, a failure. Isherwood later referred to it as "factitious and false . . . That miserable World In the Evening[12]), and although a large-scale failure may be valuable for an author, one feels that time spent on analysing reasons for failure could be better spent on following the mainstream of Isherwood's literary output.

All this is not to ignore the fact that Down There On a Visit manages to repeat many of the same mistakes Isherwood made with The World In the Evening, for Down There On a Visit, although intermittently interesting, is again, like the author's first two novels, more valuable for its autobiographical detail than its literary brilliance. For in Down There On a Visit we can begin to sort out what was occurring during the years after Isherwood fled Berlin, what events led him to leave with Auden for America and, possibly most important, what caused his conversion to the Vedanta religion. One suspects Down There On a Visit of being a revisionist document; that is, the author has rewritten his life before

conversion in the light of what he has learned about that life after the fact. Regardless of this suspicion, the novel presents us with a Christopher we had not before even partially fathomed.

This new Christopher is somewhat like the Christopher who emerges at the end of Prater Violet: he no longer feels (or no longer thinks he feels) because he has felt too much, fragmented his personality into too many separate pieces. He has attempted to reassemble his ego and to find the security of a father (in Bergmann, in England) but has discovered the process not worth the effort if simply because a completely stable ego composes a narcissism that is both limited and exclusive. Isherwood has been an outsider, apart from the objective world for long enough to realize he cannot re-enter that world. The acuity of the observer from the inside looking out cannot equal that of the outsider looking in. Isherwood, because of the primary facts of his creative intelligence and his sexuality, cannot hope to be an insider, one who acquiesces to and bolsters the censorial institution. (Marcuse notes that the social function of the homosexual is analogous to that of the critical philosopher because he represents a living protest against the tyranny of the heterosexual world.)[13] And yet, if one must stand apart from society, might one nevertheless be in good company, might one form some alternative to isolation with others who have been isolated?

In an attempt to grapple with these questions, Down There On a Visit examines the isolated, including Christopher himself. It is

almost as if, though, the author had suddenly discovered his method of operation in The Berlin Stories and then attempted to repeat that success in a highly formalized manner. Down There On a Visit is composed of a series of portraits of four indomitably narcissistic, self-sufficient human beings, each having created in a sense a world of his own: Mr Lancaster, Christopher's pompously stoical businessman cousin; Ambrose, an ageing sad little man who has established his own homosexual kingdom on a tiny Greek island; Waldemar, a German working-class hustler who works for Mr Lancaster and then becomes Christopher's companion; and Paul, a beautiful young man, "the last of the professional tapettes." (There is quite naturally the fifth portrait, Christopher himself.)

Each of the four sections of the book follows nearly the same formula--one is introduced to the character, to his foibles and follies; one just begins to accept that character and to find him beguilingly complex or merely eccentric or both; and then Christopher trots out at the last moment some sad sad story that suddenly illuminates the truth about this person, that shows, by klieg light, his true misery and loneliness. One is allowed to discover nothing about these characters, the lovely fragile ambiguities of characterization in The Berlin Stories are gone. On his way to creating characters the author has stopped short and handed us caricatures in order to flesh out a modern-day morality play.

Instead of feeling curiosity about the narrator, as we did

in The Berlin Stories and even in the skillfully handled Prater Violet, we find out more than we ever wanted to know about him, much to our dismay. Christopher is quite abruptly and inappropriately present--omnipresent. The paradox presents itself that the inobtrusive Christopher of earlier books, the Christopher we thought we knew next to nothing about, emerges a much more complete character than this new garrulous Christopher about whom we know everything, from his despair over World War Two to his penchant for making love in front of mirrors. Can this tedious self-absorbed character be the same hypnotically mysterious narrator of The Berlin Stories?

The final section of Down There On a Visit--the section entitled "Paul"--seems to offer the key to both why the novel itself fails and why Isherwood and his persona altered so radically over a period of some twenty years. The section opens with Christopher studying his own face "dimly reflected though the fashionable twilight of a Beverly Hills restaurant,"[14] for Isherwood has gone not just to America but to California--Hollywood, in fact, that most narcissistically American place in America where self-fascination has been elevated to an art form. Looking into that mirror, Christopher tells us he doesn't "look happy." He is worried about the war (the time is 1940), he is feeling sulky because he must lunch with people he does not know and probably won't like, he feels greedy because he is about to indulge in an elaborate meal and he isn't even hungry. In this tone of self-pity, his worries and complaints,

no matter how great, are somehow all reduced to a level of niggling pettiness.

