

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE NETHER WORLD WITHIN *Down There on a Visit*

Down there refers to that nether world within the individual which is the place of loneliness, alienation and hatred.... Visits to them are, at the same time, visits to the down there inside himself.

— Christopher Isherwood.

Dedicated to Don Bachardy, *Down There on a Visit* (1962) records the final appearance of Isherwood's most favourite device of the namesake narrator, which was abandoned in *The World in the Evening*. The novel's action spans over a long period from 1928 to 1953 and reverts to the themes already exploited in the novels of the early years, sometimes by alluding directly to their events, sometimes by implying their presence in the intervals among the stories. The narrator is concerned, as in the earlier novels, with an investigation of the self and particularly of the conditions of selfhood. Once again, Christopher poses to himself the familiar question : 'Who am I?' 'What does it mean to be I?' Once more, therefore, the search for identity is carried on, but here, as the thematic details of the novel suggest, by referring to the themes of the previous novels.

Episodically structured as it is, *Down There on a Visit* consists of four short stories, each focusing on a different person, each taking place at a different time, offering a view of the namesake narrator as he progresses. The author remains at the centre of the novel as he recapitulates four men who had influenced his life. The four sections named after four protagonists of the episodes represent four different experiences that Isherwood had had in the past, as he descended into his personal 'inferno' of alienation and despair : 'Mr. Lancaster' projects Berlin as the embodiment of moral and political decay; 'Ambrose' conveys political disenchantment; 'Waldemar' shows political despair during Munich Crisis in London, and 'Paul' represents spirituality as the potential means of connection. The summations of all the experiences, recorded in all four sections of the novel, depict the various

stages of the artist's growth at different periods of his life and 'thus provide' as Alan Wilde observes, 'a synoptic view of Christopher's and, mutatis mutandis, of Isherwood's life and career' (1971, 112)..

The 'I' narrator, in all four sections of the novel, is recognizably Isherwood and is seen, thoroughly, to play two roles. The characters who in the earlier books had been simply a namesake narrator now becomes both namesake narrator and author-narrator. This appears confusing. But within the text Isherwood makes the distinctions clear and meaningful. In a lecture at Berkley he describes the book as an attempt 'to show myself now writing about the situation and also at the same time, the 'I', other than 'myself', involved at that time with these characters, and so ^{he} attempting a kind of autobiography in depth'. Thus Isherwood is both narrator and protagonist, but at different times in his life. In other words, the namesake narrator who presents the earlier story is now older; while consciously looking back he comments on the experiences of his younger self. The novel, therefore, records experiences both of the past and the present filtered through the fluidity of memory and the consciousness of time. Soon after the opening of the book, the author-narrator, thus, says : 'The Christopher who sat in that taxi is, practically speaking, dead; he only remains reflected in the fading memories of us who knew him. I can't revitalize him now. I can only reconstruct him from his remembered acts and words and from the writings he has left us' (*Down There on a Visit* : 1985, 7) Conspicuously, then, three separate characters emerge : the young man acting in the present time of the story, the young man telling that story and the older man commenting on his younger counterparts.

As regards the structural symmetry of the book, critics have doubted whether it is an integrated novel or four separate novelettes featuring the same narrator. Brian Finney notes that during the period of its composition Isherwood was himself convinced of its essential cohesion. Soon after its publication, he announced to his English publisher that he had broken up the material into several pieces, and stressed how they would nevertheless relate to each other 'loosely but efficiently to give the whole a unity and make it something one could describe as a novel' (quoted in Finney : 1979, 235-36). The real unity among the four sections of the novel is, however, achieved as

