

Writers & their Work

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Christopher Isherwood

by

Francis King

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'What's nationality these days?' asks the English tramp on a Greek steamer in V. S. Naipaul's recent book, *In a Free State*, and the question seems equally apt whether it is applied to Naipaul or to Christopher Isherwood. Writers are generally assumed to draw their inspiration for material from their native roots: sometimes they write better without them or by transposing them.

'I write because I am trying to study my life in retrospect, and find out what it is made of, what it is all about,' Isherwood once observed in an interview, and that quest has led him on the path of the expatriate for most of his adult life. His first two books, *All the Consolations* (1948) and *The Memento* (1951), studies of English life in the aftermath of 1945, spring from an initial revolt against his background and education, the struggle of an only son to avoid spiritual suffocation. The years spent in Germany which inspired the Berlin novels and stories of the 1930s continued the process of discovery: his emigration to America in 1939 and his growing interest in Eastern religion represented the third and most decisive stage in this search for an authentic self.

Francis King's essay traces this evolution all through Isherwood's very diverse work, describes his struggle and final success in assimilating his American experience, and points out that his last books, *A Moving Target* (1965), and his memoirs of his parents, *Kathleen and Frank* (1971), mark a final reconciliation with and acceptance of his heredity. He notes the extent to which autobiographical material, as Isherwood would be the first to admit, has played a far larger part than invention in shaping his novels. The scope of Isherwood's world has been restricted by this somewhat solipsistic approach, the method summed up by the adaptation of the title of Sally Bowles into *I am a Camera*, but the essay pays tribute to the lucidity, the honesty and the outstanding gifts of description and dialogue which characterize all his best work.

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Acknowledgments: Our thanks are due to Curtis Brown Ltd for granting permission on behalf of Mr Christopher Isherwood to quote from *The Memento* and *Mr Norris Changes Trains*. We are also grateful to Michael At Co. Ltd for permission to quote from the author's *Frank Fisher*.



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by
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Edited by Ian Scott-Kilvert

PUBLISHED FOR
THE BRITISH COUNCIL
BY LONGMAN GROUP LTD



HW 20.7/696

LONGMAN GROUP LTD
Longman House, Burnt Mill, Harlow, Essex

*Associated companies, branches and
representatives throughout the world*

First published 1976
© Francis King 1976

Printed in England by
Baillière, Reading and London

ISBN 0 582 01250 1

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LONGMAN HOUSE, BURNT MILL, HARLOW, ESSEX
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CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

I

‘**W**ITH me, everything starts with autobiography’, Christopher Isherwood has declared. Possessed of an insight into character, an incisiveness of style and an architectural sense all far superior to his powers of invention, he belongs essentially to what might be called the ‘suppose-if’ category of novelists. For such novelists the process of creation begins with something that they themselves have either experienced or observed at close quarters. Taking this foundation of reality, they then proceed to build on it imaginatively by a series of ‘suppose-ifs’—suppose if I had done that and not this, suppose if so-and-so had said this and not that. . . . There should be a word for writing of this kind, poised half way between fact and fiction. Perhaps ‘fiction’ would do. When Isherwood has stayed closest to reality, as in the Berlin stories of his pre-war period, or *A Single Man* (1964) of his post-war one, he has been at his best; when he has strayed farthest from it, as in *The World is the Evening* (1954), he has been at his least convincing.

— Since his life story is, to such a large extent, the story of each of his fictions in turn, a summary of it is an essential preliminary to any critical study. Both life and literary career are decisively cut in two by the second world war—which he was bitterly criticized at the time for escaping by his departure for America in 1939. Born at High Lane, Cheshire, in 1904, of upper middle-class parents (it is essential to know this to appreciate the early fiction), he was only ten when his father was killed in France in the fighting around Ypres. He has denied that this event had any particularly traumatic effect on him—‘I think I would have been just as happy as an orphan’—but the character of the typical mother’s boy that recurs in his early books suggests the contrary. After attending a public school, he went to Cambridge, which he left without graduating. There followed an unsatisfactory period when he tried to study medicine. In 1928 he published his first novel and from then onwards he lived mostly out of England—

notably in Berlin—while he built up a reputation as probably the most gifted novelist of his generation.

With his departure for the States, this reputation began to damp and it was not until several years after the war that it revived again. This was undoubtedly due in some part to a feeling, however unjust, that he had abandoned his country at a time of need, but also to the fact that expatriation seemed at first to have a deleterious effect on his talent, virtually silencing him for five or six years and then causing him to produce the basically unsatisfactory *The World in the Evening* (1924). For part of the war he worked as a conscientious objector with the American Friends Service. In 1946 he became a U.S. citizen; and soon he had acquired not only American nationality but an American accent, manner and style of dress. Settling in Santa Monica, California, he divided his time between working in films, lecturing at the University of California and writing books.

Two additional facts need to be given about him, since both are crucial to an understanding of his work. The first is an increasing interest in Indian mysticism (among his works are *An Approach to Volants* and *Ramkrishna and His Disciples*, a biography of a famous nineteenth-century Indian mystic); and the second is a homosexuality about which he has become increasingly outspoken with the relaxation of the taboos that used to hedge the subject. In his treatment of his own homosexuality and homosexuality in general he has displayed a crusading courage—'In taking up the cause of one minority, that of homosexuals against the dictatorship of heterosexuals, I have spoken out for all minorities', he has said.