Christopher's luncheon guests turn out to include Paul, the jet-set tapette. The meeting appears to be love at first cruise--mutual fascination steams the air--but the love is consigned to a purely spiritual plane because Christopher, as he explains to Paul and us, is now a Vedantist. There ensues a lengthy flirtation and lengthier explanation of Vedanta (I have used this passage from one of Isherwood's tracts because it offers a concise version of what he explains of Vedantism throughout Down There On a Visit):

> . . . we have two selves--an apparent, outer self and an invisible, inner self. The apparent self claims to be an individual, and as such, other than all other individuals . . . The real self is unchanging and immortal . . . Our real nature is to be one with life, with consciousness, with everything else in the universe. The fact of oneness is the real situation. Supposed individuality, separateness and division are merely illusion and ignorance.15

Paul is surprisingly keen on the subject and soon converts. The two set up housekeeping together but remain chaste. And in ways too involved and maudlin to go into, Paul becomes a conscientious objector (along with Christopher), a heroic firefighter and something of a saint.

One reads all this with increasing disbelief, certain that this must somehow be an obscure literary joke Isherwood is playing on us. But one looks in vain for irony, for self-mockery, for any vestige of the Christopher of The Berlin Stories (much in the way one reads Waugh's Brideshead Revisited and longs for Vile Bodies or

Black Mischief). One can logically trace the steps that have brought the author to this point--there is enough biographical material to suggest that Isherwood's conversion was linked to three interlocking problems: his guilt over "deserting" England in 1939; his later guilt arising from his unexpected declaration of pacifism and registration as a conscientious objector in 1942; and the fact that he went to New York originally to begin a love affair, an affair which on his arrival disintegrated ("the true lifetime love . . . turned out to be just another quick looking-glass affair"[16])--but one cannot share the author's immense relief at being saved. Saved as an individual Isherwood may be; the last few pages of Prater Violet seem to indicate that a turn to religion was his only course. But as an author the damage done by salvation seems nearly irreparable.

At times, were it not for occassional (and usual quite awkward) attempts at the injection of humor through some rather low camp, one might think he was reading The Nun's Story. All perspective is thrown to the winds as Christopher relates his supervision of Paul's redemption. At one point we are led to believe Christopher is regaining his literary equilibrium when he complains about the quality of the writing that distinguishes so many firsthand accounts of religious experiences: "One didn't doubt the genuineness of the author's experience; but, oh dear, who taught him to write that honey-dripping jargon of the meek saved lamb?" One can't help recalling passages

--Isherwood's own--that if not honey-dripping at least can be characterized as journalistically purple and florid:

> . . . Paul had the wrong kind of body . . . You couldn't say it wasn't good-looking, lying there in the sunshine, very dark brown and gleaming with oil. And yet it repelled me slightly; it was slender in the wrong way, and somehow too elegant, too wearily sophisticated in its movements . . . Perhaps it had lain too long in the expensive Riviera or Bahamian sun . . . had belonged and yet not belonged to too many people; had been too often valued only for the envy it caused in the hearts of non-possessors. Perhaps it had lost its unself-conscious animal grace in the process of acquiring the negligent-arrogant art of being looked at.17

It's the pathetic fallacy in the flesh, telling us more about Christopher's (or in this case maybe the author's) sex-guilt than we'd really care to be told.

Down There On a Visit all told is a doubly depressing book: aside from being ill-conceived and not terribly well-written, one almost intuitively grasps the fact that Isherwood has written this book to convince himself as much as to convince us. Nearly every section rings false and one is continually suspicious of motive and skeptical about the incessant proofs of faith. Proselytizing, to be effective intellectually, must be of the subtlest variety. Subtlety, usually Isherwood's forte, appears to have deserted him in Down There On a Visit, and one leaves the book and its sour ironic ending not wanting to look back--an odd unexpected sensation when one recalls nearing the end of The Berlin Stories or Prater Violet and wishing one could go on reading indefinitely.