much by their common themes of loneliness and alienation as by the presence of a slowly maturing narrator. Isherwood also explained that the second of the novel's twin themes was 'about the attitudes to life which one individual can hold at different times — engagement versus disengagement, to use the French post-war jargon' (quoted in Finney: 1979, 236). When the novel opens, we are aware of the narrator's engagement with Art which gradually gives way to world-weariness. In the next section is portrayed Ambrose's non-attachement; to the sensual world. The third section shows the narrator's obsession with European politics which turns, again, in the final section, to non-attachment, this time in purely and profoundly religious sense, presupposing more direct and active involvement in the life of other individuals. Isherwood, indeed, traces a linear growth in the life of the narrator. Art gives way to world-weariness and the narrator invariably turns to politics. But politics being found too inadequate a means to offer any solution, he commits himself to a deeper belief in a divine reality which underlies all the lesser forms of engagements. One can, therefore, discern how the narrator keeps growing steadily at successive stages of his life and ultimately establishes his self as connected with the whole community he lives in.

The opening section of the novel is entitled 'Mr. Lancaster', and presents the namesake narrator in 1928, the year in which Isherwood's first novel *All the Conspirators* was published. The theme is built on the narrator's anger with and hostility towards the older generation. Much like the heroes and anti-heroes of the earlier novels, the protagonist of the book defines his self by anger, by opposition and particularly by his hostility towards the older generation, here represented by Mr. Lancaster. When the narrator, Christopher, first met Mr. Lancaster, his cousin, some forty years back, during his trip to Berlin, he felt him a 'bore'. Very soon he developed an attitude of hostility towards his cousin: 'As far as I was concerned, everyone over forty belonged with a mere handful of honourable exceptions, to an alien tribe, hostile by definition but in practice ridiculous rather than formidable' (*Down There on a Visit*, 6). Much like Philip Lindsay of *All the Conspirators*, who sailed for Africa, out of pride, to reassure his self, Christopher went to Germany and displayed his opposition to the diehards by pouring scorn on Mr. Lancaster: 'I loathed Mr. Lancaster ... because I suspected Mr. Lancaster of bluffing'

(*Down There on a Visit*, 6). Once again, caught up in much the same situation as Eric Vernon in *The Memorial*, Christopher was attracted yet repelled by the older male figure. On arriving at Mr. Lancaster's city he found his cousin, as a reviewer in *The New Yorker* caricatured, as 'a protean bore, an argumentative bore, a mystifying bore, a patronizing bore' (quoted in Piazza : 1978, 127). Later, in London, Christopher tried to re-establish connection with his cousin but, as the end of the story as well as the pattern of imagery suggests, Mr. Lancaster could not eschew his instinctive authoratative dislike for his younger nephew. The following year in Berlin, Waldemar, who was working under Mr. Lancaster, informed Christopher that his cousin had praised his book, had denounced his hostile critics and had even claimed Christopher as his nephew. 'I believe', said Waldemar, 'he was really fond of you ... who knows Christopher, if you'd been there to look after him, he might have been alive to-day' (*Down There on a Visit*, 46). But Isherwood understands that Mr. Lancaster, ensconced in his own 'sounding box', singing his 'epic song' of himself, 'didn't need me. He didn't need any kind of human being' (*Down There on a Visit*, 46). Left thus alone, Mr. Lancaster, at the story's end, shoots himself out of despair.

What is significant about the opening story of the novel is that it functions, for Isherwood, as a metaphor for loneliness and pride — the egotistical nature of an individual, which barricades the possibility of commitment. Brian Finney explains how both Mr. Lancaster and 'Christopher' himself share what Isherwood in *Lions and Shadows* called the 'Coriolanus-myth'. Mr. Lancaster, as suggested by the end of the episode, turns everyday experience into a myth in which he features as an epic hero. Like Coriolanus, he had developed an inflated idea of his own significance until he can hear nothing but 'his own reverberations, his epic song of himself' (*Down There on a Visit*, 46). Like Coriolanus, too, his pride is the cause of his despair which leads to death. The fact is that when the difference between reality and myth becomes impossible to bridge, Mr. Lancaster ceases 'to believe in the epic any more'. He is overtaken by despair and ultimately puts an end to his life. Committed thus to the world of Maya, the world of individual ego, he fails to accommodate his self to others. 'Mr. Lancaster... has become so attached to the charade he has mistaken for reality', remarks Finney, 'that he can only stop acting out his role by opting out of life itself' (1979, 240).