When Isherwood published his first novel, *All The Consensives* (1928), at the age of twenty-four, it sold only three hundred copies. Yet to read it now is to be astonished, despite the obvious debts to James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster, by its air of assurance. In an introduction to a 1939 reissue of the novel, the English critic Cyril Connolly describes it as 'a key . . . to the twenties'. Some qualification to

this extravagant claim is necessary. There are whole areas of life in the twenties—poverty, unemployment, political upheaval, the emancipation of women among them—that the book never touches and was never intended to touch; but as a key to the attitudes of the upper middle-class young of the twenties it is invaluable. Like the young of today, the young of Isherwood's novel are in a state of protest. But, as Isherwood himself has pointed out, whereas the protest today is against Society, then it was against the Family. Isherwood has described the book as 'a minor engagement in what Shelley calls "the great war between old and young"' and the battle-cry of its author as having been 'My Generation—right or wrong!'

What is both saddening and surprising about the book is the basic timidity and impotence of those young, despite all the vehemence with which they denounce their elders. The hero Philip is, like the Isherwood of the time, a would-be writer. Tied to a mother who stifles him with her domineering love, he makes repeated attempts to break free of her. But he fails, partly because he does not have the courage and initiative to venture out into a world in which he must learn to support himself and partly, and more subtly, because deep within himself this maternal domination is something that he actually enjoys and craves. No less weak are his closest friend, Allen; his sister, Joan; and the hearty young man, Victor, who is Allen's rival for Joan's love. All of them know what they want; and all suffer from a paralysis of the will that prevents them from taking it. Eventually, because of that paralysis of will, we suspect (though the book does not follow them that far) that they will each of them get immovably stuck, with all progress or development denied to them.

In his autobiographical *Lions and Shakers* (1918), subtitled 'An Education in the Twenties', Isherwood describes the way in which he revised *All the Conspirators*, often in obedience to suggestions from his friend the novelist Edward Upward, and so made it even less intelligible (though that was not, of course, his intention) to the readers of the day. Sauge directions, like 'he said', 'she replied', 'they both laughed' and so forth, were cut to a minimum; and any big dramatic scene—the book was to end with Allen's murder of Victor—became

instead 'an indecisive, undignified scramble'. Isherwood and his friends at that period had a phrase for this kind of treatment, of which they felt that E. M. Forster was the master: 'tea-tabling'. As Upward put it: 'The whole of Forster's technique is based on the tea-table: instead of trying to screw all his scenes up to the highest possible pitch, he tones them down until they sound like mothers'-meeting gossip. . . . In fact, there's actually *less* emphasis laid on the big scenes than on the unimportant ones.' This judgement is no less applicable to *All the Conspirators* and to much of Isherwood's later work.

Isherwood's brilliant debut was followed four years later by *The Mosaicist* (1932)—which had for its author the private title 'War and Peace', since its subject is not the actual events of the 1914-18 war but the effect of that war on those who lived on after it. Here, again, there is a bitter antagonism between a widowed mother and her son. But the most memorable character, among a host of memorable ones, is the shell-shocked, homosexual ex-airman Edward Blake, who bungles his suicide attempt as he bungles so much else; who lives with a woman with whom he is incapable of making love; who travels about the world but finds no resting-place; and who, at the end of the book, is in Berlin with a mercenary German boy lover. He and the boy talk about the war:

'It must have been terrible.'

'It was awful,' said Edward.

'You know,' said Franz, very serious and evidently repeating something he had heard said by his elders: 'that war . . . it ought never to have happened.'

This overt statement of an unexceptionable thesis is the one moment when Isherwood's artistry fails him. Until these final words, everything has been subtly implied, never stated. We have seen the characters in a state of emotional, moral or financial bankruptcy because of the war; we have seen how an established order has started to disintegrate, with nothing to replace it. We can draw the necessary conclusion for ourselves; it does not have to be thrust at us.

Technically, like *All the Conspirators*, the book is a highly interesting one. The style has less youthful trickiness and more

gravity and depth; but it, too, is remarkably concise so that, when one has reached the last page, one has the satisfying feeling of having read a book far more substantial than its actual eighty thousand or so words. Isherwood had planned to write 'an epic disguised as a drawing-room comedy' and, against all odds, that was what he succeeded in doing. The time scheme of the book is particularly interesting. The worst of all epics, Isherwood decided, is that their beginnings are so dull. Why not, therefore, plunge into the middle, go backwards and then go forwards once more? That way, the reader 'comes on the dullness half-way through, when he is more interested in the characters; the fish holds its tail in its mouth . . .'. The idea works perfectly.

The four years that Isherwood spent in Berlin from 1929 were extremely important to him, both because it was then that he was first able fully to explore his sexual nature and because they gave him the success, *Sally Bowles*, that was to have a worldwide success as a play (*I am a Camera*), as a film of that play, as a musical (*Cabaret*) and as a film of that musical. Yet of all his Berlin stories this work is, ironically, the least considerable. Far weightier, though not much longer, is the masterly *Mr Norris Changes Traits*. That on its publication in 1935 this book should have been regarded by many intelligent and civilized people as shocking and even pornographic now seems barely credible.