In the light of various autobiographical data, Isherwood's

reasons for writing Down There On a Visit are easy to understand. It seems fairly clear the novel is therapeutic in content, showing us the author/character before and after, sinning and redeemed. But what exactly were the sins--narcissism, preoccupation with the flesh, independence from objective reality? In the face of his conversion the author has taken license to exaggerate his before-grace state. One recognizes the genuineness of his fears, his loneliness, even his sufferings. One identifies with his feelings of disorientation and self-destruction that followed his stay in Berlin. And one sees that for Isherwood, if he wished to retain his limitless narcissism, the only remaining alternative must have been Vedanta, where one's real nature is at one with the universe. Freud notes in Civilization and Its Discontents:

> I can imagine that the oceanic feeling became connected with religion later on. The 'oneness with the universe' which constitutes its ideational content sounds like a first attempt at a religious consolation, as though it were another way of disclaiming the danger which the ego recognizes as threatening it from the external world.18

The child exchanges his limitless narcissism for the protection of the father; he later rejects the father in an attempt to regain his limitless ego, a "oneness with the universe." But oneness with the universe and the accompanying oceanic feeling can terrify in their threat to swallow one up and leave no trace. Instead of returning to the father, which is no longer possible anyway, one turns to religion, to an institutionalization of oneness with the universe.

The entire process, nearly archetypal in ideational content, fascinates. As confessional literature, however, it rarely fails to cloy.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Stephen Spender, World Within World (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 122.

[2]Virginia Woolf, The Moment and Other Essays (London: Hogarth Press, 1936), p. 141.

[3]Otto Friedrich, Before the Deluge (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 163.

[4]Christopher Isherwood, Prater Violet (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 16.

[5]Ibid., p. 18.

[6]Ibid., p. 17.

[7]Ibid., pp. 104-5.

[8]Ibid., p. 125.

[9]Ibid., p. 127.

[10]Ibid., p. 126.

[11]Ibid., pp. 126-27.

[12]W.I. Scobie, "The Art of Fiction XLIX: Christopher Isherwood," The Paris Review, LVII (Spring, 1974), 154-55.

[13]Paul A. Robinson, The Freudian Left: Wilhelm Reich, Geza Roheim, Herbert Marcuse (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 207-8.

[14]Christopher Isherwood, Down There On a Visit (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1962), p. 207.

[15]Christopher Isherwood, Vedanta for the Western World (New York: Compass Books, 1960), pp. 19-20.

[16]Isherwood, Down There On a Visit, p. 25.

[17]Ibid., p. 225.

[18]Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1963), p. 5.

CHAPTER FOUR

A SINGLE MAN

> "Of course, when we do get into power, we shall have to begin by reassuring everybody. We must make it clear that there'll be absolutely no reprisals. Actually, they'll be amazed to find how tolerant we are . . . I'm afraid we shan't be able to make heterosexuality actually legal, at first--there'd be too much of an outcry. One'll have to let at least twenty years go by, until all the resentment has died down. But meanwhile, it'll be winked at, of course, as long as it's practised in decent privacy."
>
> --Ambrose, in Down There On a Visit[1]

> INTERVIEWER: Would you write more about homosexuality if you were starting out now as a writer?
> ISHERWOOD: Yes, I'd write about it a great deal. It's an exceedingly interesting subject, and I couldn't, or I thought I couldn't go into it. It's interesting because it's so much more than just "homosexuality"; it's very precious in a way, however inconvenient it may be. You see things from a different angle, and you see how everything is changed thereby.
>
> --The Paris Review, 1974[2]

Christopher Isherwood's tenth novel, A Single Man, was published in 1964, only two years after the appearance of Down There On a Visit. But the differences rather than the similarities between the two novels are immense and remarkable, as though the books were the products of two different authors somehow writing under the same name. Where Down There On a Visit is set firmly in the past and extends over some thirty years and four countries, A Single Man is

deliberately and conspicuously narrow in scope, covering the events in the life of one man during one day from waking to sleeping.