Like Mr. Lancaster, the young Christopher too, concerned with himself and his own needs, could not allow himself to care for others. What debarred Christopher, in his early years, to get connected to others around him, was his inability, as the second voice of the 'Thunder' in T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* commands, to sympathize. Too engrossed with his personal needs, he simply ignored those of his fellows. It was less due to his ignorance than egoism, his entrapment, to borrow another of Eliot's images, within the prison of his personality. The story of 'Mr. Lancaster', therefore, serves as a fable to the older Christopher — to get involved with others. It allows him to take steps in the process of maturation. Mr. Lancaster 'had lived too long inside his sounding box, listening to his own reverberations, his epic song of himself' (*Down There on a Visit*, 46), and by implication, unless Christopher moves beyond self, he may suffer the same fate.

Set in 1933, the second section of the novel, called 'Ambrose', is considered one of the most accomplished of the stories. Its action occurs five years after that of 'Mr. Lancaster' and is based on Christopher's account of a summer spent on a Greek island with Waldemar, the two English men, Ambrose and Geoffrey, Ambrose's bodyguard, Hans and three Greek servants, Aleko, Petro and Theo. Once again, Isherwood aims not only to make vivid the confusions and complexities of his protagonist's thought but to anatomize his horribly simple 'despair'. Once more, indeed, he prepares himself, as the opening statement of the section indicates — 'This is May 1993 — and here I am starting another journey' to escape from the uncomfortable existential reality of his situation.

Christopher arrives on the island with Waldemar, the young German he had met at Mr. Lancaster's flat. The island of St. Gregory is no less than an independent and autonomous realm, a kingdom with Ambrose as 'one of its exiled Shakespearean kings' (*Down Three on a Visit*, 83). 'Ambrose' evokes the world of *The Tempest* as 'Mr. Lancaster' took its controlling metaphor from Coriolanus. However, the island offers Christopher an illusory prospect of retreat from the future and the past which so terrified him in 'Mr. Lancaster' 'because my mind is busy with anxiety about the future and regrets about the past. But not now, not here' (*Down Three on a Visit*, 80). The island, therefore, represents, initially and of course, momentarily, a state of mindless bliss and

so Christopher, in his attempt to escape from his guilt-ridden, time-bound self, sees Ambrose as a potential Messiah, one who possesses 'the sort of indifference to discomfort and hardship which you would expect to find in a great hero or saint' (*Down Three on a Visit*, 83).

But the island is ultimately found, as the story's imagery suggests, as an island of despair and death. The order of St. Gregory is, in fact, disorder; its ruler, Ambrose, an anarchic lord of misrule and corruption. It is surrounded by boys who are inhumanly destructive. Even the animals on the island suggest 'death'. There is a goat like a lean, black, shaggy-legged devil with goblin teeth and slanting Levantine eyes' (*Down Three on a Visit*, 75). So, Christopher, motivated as he was by the need to escape to St. Gregory where he looked for 'some basis of genuine feeling', he ultimately found it as a 'charming Devil's island'. As Paul Piazza aptly says, 'The island escape sought by Philip Lindsay in Isherwood's first novel is finally revealed for what it is : a world of Kafkaesque fantasy, sequestered from humanity' (1978, 132). Alone on the island, Ambrose is, in fine, both one of the 'lost', as sterile as the people the earlier Christopher meets and identifies with in Berlin, and 'absolutely self-sufficient within his own world' (*Down There on a Visit*, 58). Christopher is made conscious of his own loneliness, of the forces of his oppressive self. While on the island, he is propelled by the need to move beyond the self. But the marooned life gives him only an intense view of his crisis of identity and he seeks desperately for possible means of salvation through belief in Satanism.