In all the Berlin stories, with the exception of *Mr Norris Changes Traits*, the hero-narrator appears as 'Christopher Isherwood'—'Chris' to Sally Bowles, the expatriate English girl with ambitions to be both a *deux-traité* and a singer, 'Herr boywoo' to the Germans. Isherwood describes this fictional person as 'a convenient ventriloquist's dummy, nothing more' but we need not take that disclaimer too seriously; the ventriloquist's dummy (to whom I shall refer in this study as 'Isherwood', with inverted commas round his name) and the author have much in common. In *Mr Norris Changes Traits*, the hero-narrator is given the name of William Bradshaw. Like Isherwood at that period, Bradshaw is a young would-be writer of left-wing sympathies, who supports himself in Berlin, in a state of semi-poverty, by giving English lessons. His feelings for the Germans are

ambiguous, being compounded in equal measure of love and hate, admiration and disgust. On the train taking him to Berlin, he falls in with a fellow-Englishman in his fifties, who can more charitably be described as an adventurer and more accurately as a crook. This is Mr Norris. A gentleman by birth, he has often been reduced to the ungentlemanly expedients of blackmail, fraud and theft to keep himself in the luxury to which he has long been accustomed. 'A queerly cut fringe of dark-grey hair . . . compact, thick and heavy' soon makes it clear to Bradshaw that his train-companion is wearing a wig. But his baldness is not the only thing that Mr Norris has to conceal; his sexual tastes are decidedly unorthodox. Through Norris, Bradshaw meets Baron von Pregnitz, a rich pederast who invites them to his luxurious country villa and who, it soon becomes clear, is being blackmailed by Mr Norris and his sinister secretary-companion, Schmidt. Parallel with this frieze illustrating the moral twilight of the Weimar Republic, Isherwood paints another of the political ferment of the time. Norris proclaims himself to be a Communist, addresses meetings of, not surprisingly, somewhat bewildered Communist workers, and introduces his young protégé to one of the Communist leaders. But in fact he is a traitor to the Communist movement, selling its secrets to the French Intelligence Service.

The other Berlin stories also deal with this period when, humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles, disgusted by the lack of discipline of the Weimar Republic and disillusioned by years of economic chaos, many Germans were preparing to give an enthusiastic welcome to Hitler and the Nazis. Though fragmentary—Isherwood had originally hoped to write a huge episodic novel of pre-Hitler Berlin, entitled 'The Lost', but the hope was never realized—they are surprisingly wide in their range. On the one hand, there are the poor, living in their near-slums, perpetually anxious about work and money, succumbing to illness from over-crowding and malnutrition and dreaming of an illusory escape to another life in another country. On the other hand, there are the rich, often Jews, who can afford to employ a struggling would-be writer from England as tutor, inviting him to their luxury town flats or their splendid seaside or country houses, but who sense that

at any moment a new wind, whether Nazi or Communist, will sweep them and their wealth away.

In his essay 'Mr Norris and I' (1936) Isherwood writes 'What repels me about Mr Norris is his heartlessness', going on to describe the book as 'a heartless fairy-story about a real city in which human beings were suffering the miseries of political violence and nose-starvation'. This accusation of heartlessness could be levelled by a hostile critic against all the Berlin stories, and the reason must, I think, be found in the Bradshaw/Isherwood persona itself. This young foreigner 'who pined guiltily through these scenes of desolation, misinterpreting them to suit his childish fantasy' (the words are Isherwood's) is at once innocent and knowing, sensitive and immune. He perches on the edge of the steaming Berlin cauldron, while the others, whether English or German, thresh about in agony in its waters. He is far more self-contained and self-protective than Isherwood can possibly have been in real life, to judge from all one knows about him. His immunity extends even to sex. Others, like Sally Bowles, attract men or are attracted by them; others, like Mr Norris or Baron von Fregnitz, pursue their less orthodox obsessions, often with disastrous results to themselves or their loved ones. The young narrator looks on; smiles; says some words of sympathy or encouragement; scribbles in his note-book. Hindsight now makes it clear why Isherwood made Bradshaw/Isherwood a man without apparent sexual drive. He was too honest to adopt the usual homosexual novelist's device of substituting girl for boy; and at that period it was extremely difficult and even dangerous to tell the truth.

There are, nonetheless, many moments in the German stories when Isherwood's shell of detachment cracks. The most moving of these is when he goes to visit his former landlady in the sanatorium from which it seems unlikely that she will ever emerge. Her son, Otto, is with him. When the time comes for the two young men to leave, Frau Nowack, previously composed, breaks down.

Clasping her hands over her breast, she uttered short yelping coughs like a desperate injured animal. . . . Two sisters gently tried to lead her away, but at once she began to struggle furiously. She wouldn't go with them.

In seeming menace, the patients gather closer and closer round the bus that is to take away the visitors, and briefly 'Isherwood' has an absurd dread that they are going to launch an attack—'clawing us from our seats, dragging us hungrily down'. Then they draw back. It is a masterly scene, written with the force of an agonized compassion.

The last work that Isherwood published before he emigrated to America was the autobiographical *Lions and Shadows* (1938), subtitled 'An Education in the Twenties'. Just as his fiction has always contained a high proportion of fact, so this factual account contains, on his own admission, a high proportion of fiction. 'Read it as a novel', he advises the reader in his preface; and it is perfectly feasible to do so, since it has the necessary pace, qualities of surprise and architectural unity. Many of Isherwood's friends of the period, who have since themselves achieved fame—Stephen Spender, W. H. Auden and Edward Upward are the most important—appear caricatured under other names. One interesting feature of the book is that Isherwood's mother, obviously the most important person, for good or ill, in his life at that period, never appears at all—when he has to mention her, she becomes 'my female relative' or 'my relatives' or 'my family'. (With typical frankness, Isherwood has himself commented on this omission.) It is as though, at the period in question, she still exerted such authority over him that he felt that even to write of her could be dangerous. Another curious feature is the account of how, while students, he and Edward Upward invented for themselves a private fantasy world, to which they gave the name 'The Other Town' and later, 'Mortmere'. They peopled this world with imaginary characters, devised bizarre eccentricities, vices and misadventures for them and, to categorise them, invented a number of words and phrases not to be found in any dictionary. Isherwood and his friend W. H. Auden, both separately and in collaboration, were often to indulge in such private allusions and jokes in their later published writings, as though reverting to this undergraduate game.