The two novels are equally different in tone and intent, not to mention technique: Down There On a Visit frequently appears to be an all too autobiographical rationalization for some of the author's past acts and books, whereas A Single Man, although filled with details from the author's own life, allows apologies for nothing; while tone fluctuates from the melodramatic to baleful regretfulness in Down There On a Visit, the author of A Single Man maintains a consistently detached ironic (but nevertheless highly affective) attitude toward his main character and his story. And where technical caution is abandoned from time to time in Down There On a Visit in favor of rather breathless testimonials of religious belief and temptation to sin, in A Single Man hardly a false note is struck or a superfluous word or phrase added.

One feels tempted, in fact, especially in light of the nearly unmitigated failure of Down There On a Visit, to declare A Single Man a near-perfect book--a minor classic, in other words. And yet that sentiment uttered, one immediately becomes suspicious, wary of motivations, both his own and those of the author. In the first place, as a homosexual one is drawn to the book because it is about a homosexual, a rare enough event in itself, and one feels that one's critical faculties may have been softened by inherent

bias. In the second place one wonders at the hubris and presumption of a twentieth-century author who sets out to write a novel bounded by the classical unities: could it be that the restrictions of the form might make the novelist's task easier, programmed as it were in advance? Could this structural patness provide restrictions welcome to an artist who might prefer working within a neat conveniently arranged matrix that would provide little challenge to his notions of the world he wishes to portray? In order to answer these and related questions it is first necessary to grasp how Isherwood works within his pre-established limitations and only then to determine whether those limitations have forced him to expand his technique, content and style or merely tailor them to fit the form.

It is a day in December of 1962 that Isherwood writes about; the setting is southern California: Kennedy is president, the Cuban missile crisis has just blown over, bomb shelters are the preoccupation of the older generation, LSD is just beginning to excite the curiosity of some of George's students. There is of course no gay liberation movement as such (one is rather naively surprised that the ideas of the movement were apparent to people such as George long before the movement began), and George is a fairly closeted homosexual. To clarify, George most likely would never announce his gayness to the world at large, but he is at the same time apparently unconcerned about concealing his sexual preference--his neighbors are aware of

something:

> 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, never more to be ignored, explained away . . . the unspeakable that insists, despite all their shushing, on speaking its name.3

and his friends know for sure; his students?--ah, to his students George is "a severed head, carried into the classroom to lecture to them from a dish."[4]

In a single day we see George from many different angles, striking a wide variety of poses and attitudes, expressing many contradictory opinions and moved by many conflicting emotions. We see him first not as George at all but rather as a nothing, a void on the verge of consciousness preparing to utter those first necessary words which determine all that will follow--am, now, I, I am, I am now. Once the words, then the awareness of body, an awareness of the body's reluctance--fear?--at facing another day, an awareness of a fifty-eight-year-old body perhaps less prepared today than it was yesterday to labor through another day, like yesterday but different, like tomorrow but more immediate, more demanding.

The body out of bed, steps to the mirror to view what isn't so much a face as "the expression of a predicament," and the look on that face is the harassed look of:

> . . . a desperately tired swimmer or runner; yet there is no question of stopping. The creature we are watching will struggle on and on until it drops. Not because it is heroic. It can imagine no alternative.

> Staring and staring into the mirror, it sees many faces withjn its face--the face of the child, the boy, the young man, the not so young man--all present still, preserved like fossils on superimposed layers, and, like fossils, dead. Their message to this live dying creature is: Look at us--we have died--what is there to be afraid of?5

We follow George, this live dying creature, through the events and non-events of his day--eating, defecating, driving, cursing, cruising, teaching, shopping, sympathizing, drinking, remembering, fantasizing, masturbating, sleeping--and we begin to recognize him as one recognizes few characters in fiction--as a compatriot, an individual as baldly and covertly motivated as ourselves, a character whom we as readers cannot distance ourselves from--for that we require the dispassionate author.