The second section of the novel shows the epiphany of the older Christopher : his retrospective understanding of the feelings and sentiments of others. He can now both examine the attachments he has had with others in the past and appreciate them more fully in the present. At the end of the story he looks in the mirror and notices 'a look in my eyes which hadn't been there before. By the time I got back to England, no one could have had any difficulty in recognizing me as my familiar self. Only I caught glimpses of that look now and then while shaving' (*Down There on a Visit*, 113). The 'mirror' symbol is here brilliantly conceived. It is perhaps the best symbol for the novel as a whole — recreating what is, yet in the very act of reflection, creating something new. Christopher had learnt that to be alone and independent as

he was with Mr. Lancaster is no longer comfortable, but he cannot as yet, find any path to move about. However, this desire to move marks Isherwood's growth : he does not reveal how he felt but how he feels about his responsibility and relationship to others; what he thinks of himself is not important but what others think of himself in his relation to others. As regards the narrator's new awareness and growth Alan Wilde says : 'Anticipatory as well as summary, the (above) comment testifies not only to the growth in Christopher's self-awareness but to the direction, both out of time and away from self, in which he is hereafter to move' (1971, 120).

The third story of the novel 'Waldemar' records Isherwood's descent into his personal 'inferno'. Written against the background of the Munich Crisis, it focuses, almost exclusively, on Christopher more than do the other three parts of the novel; the Waldemar-Dorothy relationship seems almost incidental. But this subject becomes important as it is, in effect, a way to explore Heinz and Isherwood's experiences. However, apart from the Munich Crisis we are also made aware of the Sudetenland Crisis in August and September, 1938, which inflamed his old sickness into death. The narrator also tells us about Chamberlain's well-intentioned but ineffectual attempts to replace the fear of war by the security of peace. In fine, political commitment as a *raison d'être* in itself is largely explored, but it is underplayed to emphasize Christopher's personal despair. As Paul Piazza notes, 'The political crisis stokes Isherwood's personal crisis' (1978, 105), and Isherwood as a result vacillates between hope and despair. But it is not merely the political crisis which exacerbates his pangs; his anxiety over Heinz, who was not allowed to obtain a permit for entering England, only intensified his personal despair. In short, Isherwood's neurotic fear of war, his despair at the political situation of Europe and finally, his anxiety and guilt of having lost Heinz make 'Waldemar', as Piazza further observes 'one prolonged,desperate scream from beginning to end' (1978, 103).

To Isherwood's political crisis was added the story of Dorothy and Waldemar. Dorothy is an English girl whom Christopher came across in Berlin. She brings Waldemar to her family, a typically conservative English family and announces their engagement. But Dorothy's family responds to Waldemar as any middle-class family would. Waldemar to them is hardly better than a

servant. Dorothy made some futile attempts to save their engagement but Waldemar comes to see the reality of his situation and finally leaves her. To Christopher, Dorothy's family represents all that he detests in England — Kathleen's England which had rejected Heinz. So, though Brian Finney notes, as he was told by Isherwood in an interview, that the Dorothy-Waldemar relationship was based on 'a fanatical worker-worshipping English woman he knew who worked at the Communist Headquarters in Berlin and a German carpenter married and travelled around with' (quoted in Finney: 1979, 242), the feelings and sentiments presented here more really parallel Isherwood's experiences with Heinz.