Isherwood's works written in collaboration with W. H. Auden were *Journey to a War* (1932), an account of the war in China, and three plays, strongly influenced by German

Expressionist drama—*The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1936), *The Ascent of P6* (1937) and *On the Frontier* (1938). Iherwood worked only on the plotting and part of the prose of the plays and did not (as is sometimes thought) write any of the verse. The plot of *The Ascent of P6*, the best of the plays and the one most worth revising, has a particular psychological interest. When, after tremendous hardships and struggles, its mountaineer hero at last reaches the summit of the hitherto unscaled peak, P6, that he has set out to conquer, it is revealed to be his mother. Whether consciously or not, Iherwood had perhaps here found a symbol for his own success under the spur of his dominating mother's ambition for him, and his guilty feeling that he could never win her wholehearted approbation and yet must go on striving to do so.

III

After his departure for the United States shortly before the War, there followed a period of some six years when Iherwood wrote very little. One critic has talked of 'the dark night' of his soul. Certainly he felt dissatisfied, disorientated and creatively depleted. His leaving of England had provoked some bitter comment; the novelist Evelyn Waugh had even made him and his fellow exile, the poet W. H. Auden, characters in his novel *Put Out More Flags*, under the names of Parsnip and Pimpernel, having them quit the country, not for the safety of the New World, but for that of neutral Southern Ireland. That two people who had so energetically fulminated against fascism in Germany, Italy and Spain should have opted out of the struggle against fascism when it was on the point of coming to open warfare, was calculated to arouse mockery and indignation among many people in the England of that time and Waugh's contemptuous satire was expressive of a common, if ugly, attitude.

The first work of fiction to break the silence was *Prater Fiore* (1945), written in America but looking back to a period when Iherwood was still resident in England. Though extremely brief, an extended short story rather than a novel,

it succeeds, like *Sally Bowles* and *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, in compressing a great deal into its narrow compass. Here again 'Isherwood', at once knowing and innocent, sympathetic and detached, is the person chosen to tell the story. Living with his mother and brother as he struggles to complete a novel, he receives an unexpected telephone call, asking him to write the script of a film set in Old Vienna. He has been approached because of a ludicrous misunderstanding: the studio has mistaken his knowledge of Germany for a knowledge of Austria. Chosen to direct the film is a famous Austrian director, Bergmann, whose family have stayed on in Vienna during his absence. Young Isherwood and Bergmann (the character was based on the real-life director Berthold Viertel) at once establish a close rapport, as between a wayward and affectionate son and a sympathetic and occasionally irascible father. This 'Isherwood', like the hero of *All the Consolations*, is a typical mother's boy. Bergmann at once perceives this, telling him that the typical mother's boy

is unable to cut himself free, sternly, from the bourgeois dreams of the Mother. That fatal and comforting dream. He wants to crawl back into the economic safety of the womb. He hates the paternal revolutionary tradition, which reminds him of his duty as its son.

At this moment, as at many others in the book, it is as though it were not Bergmann speaking to Isherwood but Isherwood communing with his innermost self.

While Bergmann is engaged on making his light, frothy musical, Austria is all at once racked by the political disunion that eventually brought defeat to the Socialists and Dollfus to supreme power. Bergmann is plunged into gloom, as he awaits anxiously for news of his country and his family. The contrast between the triviality of his film and the seriousness of real events is all but unbearable to him. But he eventually pulls himself together, when it seems likely that the studio will replace him with another director, and *Prater Violet* (the title of the film as well as the novel) is a huge success.

The tone of the whole book is, for the most part, humorously ironic. By the time that he came to write it, we know that Isherwood had put in a great deal of work in Hollywood

film studios and had long since become familiar with the industry. But with great adroitness he thought himself back to a period when he was still able to view it with the amazed and bewildered eyes of innocence. Everything is new, strange and startling to his 'Isherwood'; and he succeeds in making everything new, strange and startling to us.

Using that old technique of 'tea-tabling'—of domesticating drama and even tragedy—Isherwood gives a certain absurdity to Bergmann's anguish over the fate of his film, his family, his country and, finally, Europe. But that anguish is nonetheless real and it is made real to us. Seeing Bergmann for the first time, Isherwood thinks: 'The name, the voice, the features were inessential, I knew that face. It was the face of a political situation, an epoch. The face of Central Europe.' Bergmann therefore—intelligent, ironical, cultivated, sometimes solemn and sometimes playful—is a symbol of the race to which he belongs, the area on the map of Europe which he inhabits and the period in which he lives. That he is not only a symbol but also a three-dimensional person in his own right is a measure of Isherwood's artistry.

The brilliant surface of the book suddenly deepens and darkens for the last ten pages. 'Isherwood', the detached and nonchalant observer of the agonies of others, suddenly reveals his own. First he puts to himself the question 'What makes you go on living?' and then comes up with the answer that life for him has been a supine process of doing, in succession, whatever people have recommended to him. Among the things recommended has been Love; and he then meditates on his affair with someone called J. He still drinks in this book from total frankness about himself and so the sex of J is left indeterminate, with Isherwood avoiding any use of 'he' or 'she', 'him' or 'her'. The prose is, not unnaturally, oddly gauche in consequence of this absence of personal pronouns; but that very gaucheness, as of someone stammering out an embarrassed confession, makes it extremely moving.

