

Conclusion

Perhaps I have travelled too much, left my heart in too many places what is the use of caring at all, if you aren't prepared to dedicate your life to die?

— Christopher Isherwood.

Paul Piazza in the concluding chapter of his book, *Christopher Isherwood : Myth and Anti-Myth*, refers to two literary exhibitions : the one entitled 'London in the Thirties' held by the London Museum in 1973 and the other 'Young Writers of the Thirties' hosted by the National Portrait Gallery of London in 1976. The first exhibition contained sixteen books, four of which were written or co-written by Christopher Isherwood. The second programme featured the published and unpublished works of five writers who had profound impact on their contemporaries : Auden, Day Lewis, Isherwood, Mac Neice and Spender. The two exhibitions 'London in the Thirties' and 'Young Writers of the Thirties' only confirm Isherwood's importance and the enormous influence he left on his contemporaries during the thirties. To most critics and reviewers, indeed, Isherwood's reputation rests with the Berlin books. They feel inclined to believe that his talent burnt itself out in the thirties, and with his journey to America, along with Auden, 'left the hope of English fiction' (quoted in Piazza, 1978, 13).

But the significant point about Isherwood literature — one which most critics and scholars miss — is that the whole corpus of Isherwood's writings forms one coherent pattern, based as it is, from beginning to end, on the artist's relentless rebellion and growth. Whatever he wrote right up to the end of his career builds up a trajectory of the artist's evolution from his earlier anger or iconoclasm to his latest embrace of Vedanta. Indeed, as Isherwood's career displays, one would face several Isherwoods : 'The Cambridge Isherwood' of *All the Conspirators* and *The Memorial*, 'The Berlin Christopher Isherwood' and 'The American Vedantist Isherwood'. The artist lived and grew through all the successive phases, and to segregate one from the other is to miss the whole thrust of artistic growth in his literary career of which the thirties is only a beginning and his recent conversion to Vedanta its apt conclusion. One might go further and say that as time wears on, Isherwood matures, incorporating

new, original insights into his novels so that the last one becomes a palimpsest recording the results of his modified interpretation of the anti-myth, recalling and reliving the past. In his last novel, *A Meeting by the River*, for example, Isherwood takes a vastly different look at the protagonists of *All the Conspirators* and *The Memorial*, held in the clutches of the 'evil' mother. In *A Single Man* he is found to refocus his 'Camera' on the isolation of the lonely observer who appears in the Berlin novels, say, *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin*. In fact, he keeps on, throughout his career, revising and modifying his earlier stand. As he crosses a new frontier, he is imbued with fresh insights. In the light of his new insights and enlightenment, he curbs, softens and in some cases, annuls his early repudiation of his parents, faces his neurotic fear of war and death and finally, reinvestigates his position. So, it is Isherwood's own search for the self and its realization that underpins the entire corpus of his literary output. Every critical appraisal should, then, be directed or confined not to the novels of any particular period, but always taking into account all that he wrote during his long literary career of more than forty years. The lack of a comprehensive study in this line not only leads to the misapprehension of the 'essential Isherwood' but testifies to the state of general neglect. It is a fact that there is probably no writer less justly valued at the present time than Christopher Isherwood, none, therefore, more in need of reassessment and revaluation.

Isherwood is a writer with varied and profound experiences and interests, social as well as political, philosophical as well as religious. Right from the time of *All the Conspirators* he visited several countries, say, Germany, China, America, South Africa, India, and each of the visits inspired him to write either a novel or an autobiography or a memoir. With his natural power of self-analysis he observes in *Prater Violet*: 'Perhaps I have travelled too much, left my heart in too many places' (104). Wherever he went, his experience became very much a part of his own being. Indeed, what Isherwood writes of Upward may be said of himself that 'wherever he is, all places are the same, because all places become part of himself' (quoted in Piazza: 1978, 10). But throughout his literary career nowhere does Isherwood propagate any political creed or ideology. The group of poets of the thirties with whom his name was generally associated

were all one-time communists. But Isherwood never committed himself to any political ideology whatsoever. Jonathan Fryer notes that 'already surrounded by a good number of communist sympathizers at the Hirschfeld Institute, Christopher was in general accord with their leftist tendencies, although he was not politically motivated enough to align himself with them' (1977, 121). Like the narrators of the Berlin books, he detached himself from practical politics. Behind the ironic comments on the low life scene in Berlin, we find no dogma but only the sympathetic heart of the humanitarian artist that Isherwood undoubtedly was. An ever-present sense of dissatisfaction seems to goad him on to enlarge his sympathies or rather to encompass the whole world within the range of sympathetic treatment. Stephen Spender in *World Within World* thus writes : 'Isherwood, according to Auden, held no opinions whatever about anything. He was wholly and simply interested in people He simply regarded them as material for his work' (1977, 101). Isherwood's interest, in all his writings, lies in essential human impulses and eternal human problems along with a quest for their lasting solution.