Isherwood has never been so detached, so little an active part of his own story as he is in A Single Man. Although as stated before, much of the pertinent detail about George--he is British-American, he is a professor, he is gay--is autobiographical, Isherwood has dropped his narrator named Christopher Isherwood, and one supposes he has adopted George as a surrogate for Christopher. George, we learn quite early on, like Forster, does not believe in belief. Isherwood, and the character Christopher as he evolved between Prater Violet and Down There On a Visit, has wholeheartedly embraced the Vedantist creed. George then would seem to stand--particularly since he is the first Isherwood-persona since All the Conspirators and The Memorial to be viewed from the standpoint of a third-person

omniscient narrator rather than acting as narrator himself--for what Christopher most likely would have become had he not converted to Vedantism. Isherwood, although he hadn't the necessary forbearance to face life without religious belief, has nevertheless managed to live that life he rejected by writing about it, by writing about George. The similarity to the utilization of the character Edward in The Memorial may be recalled: in that case Edward seems to have stood for what the young Isherwood feared he might become in the future: an ageing lonely pathetic homosexual chasing young boys across Europe. George on the other hand is what Isherwood did not become, but George is not some future projection; rather his life runs closely parallel to his author's--George and Isherwood are contemporaries, doppelgängers if you will, with that one crucial difference: belief.

Isherwood, discussing George in a recent interview, accentuates the magnitude of this difference:

> I really admire the sort of person George is: it isn't me at all. Here is somebody who really has nothing to support him, except a kind of gradually waning animal vitality, and yet he fights, like a badger, and goes on demanding, fighting for happiness. That attitude I think rather magnificent. If I were in George's place I would think about killing myself, because I'm less than George. George is heroic.6

George, standing in front of his mirror in the early morning light, surveying his present and all past selves, is Narcissus grown old, seeing reflected both the vanished beauty of his youth and the ravages of age, the eventuality of death ("You only have to watch

yourself all your life in a mirror," Heurtibise says in Cocteau's Orphée, "and you'll see Death at work like bees in a glass hive"[7]), George is both a narcissist in the limited sense--that is, he is child-like, self-absorbed, auto-erotic, "demanding, fighting for happiness"--and at times his narcissism actually becomes limitless, he sees his own reflection in the eyes of all those about him, he identifies himself with all others he encounters, he loves others for what he sees in them of himself.

And George is--perhaps more than any of the author's previous creations, more than Sally Bowles, Fräulein Schroder, Mr Norris, Otto and all the other playmates in the Kinderzimmer that was Berlin between the wars--the essential child, combining in one body the limitless and charming narcissism of a child with the undemarcated ego of a child. He is of course at all times George, alternately raging, avuncular, aloof, intimate, compassionate, detached; but the violent fluctuations of his mood, the mercurial changes of temperament are set off by his reactions to himself as reflected by others. Throughout the day he moves from limited narcissism to limitless narcissism and then back again; now only self-involved and apart, later (if only in fleeting moments) at one with the universe. To further elucidate this point it is only necessary to follow George as he makes his way through another day.

George's real day, his professional day as opposed to his

personal private one, begins with his drive on the freeway to work. It is here, perhaps to brace himself against the formidable onslaughts his ego will face throughout the remainder of the day, that George allows all his irrationalities, his loathings large and small, his intemperate desires to have their say. He curses pollution and the high-rise developers, the politicians and "the brashness and greed" of America; he plots bizarre punishments, elaborate tortures (how fun it would be, George thinks, to kidnap "the Police Chief and the head of the Vice Squad" and various other enemies "and take them all to a secret underground movie studio where, after a little persuasion --no doubt just showing them the red-hot pokers and pincers would be quite sufficient--they would perform every possible sexual act"[8]). It's a full-scale purgation that's in progress on the freeway as George vents his spleen on every conceivable topic, but especially on those myriad aspects of the objective heterosexual world that work to keep George separate and then militate against his insidious separateness.

But once arrived at his college, this venomous hate-filled Uncle George (a cross between Uncle Sam and Big Brother) subsides, for all this hate is merely a stimulant; George walks briskly to his classroom, fill with "eagerness for the play to begin."[9] He is no longer George; instead he becomes the reflection of the figure he sees in his students' eyes: The Professor. And to each of

of the students he plays a separate role, the role each student according to his preconceptions would prefer. To Dreyer, the serious aspiring academic, he is grave and serious, even consenting to discuss what Dr Leavis said to Sir Charles Snow; to Sister Maria he plays the inveterate dirty (and anticlerical) old man; to Wally Bryant--whom George is certain of being gay ("I am with you, little minority sister"[10]) --George is a catalyst, an apostate seeking a convert; to Estelle Oxford, the sole black in the class, he is the defender and explicator of minorities (" . . . a minority is only thought of as a minority when it constitutes some kind of threat to the majority, real or imaginary. And no threat ever is quite imaginary."[11]); and to Kenny Potter, whose beauty lies in his youthful exuberance and highly developed sense of the ridiculous--to him George is, well, flirtatious.