Finally, Isherwood writes of the fears that assail him: of death, war, illness and other more trivial, childish things. How is one to escape from a life lived in perpetual fear of something or other? Briefly, he has a vision of 'the way that leads to safety': it is like 'the high far glimpse of a goat-track

through the mountains between clouds'. But he cannot go that way. 'I could never do it', he tells himself. 'Rather the fear I know, the loneliness I know. . . . For to take the other way would mean that I should lose myself, I should no longer be a person. I should no longer be Christopher Isherwood.' The passage is a strangely enigmatic one, since it is never entirely certain from the text alone whether the self-annihilation to which he is referring is that of the suicide or of the mystic. In the light of his increasing interest in Vedanta, the latter seems certain.

Almost ten years were to pass before Isherwood published another novel and, since in the thirties he had been such a fluent writer, many of his admirers began to assume that his career as a novelist had come to an end. (He was working audaciously on his religious books during this period.) When he at last published *The World is the Flesh* (1954), it was not wholly reassuring. The hero, Stephen Monk, a wealthy, rootless, handsome Anglo-American, is the sort of person of whom one comments 'He has never really grown up'. In the habit of running away from any unmanageable situation, he retreats to his Philadelphia village birthplace and his Quaker foster-mother when he surprises his second wife, Jane, being unfaithful to him at a Hollywood party. Running away yet again from the suffocating goodness and worthiness of this foster-mother and her circle, he has a motor accident in which a truck breaks his thigh and he is then back with his foster-mother, immobilized for the next ten weeks. This enforced idleness forces him to review his past life, with all its inadequacies and betrayals, and so lay the foundation for something better.

Religious people would say that the accident that starts this process of self-redemption was an act of God; students of Freud would say that not God but Stephen's subconscious had intervened. Isherwood probably intended both. At least one reviewer has described the theme as being 'the making of a saint'; and though that may be an exaggeration—perhaps the theme is merely the making of a mature human being—there is no doubt of Isherwood's religious preoccupation. Unfortunately this whole process by which Stephen begins to grow up as he lies in bed, reads his dead first wife's letters,

and talks to his foster-mother, his homosexual doctor, his doctor's boy-friend and a woman German refugee, is curiously artificial and unconvincing. When in *Crise and Punishment*, we read of how a callow young Russian officer becomes Father Zossina, we do not for a moment question the conversion; but Isherwood's Stephen, like Somerset Maugham's Larry in *The Razor's Edge*, is always more credible in his unregenerate days.

Stephen's first wife, Elizabeth Rydal, an English novelist, is dead at the opening of the book. As in the case of Stephen's foster-mother—a garrulous, seemingly middle-headed, seemingly ingenuous spinster—there exists in her a strong element of goodness, even mindiness. She knows that her husband has been unfaithful both with the young man whom they regard as their adopted son and with the woman whom he eventually makes his second wife; she knows too that, a chronic invalid, she has not long to live. But she has learned the total acceptance that Stephen himself finds so difficult to learn. The character of this woman—based, one would guess, on that of Katherine Mansfield, a writer whom we know that Isherwood has always admired—is revealed with admirable subtlety, whether through Stephen's memories of her or through her letters. The letters themselves are clever pastiches of the kind of letters that Katherine Mansfield wrote and of the kind of journals that Virginia Woolf (another writer whom Isherwood greatly admired) kept. At first we think that they are the product of a first-rate writer and a second-rate human being; then, gradually, with great adroitness, Isherwood shows us that they are, in fact, the product of a first-rate human being and a second-rate writer.

There are many other things to admire—descriptions of life and scenery in the Canary Islands, the account of Stephen's sexual betrayal of Elizabeth with the 'adopted' youth, the character of the stoical, almost grim German refugee, awaiting news of her lover, a prisoner in a concentration camp—but a curious miasma of unease seeps through the book. This may be because Isherwood was not sufficiently familiar with American life and the American idiom by the time that he came to write it. It may also be that, as a homosexual, Isherwood did not feel at home in handling Stephen's relationships

with his two wives—certainly the relationship with the 'adopted son' is physically more convincing. Because this uncase keeps obtruding, because Stephen's declaration at the end of the book 'I really do forgive myself from the bottom of my heart' (as though self-forgiveness might not be another and even more insidious kind of self-indulgence than his egotism in the past) strikes all too glib a note, and because the relationship between the homosexual doctor and his boyfriend is handled in so embarrassingly skittish and arch a manner, what was no doubt intended as the 'big' book of Isherwood's creative maturity, seems both smaller and less mature than the early *The Memorial*.

Down There as a Visit (1962) is a more satisfactory book, since it returns in three of its four episodes with total self-confidence to Isherwood's European, pre-war past and in the fourth episode, set in California in the forties, the American scene and idiom have been perfectly assimilated. The first section, 'Mr Lancaster', is the shortest and most fragile. It might also be regarded as a preface to the Berlin stories, set as it is in the year 1928 and describing Isherwood's first introduction to the country in which he was later to make his home. The Mr Lancaster of the title is a distant family connection, a pompous and prurient businessman, working with a shipping-firm in Germany, who, when on leave, calls unexpectedly on Isherwood's mother and, even more unexpectedly, invites Isherwood to visit him. The young man, who has just published his first novel, travels across the North Sea in one of the ships belonging to Mr Lancaster's firm. The crew are described with characteristic crispness and vividness. Face to face with his host and benefactor, Isherwood feels for him only hatred and contempt. Mr Lancaster is a fantasist, a man whom loneliness has driven to live 'too long inside his sounding-box, listening to his own reverberations, his epic song of himself'. But the heartless and amused young man sees not the pathos but only the absurdity. Lancaster has a German adolescent, Waldemar, working for him as an office-boy. This boy, who takes Isherwood swimming and who later introduces him to a youthful orgy of 'dippy sounds of nakedness, of Turkish cigarettes, cushion-dust, crude perfume and healthy sweat', appears in