In 'Waldemar', then, Isherwood relays his thoughts and feelings, often as in diary entries and in direct narration as well. After detailing his obsession with the signals of war, his political despair and various personal crises, Isherwood admits that 'underneath all my various feelings about the crisis is a cold rock-bottom resentment against being forced' (*Down There on a Visit*, 134). We find, therefore, that Isherwood resents whoever or whatever intrudes on his progress. He says, 'I prefer to keep hold of what I have' (*Down There on a Visit*, 116). In this assertion of self, however, lies a new-found awareness. He no more wishes for the 'aloneness' he felt at the end of 'Ambrose', he now values the company of real friends : 'I want to be with people who think about themselves, not me' (*Down There on a Visit*, 141). What is suggested is that the namesake narrator, who until this novel has not truly contemplated how he feels about connections with others, here explores : 'How do I appear to my friends and acquaintances?' (*Down There on a Visit*, 115). His assertion of self is as solid as his sense of connection. There is justification of his statement when he says that his actions are mostly attempts 'to prove I can play (the Others') game' (*Down There on a Visit*, 116). It also reflects Isherwood's optimism in the movement of self, which finds its full expression in the final episode of the novel 'Paul'. This is, perhaps, one reason why 'Waldemar', 'the least complete in itself of the four episodes', as Isherwood wrote to Upward 'relates a lot to Paul, which follows it' (quoted in Finney: 1979, 243).

'Paul' is the novel's final episode and its action takes place in Hollywood. There Christopher, engaged as he was in script-writing and Hindu spirituality,

meets Paul, a dissolute male prostitute. The 'fabulous' Paul conforms to Isherwood's conception of the 'sinner-saint', who achieves spirituality through a conscious immersion in evil. He moves from a life of the flesh as 'the most expensive male prostitute in the world' (*Down There on a Visit*, 161) to the pursuit of what Christopher calls 'this thing that's inside us and yet isn't us' (*Down There on a Visit*, 174). There are references in this episode to sexual promiscuity, supposed rape and impotence along with Isherwood's didactic explanations of religious and Yoga meditations. The protagonist, Paul, at the story's end achieves sanctity through his belief in Satanism and breaks free of the body, and overcomes all obstacles leading to man's essential separateness. One may find here, as Brian Finney notes, that Isherwood's 'sinner-saint' pattern in this episode as also the very title, *Down There on a Visit*, has obvious reference to Huysmans' *Lá-Bas*. The protagonists of both books achieve transcendence through involvement in evil. Paul is, however, the dramatised version of Isherwood's Oriental belief that sex is no bar to spirituality, a dramatised aspect of Isherwood's own spiritual credo — 'The kind that makes dangerous criminals, and very occasionally, saints' (*Down There on a Visit*, 199).

Christopher first meets Paul, in Hollywood, at a lunch with their mutual friend, Ronny. Paul invites Christopher to visit him at his residence and explain his religion. Christopher feels that 'Paul smiled at me in quite a new way, with such charm and intimacy that I began to feel something between us — a kind of ease — which might ever lead to friendship' (*Down There on a Visit*, 177). But Christopher discovers that Paul is in need of money and is haunted by the fear of death because of his impotence. Paul also exposes to Christopher his past life of decadence and his plan of committing suicide. Christopher gives half of his money to Paul and refers him to the Yoga instructor, Augustus Parr (who is modelled after Gerald Heard but fulfils Prabhavananda's role as a spiritual guide). Christopher also rescues him from the police, offers him shelter and invites him to live with him as long as he wishes. Paul agrees. They start living together, and when they meditate together, Christopher felt that 'as if we were both sitting there naked — the situation had that kind of intimacy I needed Paul every bit as much as he needed me. Our strength and our weaknesses were complementary' (*Down There on a Visit*, 209).

The relationship between Paul and Christopher, however, deteriorates in the course of the novel. Both fail to sustain their ability to maintain intimacy. Very soon Paul's behaviour seems to irritate Christopher who screams: 'You utter bitch! Do you know what you're doing? You are slowly but surely manoeuvring me into the position of being a jealous husband' (*Down There on a Visit*, 225). Christopher is afraid that his relationship with Paul who had a past life of decadence might give rise to a public scandal. This is the young Christopher we used to meet in the earlier fictions — the young narrator wholly engrossed within himself. However, a few years later, the war being on, both Christopher and Paul meet each other, as they were registered as conscientious objectors. Months later, the doctor at the Camp, being jealous of Paul's influence on the younger men, discharges him on the pretext of heart murmur. Christopher drives to the Camp and invites Paul back to live with him as a matter of form. Later on, we learn that Paul abstains from such addictions as opium eating. He becomes an enthusiastic self again and goes to the world of people. He decides to return to his old friends, not to make any further attempt to commit suicide. He also shows, as the narrative suggests, some degrees of inwardness which gives him the final understanding of self. And the novel ends with an emphasis on connection. The namesake narrator's final words, as also the last ones of the novel, reflect the vision of concord that Paul achieves at the end, and that also gives a fitting finale to *Down There on a Visit*: 'You, Christopher and Ruthie and I were the only close friends he (Paul) ever had' (272).