Professor George manages to be all these things to all these students during the course of an hour's discussion of Huxley's After Many a Summer Dies the Swan. In introducing the discussion of the novel, "He comes down on dies with a great thump to compensate for the And which Aldous Huxley has chopped off from the beginning of the original line."[12] But that obviously is not the only reason for added emphasis, for as George's lecture continues--and expands to encompass Tennyson's Tithonus and the background of the myth--we infer that death is more than a little on the professor's mind. Tithonus, endowed by Zeus with immortality but not eternal youth, "gradually became a repulsively immortal old man."[13] So George,

evidently recalling his start of the day before the mirror, is in many ways lecturing about himself; his lover is dead (killed a year before in an auto accident), and yet George still, at fifty-eight, desires love but because of his age cannot attain it. One must feel cursed with a useless immortality when the person one has loved is dead and yet one lives on.

But if George, although preoccupied with his mortality that frequently seems painfully immortal, lives the roles his students demand, he also feeds on their own vitality--the two high points of George's day, moments of clear-headed ecstasy and boundless unfrightened energy occur when George is with his students, thriving on their high-spirited inquisitiveness and "their beauty . . . like the beauty of plants, seemingly untroubled by vanity, anxiety or effort."[14] Once leaving the classroom, however, once away from the campus, The Professor disappears (because his students are not present to summon him, to create him, to sustain him), and we are left with George, George and George's body, the machine he encounters in the mirror each morning:

> . . . George feels a fatigue come over him which is not disagreeable. The tide of his vitality is ebbing fast, and he ebbs with it, content . . . All of a sudden, he is much, much older. On his way out to the parking-lot, he walks differently, with less elasticity . . . He slows down. Now and then, his steps actually shuffle. His head is bowed. His mouth loosens and the muscles of his cheeks sag . . . He hums queerly to himself, with a sound like bees around a hive. From time to time, as he walks, he emits quite loud prolonged farts.[15]

The mind is at rest, the ego nearly non-existent, exhausted. The body carries on, automatically.

Motivated by guilt or duty or simply memory and habit, George proceeds from the campus to a hospital where Doris, who once briefly became George's rival for his lover Jim's affections, lies dying of cancer. Doris lies in her room, absorbed in the pain of her body, immersed in the awareness of her own approaching death; even time has become extraneous to her, like a very odd kind of mirror-maze. Although she and George have affected a truce, forgotten old jealousies, old rivalries and even recognized affection for each other, Doris is beyond responding to George or any other person. A person suffering pain, Freud notes:

> . . . relinguishes his interest in the things of the outside world, in so far as they do not concern his suffering. Closer observation teaches us that at the same time he withdraws libidinal interest from his love-objects; so long as he suffers, he ceases to love . . . illness implies a narcissistic withdrawal of the libido away from its attachments back to the subject's own person, or, more precisely, to the single desire for sleep.16

Doris has instinctively drawn away from attachments, she has relinquished the bond of jealousy and memory that has tied her to George. And George, looking at "this shrivelled mannikin," realizes that in losing Doris, in the ebbing of his hate and the extinguishing of his jealousy, he also loses "one more bit of Jim."[17] And in losing a bit more of Jim, George loses a bit more of himself.

Away from Doris, though, free (at least for the time being)

from the strength of that final valedictory narcissism, George is suddenly triumphant, "almost indecently gleeful to be able to stand up and be counted in . . . the ranks of the marvellous minority, The Living." Ebullient, alive, optimistic, he momentarily considers picking up one of the young hustlers he passes, for George:

> . . . still claims a distant kinship with the strength of their young arms and shoulders and loins. For a few bucks, he could get any one of them to climb into the car, ride back with him to his house, strip off butch leather jacket, skin-tight levis, shirt and cowboy boots and take part, a naked sullen young athelete, in a wrestling bout of his pleasure.19