each of the subsequent episodes. 'Isherwood' goes sailing with his host and, too terrified to defy him openly, gets his revenge by half-deliberately causing the outboard engine to fall into the water. Later, when he is once more back with his loving mother and faithful friends, he learns of the mysterious death of Mr Lancaster by his own hand. As so often in life, the suicide has had no prior build-up or warning. Possibly, Isherwood speculates, Mr Lancaster invited him so surprisingly to be his guest in a desperate last attempt to establish contact with the outside world. The attempt failed; he was submerged by despair, just as the outboard motor was submerged by the muddy water. The story has an inconsequentiality and perfunctoriness about it, as though it belonged more to a memoir, in which the author is obliged to set down things exactly as they happened, rather than to fiction, in which he may give them artistic shape. But it is precisely this seeming inconsequentiality and perfunctoriness that makes the whole incident (it is little more) so lifelike.

The next episode, 'Ambrose', has more substance and architectural unity and is the best of the four. Five years have passed, it is now 1933 and the young 'Isherwood' is travelling out to Greece with Waldemar, whom he has met again in Berlin. Waldemar has been promised a job with an eccentric Englishman, the Ambrose of the title (based on the English archaeologist, now dead, Francis Turville-Petre), who is living on a wild little Greek island off the coast of the larger, densely cultivated island of Euboea. Ambrose (who has been at Cambridge with 'Isherwood') asks him to stay on the island too. There, in what to many people would seem a hell of discomfort, squalor and intellectual and moral degradation, Ambrose attempts to rule a little kingdom of misfits and parasites. The Greek boys whom poverty has brought to the island spend their time exploiting their master or quarrelling among themselves. The adults sit around all day drinking or recovering from their hangovers. Yet what to most other people would be hell is heaven to Ambrose. 'Isherwood' eventually leaves the island, knowing that he does not belong there; but, after this odd and devastating experience, he is haunted by the feeling that he does not belong anywhere else either.

Waldemar reappears in the third section, which bears his name for title. It is now 1938, the period of near-war before the war actually breaks out. Waldemar arrives in England in the company of an English girl, a Communist from a well-to-do upper middle-class family, whose lover he has become. The girl has difficulty with the English immigration authorities, who are reluctant to admit a non-Jewish German with no money to support himself. Later, she has further difficulties with her family (Isherwood is here reverting to his old theme of the war between the generations), who disapprove of her openly living with a man who is not her husband. The relationship between the two becomes increasingly difficult and stormy and finally Waldemar decides to go home. He is not a Nazi, he has no sympathy with the Nazis; but if war is to come, then he feels that his place is in his own country. Interspersed with this account of Waldemar and his English girl-friend are diary-entries (one guesses that they derive from actual diaries kept by Isherwood at the time) about the crisis that was ended, though only temporarily, by Chamberlain's flight to Germany and the Munich agreement. These catch the ominous atmosphere of the period with great fidelity, even if their relevance to the story of the German boy and the English girl is not always wholly clear. This section concludes with 'Isherwood' reaching a decision the exact opposite of Waldemar's: he will quit his homeland for exile.

The last section, 'Paul', is for the most part set in America during the war. 'Isherwood', now the disciple of an English expatriate guru named Augustus (a character based on the philosopher Gerald Heard) and working in a film studio, is introduced to a male prostitute called Paul. Paul shows a surprising desire to give up his worldly existence and to study religion and, to this end, persuades 'Isherwood' to introduce him to Augustus. But though he is totally sincere in this wish and though it is clear, by the end of the story, that he has probably progressed further along the path of enlightenment than 'Isherwood' himself will ever do, he is so far removed from the usual convert in behaviour, speech and attitude that he inevitably excites suspicion and even hatred. Eventually he turns to opium to provide him with the vision that he

sneaks. Such a life—at first gregarious, mercenary and destructive, then lonely, impoverished and drug-dependent—would strike most 'normal' people as hell. But, as in the case of Ambrose, the hell of others provides Paul with his glimpse of heaven.

Paul accuses 'Isherwood' of being 'down here on a visit'—a perpetual tourist, gaping at the hells of others but never himself condemned to their torments; and this idea provides both the title of the book and whatever unity it possesses other than that derived from the appearance of Waldemar and 'Isherwood' in all four sections. (Isherwood's viewing of himself as a temporary visitor to Hell has already occurred in *Pravé Violet*, where the film director, Bergmann, tells the young 'Isherwood' that he is 'the good Virgil who has come to guide me'—an allusion to Virgil's guiding of Dante through the *Inferno*.) But despite the fact that each of the sections is about people shut up in hells of their own making, with the author as spectator, the book remains scrappy and lacking in cohesion. One feels that, having in his desk-drawer a number of fragments—notes, letters, diary-entries, the beginning and ends of stories—the author has set about weaving them into a single fabric. The book is not an organic growth but a skilful assembly.