With Paul, then, Christopher experiences a kind of relationship in which, as he himself admits, 'we were tied together ... not by sex' (*Down There on a Visit*, 225). The spiritual unison becomes possible, since both Christopher and Paul were aware of each other's ties and responsibilities, since both of them were in a continuous search for something that will bridge the gap that separates them. They become sympathetic to each other, and this element of sympathy, Christopher would suggest, rightly springs from their love for each other. So, in course of conversation that establishes a true intimacy Christopher says to Paul : 'What's really important is I'd suddenly found there was a word I could not say to Paul. Only this time the word was "love"' (*Down There on a Visit*, 257).

In the figure of Paul Isherwood also portrays the model of a potential saint who believes that love is the only solution to the problem of connection. We learn, as does the narrator, that it is possible for every individual to achieve transcendence of the self through a ceaseless struggle, and that sainthood does not necessarily imply denial of fellow feeling. Sanctity may be obtained through the gift of love, which takes us outside of self to join us with the people around. Paul comes to realise, after he goes back to his old friends, that one must not use his fellow people for selfish ends, and that love must be mutual and shared — this is what the older narrator learns. His awareness that only a saint is capable of developing infinite love as the means of connection shows Isherwood's own maturity of vision and final growth.

The whole thrust of *Down There on a Visit* is, indeed, based on a pattern which suits the life of Isherwood well and is by far his most self-revealing novel. The four episodes of the book represent four hells, signifying Isherwood's experience of the nether world within — of isolation and despair at various periods of his life. On reviewing the novel, Malcolm Bradbury suggested that all of the four main characters 'represent to us facets of Isherwood himself', and they are not merely 'versions of his own degradation' but also 'solutions to a predicament which the narrator shares with all the four characters' (quoted in Finney : 1979, 238). Like each of them Isherwood confronted his own hell. He might have succumbed to despair like Mr. Lancaster, or to the isolated fantasy-world of Ambrose, he could also have been as politically despairing an individual as Waldemar, or even a Paul, a male-prostitute, turned a saint. One may find here, very appropriately, indeed, the novel's parallel to Huysmans' *Là-Bas*, a novel about hell. Both Huysmans and Isherwood seem to believe that religious sanctity may be obtained through a belief in Satanism, that despair may be evaded only by transcending the private hell of ego. Living exclusively in the world of debauchery and promiscuity, Paul, in the final section of the novel, achieves sainthood, and by transcending his own prison-cell of personality, by going back to the world of people he overcomes alienation and despair. 'Not helpless, negative despair. Dynamic despair. The kind that makes dangerous criminals, and very occasionally saints' (*Down There on a Visit*, 199).

Compliciously, then, as the title of the novel signifies, 'Down There'

refers to that nether world within each individual which begets loneliness, despair and anxiety. The novel in four episodes describes characters shut up inside private hells of their own making, committed to an egocentric world. 'Visit' here means, therefore, visit down there inside themselves. Isherwood by tracing his experiences of the four hells explores the self itself, evincing a deeper awareness of it. Alan Wilde succinctly sums up the process thus : 'Moving dialectically through the various hells where he meets Mr. Lancaster, Ambrose, Waldemar and finally, Paul, Christopher arrives, one might say, at a higher level, of the spiral his life describes and becomes a better and steadier, certainly a more self - aware individual' (1971, 125).