But George doesn't want to buy a boy; instead he wants to rejoice in his own time-battered carcass, to take absolute pleasure in "the body that has outlived Jim and is going to outlive Doris."[20]

George spends the early evening hours dining and drinking, mainly drinking, at the home of an old friend, a British woman named Charlotte. As the evening progresses, the talk becomes boozier and and more nostalgic, Charlotte forever bringing up the past--England, her ex-husband, her friendship with George and Jim. George, no matter his drunkenness, resolutely refuses to join in, refuses to indulge in maudlin reminiscences. His past was full, his present is empty and his future offers little hope of any radical change for the better, but George will not embrace the past: his flaw (and saving grace) is narcissism, not masochism. The past may have been better, but that knowledge will not help George who, a prisoner of life, ~~has~~ to live <u>now</u>.

A joy similar to that arising after leaving Doris' bedside seizes George as he retreats from Charlotte's elegy for the past. He breaks into a cautious trot, aiming for home but ending at his favorite gay bar, The Starboard Side (the model from the author's life for The Starboard Side is a Santa Monica gay bar called The Friend Ship[21]). There he encounters, of all people, Kenny Potter, who has turned up because he has heard this is where George hangs out when he's not The Professor. Drinks are drunk, barriers let down and a Dialogue ~~between~~ Youth and Age ensues. They talk of everything, they ramble, they proclaim, they say whatever it occurs to them to say, for with this Dialogue there are no rules.

The actual purpose of the Dialogue is to allow George to see himself in Kenny Potter, to bask in the youth of his own reflection. The Dialogue concluded in the proper way, with no conclusions reached, the two leave the bar and run toward the ocean, dropping their clothes on the sand. There is no longer Youth and Age, only two separate entities united in a rite 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 . . . 22

George is perfectly happy by himself, he has washed away that self by affirming that self, by immersing himself in himself. The ocean provides a baptism; and George is baptised into the universe rather

than into a religion. His religion is the religion of self and the oneness of that self with the universe; George's baptism then is only a tangible affirmation of the "oceanic feeling" which moves those who have attained limitless narcissism.

Nothing, however, especially not oneness with the universe, can endure for very long when the mind is forever reminded of the presence of the body, of the stolid desperate clinging of the body to the physical world. "An apocalyptically great wave" sweeps George off his feet and Kenny must swim to the rescue and drag George to safety. They walk slowly, almost soberly back to George's house, the overwhelming exuberance of a few minutes before vanished without a trace. By the time they reach the house, George "no longer sees the two of them as wild water-creatures but as an elderly professor with wet hair bringing home an exceedingly wet student in the middle of the night. George becomes self-conscious and almost curt."[23]

At home, Kenny's nakedness wrapped in a blanket, more drinks are consumed, more desultory conversation goes on until George, drunk and exhausted, passes out. He awakens in his own bed, realizing simultaneously it is Kenny who has put him there and that Kenny is gone. He resents Kenny's departure, resents Kenny's (perhaps unwitting) flirtations; but, alone again, he masturbates, stimulated by the thought of Kenny and by his own fantasy synthesized from a tennis match between two youths he has watched surreptitiously earlier in

the day while ostensibly discoursing on the good Dr Leavis:

> Perfect! Now they can embrace. Now the fierce hot animal play can begin. George hovers above them, watching; then he begins passing in and out of their writhing, panting bodies. He is either. He is both at once. Ah--it is so good! Ah--Ah--!
>
> You old idiot, George's mind says. But he is not ashamed of himself. He speaks to the now slack and sweating body with tolerant good humour, as if to an old greedy dog which has just gobbled down a chunk of meat far bigger than it really wanted . . . His hand feels for a handkerchief from under the pillow, wipes his belly dry.24

It is appropriate that the last conscious act of George's day (and incidentally, but only incidentally, of his life) is masturbation, the ultimate expression of self-love. For it is narcissism that sustains George, that has allowed him to survive alone, by himself, a single man.

One wants to end there and call A Single Man a perfect book, a classic. But there are blind spots in one's own judgment and in the judgment of the author himself that make such a statement perhaps premature. Concerning oneself, there is the awareness of a response to the novel that is as much emotional as it is critical: as a homosexual one repeatedly experiences the delighted shock of recognition on nearly every page of the novel; as an outsider observing an outsider observe, one snarls with George at heterosexuals, one is aroused by the tennis match George cruises, one sees one's own experiences and frustrations and gleeful aggressions against the majority confirmed, amplified and magnificently articulated by George.