Two years later, in 1964, Isherwood published what is, in my view, his finest novel, *A Single Man*, even though it is not his most popular. Here, the narrator (George) is describing, not the hell of others, but the hell in which he himself is living. Superficially, his life as a lecturer at a Californian University, is happy and successful: he is popular with his students, he has enough money to spare and, though he has now reached late middle age, his health is good. But he is also a bachelor and a homosexual, whose former lover, killed in a car crash, has become a perpetually haunting memory to him. Unlike *Down There on a Visit*, with its lack of cohesion, this is a novel severely ruled by the classical unities. It begins with the hero waking up alone in his 'tightly planned little house' and ends with his going to bed, again alone, in it. What happens in the meantime—a lecture on a Huxley novel to his students, a visit to a woman dying of cancer, a frustrating flirtation with one of his male students in a seafaring bar—does nothing to change

his life and if he wakes up the next morning (it is possible, as he is well aware, that he may not do so) then the succeeding day is unlikely to be much different. But as he moves through these events, now comic, now tragic, now pathetic, now embarrassing, he is revealing to us everything about himself and about the predicament of a middle-aged, middle-class homosexual of that time and social status and place. There is no reason, children apart, why a homosexual's life should be any more sterile than a heterosexual's; but the hell in which George lives is a desert and it is significant that his final action of the day should be a totally arid one—to masturbate. The book is bleak in its vision of stoicism in the face of bereavement, loneliness, imminent old age and eventual death; but it is redeemed from being depressing by its ever-present humour (the account of George's lecture on a Huxley novel is very funny) and by the vigour and freshness of its writing. George may himself be world-weary and discouraged; his creator never appears to be so.

In his last novel to date, *A Meeting by the River* (1967), Isherwood writes yet again—and writes more convincingly than ever before—of the first steps that a man takes on the road to spiritual enlightenment. The younger of two brothers, Oliver, leaves his work with the Red Cross in Munich, to become the disciple of an expatriate Hindu Swami, resident in the city. The Swami dies, in circumstances that suggest that he himself has chosen the exact moment for his departure, and Oliver then travels out to India, partly in order to transport the Swami's ashes for committal to the Ganges and partly in order to take his final monastic vows at the Head Monastery of the Order. Oliver's elder brother, Patrick, decides to stop off at the Monastery on his way to Thailand, where he is involved in the shooting of a film, in order to try to dissuade Oliver from the irrevocable step he has in mind. The brothers have always been very close to each other; but it is hate, as much as love, that has caused their closeness. At first Patrick does everything in his power to weaken Oliver's resolve: he mocks at him, questions his motives and, most devastatingly of all, forces Oliver to recognize in himself both the ability to impose his will on others and the ambition to do so. But the book concludes

with Oliver's acceptance of his role as Swami; Patrick's acceptance of Oliver's decision; and the brothers' acceptance of each other.

The story is told through the medium of letters—many of them written by Patrick to his wife, mother and the young man with whom he has been having a homosexual affair—and of Oliver's journals. That letters and journals should all be almost identical in style at first strikes the reader as a failure of technique. But this similarity reinforces the view of Patrick and Oliver as, in some sense, two conflicting halves of the same person, perhaps even as two conflicting halves of their creator. Patrick is worldly, dy, tough, bisexual; Oliver is unworldly, straightforward, sensitive, in love with his brother's wife. With the almost off-hand effortlessness that we have learned to expect from him, Isherwood gives, through Patrick's eyes, a brilliant picture both of the Meena-stery and of India—a country, as he sees it, of 'a kind of nauseating enchantment'. Oliver's spiritual odyssey, described step by step, is no less vivid. Like Patrick, we from time to time ourselves smile at the near-absurdity of his conduct and question his motives or his wisdom; but, again like Patrick, we eventually come to see that he has taken the course that is right for him, if not for everyone else. The final reconciliation, between the two brothers, halves of the same identity—they embrace each other after the ceremony of initiation—is perfectly convincing.

The last of Isherwood's books to appear to date is *Kathleen and Frank* (1971), a long memoir—some might say too long, despite its quality—of his father and mother, based on their letters to each other and on the mother's diary. Meeting in 1895, Frank and Kathleen were married in 1903 after Frank, a regular officer in the Army, had returned from the Boer War. Both were highly observant people and both wrote in a vigorous and vivid, if wholly military, manner. Through them we view many of the major events of the Edwardian age; share the preoccupations and attitudes of the upper middle classes of the time; and, very movingly, see how two strong-willed, not always easy people came to adjust to each other in marriage. Tragedy came with the war, in which Frank was killed in 1915. Kathleen lived on until 1960, dying



at the age of ninety-one in full possession of her by then formidable powers.

One realizes—and he himself confesses this—that this exploration of the lives of his parents was for Isherwood an act of both reparation and reconciliation, akin to that embrace between the two brothers at the close of *A Meeting by the River*. The young Isherwood had rebelled against the image of a Hero-father and all that he had seemed to represent: patriotism, the public-school system, a rigid sexual morality, a no less rigid class-structure. But, reading his father's letters, he had come to see that here was a man who was not the symbol of oppression and reaction that he had supposed him to be but a gentle, intelligent, often admirable human being. Similarly, the young Isherwood and his mother had often argued and even quarrelled furiously together—it was his revolt against her domination, his determination not to acquiesce in the role of mother's boy, that had been largely instrumental in propelling him to Germany at the end of the twenties and to America at the end of the thirties, thus (as he himself put it) 'separating himself from Mother and Motherland at one stroke'. But now, reading her letters and diaries and pursuing her ghost in memory, he saw that her constant opposition had, so far from depriving him of resolution, merely served to strengthen it. Indeed, perhaps even his marvellous readability derived from a desire to seduce her into enjoying what might otherwise, if judged merely by its subject-matter, have disgusted and shocked her. Writing the book, Isherwood began to see the extent to which heredity made him and his brother, on the one hand, and their parents, on the other, merge into each other, so make almost a single entity.

IV

Isherwood has paid literary tribute to E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Ford Madox Ford and Aldous Huxley. But, at least as far as narrative technique is concerned, the older writer to whom he is closest is Somerset Maugham. Although Isherwood has a marvellous ability, denied to

Maugham, to produce one startling yet illuminating image after another, the style of both novelists is notable not for poetic grandeur, but for the more modest virtues of lucidity, simplicity and an almost conversational relaxation. More important, both novelists have made use of a persona—the Ashenden of many of Maugham's stories, the 'Isherwood', Bradshaw or George of most of Isherwood's. These personas have never been entirely identical with the actual personalities of their projectors. Maugham was capable of a passion, irrationality and vindictiveness alien to his always tolerant, rational and benevolently amused Ashenden. Isherwood describes how in the past his friends regarded him as 'part despot, part diplomat', ascribed to him an overpowering will and remarked on his ruthlessness. None of these are qualities that one would associate with the 'Isherwood' of the stories. In Isherwood's case, however, one has the sense that, with each book, persona and real person have been more and more nearly superimposed on each other, until in *A Single Man* the identification has become almost complete. One of the reasons for this tendency to speak less and less through 'the ventriloquist's dummy' with the passing of the years may have been the increasing frankness with which Isherwood has felt himself able to refer to his homosexuality without giving offence.

Maugham was a writer who, by deliberately visiting out-of-the-way places and cultivating out-of-the-way people, perpetually sought to extend his range. Isherwood's range, on the other hand, has tended to narrow with the years, covering a far wider spectrum in an early work like *The Mermaid* than in a later one like *A Single Man*. This narrowing is probably a reflection of a narrowing in his own life after his decision to settle in California. The main characters of the later books rarely want for money. They either have private means or else they earn their living by writing or teaching. Many—a far higher proportion than one would meet in everyday life—are either bisexual or homosexual. There are, of course, novelists the breadth of whose literary range has been in inverse proportion to the narrowness of their lives; but these have been writers who have not depended, to the extent of Isherwood, on their own personal experiences.

This increasing narrowness may, in part at least, account for the fact that, regarded in the thirties as a potentially major novelist, Isherwood has ended up as a minor one—albeit of great accomplishment. Another reason for what some people would regard as a decline may be Isherwood's increasing interest in Vedanta. Vedanta, like other Eastern religions, teaches the necessity for detachment from all worldly desires and preoccupations and the elimination of self. It is, however, precisely in worldly desires and preoccupations and in the differences, attractions and conflicts between individual selves that the novelist has usually sought his material.

But though few people would now claim Isherwood for the first rank of modern novelists, he stands out in the second rank. The world he creates is a solipsistic circle: he himself is its centre, his perceptions its radii, his consciousness its circumference. What makes this world, admittedly confined, fascinating to the reader is the tone of voice—humane, totally truthful, ironic, benevolent—that its creator employs to describe it. It is chiefly this unique tone of voice that gives Isherwood his distinction as one of the most entertaining and likeable of novelists at work in the English language today.

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

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— **DOVER & LYBATE:** Derek Pearsall

— **RICHARD HOOKER:** Arthur Pollard

— **THOMAS KID:** Philip Edwards

— **LANDSLAD:** Nevill Coghill

✓ **LYLE & FIFE:** G. K. Huxley

✓ **MALORY:** M. C. Bradbrook

— **MARLOWE:** Philip Henderson

✓ **HIS THOMAS MORE:** E. E. Reynolds

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— **FIRLTON:** Peter Green

— **SPENCER ROBERTY PROVERB:**

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— **TWO SCOTS CHAUCERIAN:**

H. Harvey Wood

— **STATT:** Sergio Baldi

Seventeenth Century:

✓ **HIS THOMAS BROWNE:** Peter Green

— **BUNYAN:** Hazel Tolan

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— **BURKE:** T. E. Usher

— **BURNS:** David Daiches

— **JOHN COLLING:** Oswald Doughty

✓ **CONYER:** N. Nicholson

— **CRASSER:** R. L. Hogg

— **DUPON:** J. B. Sutherland

✓ **FIELDING:** John Butt

✓ **FAY:** Oliver Warner

✓ **GIBSON:** C. V. Wedgwood

- GOLDMITH: A. Norman Jeffers
- ✓ GRAY: R. W. Kesson-Crozier
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- JAMES JOHNSON: S. C. Roberts
- JOSE: Ian Jack
- RICHARDSON: R. F. Brinsden
- ✓ IRRIDAN: W. A. Darlington
- ✓ CHRISTOPHER SMART: G. Grigson
- SMOLETT: Lawrence Sanders
- STEEL, ANDREW: A. R. Humphreys
- STERNE: D. W. Jefferson
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- SWIFT: A. Norman Jeffers
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- ✓ BACCHUS: M. St John-Sivens
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- ✓ MERRIFIELD: Phyllis Barber
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- ✓ WILLIAM MORRIS: P. Henderson
- ★ NEWMAN: J. M. Gorton
- FATHER: Ian Fletcher
- ✓ HERCOCK: J. L. M. Stewart
- ✓ BOSSETTI: Oswald Douglas
- ✓ CRISTINA BOSSETTI: G. Battiscombe
- BUNYON: Peter Quennell
- SIR WALTER SCOTT: Ian Jack
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- SOUTHBY: Geoffrey Carnall
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- R. L. STEVENSON: G. B. Stern
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- TENNYSON: B. C. Southam
- THACKERAY: Lawrence Sanders
- FRANCIS THOMPSON: P. Butler
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