And one feels boundless admiration for him and his creator because they have made it, they are outsiders, observers, exiles from objective reality, and they have survived.

And yet one hopes one's responses to A Single Man are not entirely without justification. One suspects, in fact, that even heterosexuals (as George might sneer) could not resist the temptation to enter George's world, to become a tourist who leaves the objective world behind. The novel is so direct and so completely intimate that it is difficult to keep in mind that one is responding to a literary work rather than an actual living breathing farting human being.

There are points, of course, when Isherwood has marred the tone of his work: there are two brief passages toward the end of the novel in which the author makes observations about George which have more to do with the author's belief in Vedantism than with the actual facts of George's life. This attempt of a religious man to apply religious meaning to the life of a dedicated non-believer smacks of reductionism, but the power of this attempt to distract is minor in comparison with the beautiful smooth surfaces of Isherwood's prose throughout the rest of the novel. And the form, the much-heralded classical unities, in the end has not been restrictive in the least. On the contrary, Isherwood has implemented those limitations in his creative struggle; straining to expand a day in one man's life to encompass that man's entire life and to render

that life--the life of an outsider--universal accurately demonstrates the mastery of craft and art Isherwood has achieved.

We have thus observed the maturation of an author, a homosexual author, through four phases, phases represented in both his life and works, running on parallel but distinctly separate courses. All the Conspirators and The Memorial represent the author's recognition of his position in life as an outsider, a a homosexual exiled between the objective world of heterosexuality and the at once forbidding and enticing netherworld of limitless narcissism. With Isherwood's departure for Berlin and the resultant Berlin stories--The Last of Mr Norris, Sally Bowles, The Nowaks, The Landauers and A Berlin Diary--we see the author (and his persona) rejecting the censorial institutions of the objective world and simultaneously affirming his own homosexuality and moving away from that world and toward the engaging narcissism of his Berlin friends. Prater Violet expresses the inability of the author and his persona to come to terms with the oceanic feeling caused by his acceptance of limitless narcissism; an existence without censorial institutions, without a carefully maintained ego produced in Isherwood a spiritual vertigo, a fear of being forever separate and yet forever undifferentiated. Unable to cope with this sensation, the author turns for protection from the infinity of the universe to religion (much as a child relinquishes his limitless narcissism and

boundless ego for the protection of the father); he incorporated his oneness with the universe into a system of mystical belief. Down There On a Visit then elucidates and rationalizes this process which occurred over the space of some thiry years. But although Isherwood decided to reject the outsider's life he had lived in Berlin, he nevertheless had the artistic--and perhaps personal--courage to follow the early thrust of his ego through to its logical outcome: the character of George in A Single Man--that brave, determinedly narcissistic, unyielding, limitless and limited man.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Christopher Isherwood, Down There On a Visit (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1962), pp. 110-11.

[2]W.I. Scobie, "The Art of Fiction XLIX: Christopher Isherwood," The Paris Review, LVII (Spring, 1974), 158.

[3]Christopher Isherwood, A Single Man (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964), p. 21.

[4]Ibid., p. 41.

[5]Ibid., p. 8.

[6]Scobie, "The Art of Fiction," The Paris Review, 158.

[7]Jean Cocteau, Five Plays (New York: Hill & Wang, 1961), p. 29.

[8]Isherwood, A Single Man, p. 29.

[9]Ibid., p. 35.

[10]Ibid., p. 57.

[11]Ibid., p. 57-8.

[12]Ibid., p. 50.

[13]Ibid., p. 53.

[14]Ibid., p. 49.

[15]Ibid., p. 78.

[16]John Rickman (ed.), A General Selection From the Works of Freud (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1957), pp. 108-9.

[17] Isherwood, A Single Man, p. 86.

[18] Ibid., p. 87.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., pp. 87-88.

[21] Scobie, "The Art of Fiction," The Paris Review, 140.

[22] Isherwood, A Single Man, p. 138.

[23] Ibid., p. 139-40.

[24] Ibid., pp. 152-53.

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