All Isherwood's writings are autobiographical; they reveal the progressive modifications life brings upon the artist giving rise to successive stages of growth and development. Isherwood writes about his own experiences and incorporates them into the thematic textures of his fictions and non-fictions. In this connection, Isherwood himself says : 'I write because I am trying to study my life in retrospect and find out what it is, what it is made of, what it is all about' (quoted in James, 1976, 705). In *All the Conspirators* Philip Lindsay, the protagonist, who revolts against his mother and all that the past symbolizes may be said to represent his author. Like Philip, Isherwood was always at loggerheads with his termagant mother, Kathleen and broke free of all familial ties in the pursuit of art. In *The Memorial* Eric Vernon's dislike of his mother's dominance and of all aristocratic life as such reflects Isherwood's own attitude. The two Berlin novels, *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin* are Isherwood's most directly autobiographical works and are something of modern classics too. The characterized 'I', whom Isherwood calls the 'ventriloquist's dummy' is none but the author himself, who appears under different names in different stories.

But the first-person narrative method in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin* neither glorifies nor humiliates the author, as he makes friendship with all classes of people as a means of self-examination and of unifying different episodes of the books into one coherent whole. Percy Lubbock well defends Isherwood by saying that 'the first person will draw a rambling, fragmentary tale together and stamp it after a fashion as a single whole' (1921,131).

The novels, written after conversion, *Prater Violet*, *The World in the Evening* and *Down There on a Visit*, show Isherwood's concern with the Hindu philosophy of Vedantism and chart out the artist's growth in the understanding of his self. The namesake narrator now modifies his earlier concern with the self; the emphasis is laid not on what he feels about himself but on how he feels about himself in relation to the vast wave of humanity around him. In the last two novels, *A Single Man* and *A Meeting by the River* we are aware of Isherwood's Vedantic lore which shows him a new path — a path of extinction of individual ego-consciousness into universal consciousness that absolves man from being colluded into his solitary prison-cell. George, with his profession of teaching and homosexual instincts, and Oliver, who under the influence of a Hindu Swami became a Vedantist, are but fictive transfigurations of Isherwood himself, who after a search persisting through the four decades of his literary career found his real self on turning a Vedantist. Evidently, then, all the nine novels beginning with *All the Conspirators* right up to the concluding one, *A Meeting by the River*, are all concerned with the artist's overriding search for the self. Indeed, what David Pryce-James says is perhaps an apt observation on Isherwood's work as a whole : 'His writing is concerned with himself and his development, and not with abstractions or ideologies' (quoted in Piazza : 1978, 10). Till the end Isherwood continued to mine the self, but always with an eye to the larger world. So whether or not his novels are fact or fiction is ultimately unimportant compared with his representation of a felt life.

One may trace a number of formative influences on the theme and technique of Isherwood's novels. At the time of writing *All the Conspirators* and *The Memorial* Isherwood was profoundly influenced by Virginia Woolf, James

Joyce and E.M. Forster. His masterly use of the 'Stream of Consciousness' technique which enables the readers to perceive the 'observable tendencies of narcissism' of 'an adult male extrovert', as in *All the Conspirators*, owes as much to Woolf's way of rendering a character's inner thought-stream as to Joyce's. In *The Memorial* is clearly evident Isherwood's indebtedness to E.M. Forster his method of 'tea-tabling'. Isherwood writes in *Lions and Shadows* : 'Forster's the only one who understands what the modern novel ought to be Our frightful mistake was that we believed in tragedy : the point is tragedy's quite impossible today The whole of Forster's technique is based on the tea-table' (1985,107). In *The Memorial* the great tragedy of a war-torn generation has been rendered not in great tragic catastrophe but in a quiet, mild tone. Again, a decrescendo of anti-climax, a way in which *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* ends is another example of toning down tragic incidents. Mr. Norris's profound tragedy is described by Isherwood in the following words: 'Tell me, William, his last letter concluded, what have I done to deserve all this?' (*Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, 136). This mild tone restrains the tragic scenes from attaining their highest possible pitch and is a pointer to Isherwood's brilliant conception of comedy as a far more telling and effective dramatic art than tragedy.

Somerset Maugham and Leo Tolstoy are two other potential literary influences on Christopher Isherwood. Isherwood thought of Larry in Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* as an ideal portrait of a saint. The manner in which Maugham has presented the evolution of Larry from an ordinary man into a saint, steeped in Vedantic knowledge, has been exactly followed by Isherwood in the delineation of the character of Oliver in *A Meeting by the River*. Isherwood turned to Tolstoy, as he intended to present the whole panorama of the life of his war-torn generation in *The Memorial* in the fashion of *War and Peace*. Besides, so far as the apparently arbitrary division of the novel into 'non-consecutive time blocks' is concerned, Isherwood might have derived inspiration from Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza*. One would also feel inclined to believe that Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* and Huxley's *Time Must Have a Stop*, instinct as they are with Eastern mysticism, might have influenced the religious

theme of Isherwood's *A Meeting by the River*. Thus, one may trace numerous other literary influences of contemporary writers and their works that contributed to the shaping of the thematic concerns and techniques in Isherwood's novels.

Finally, one other notable aspect of Isherwood's novels is their inventiveness and versatility of narrative techniques. The artist's remarkable achievement consists in his command of stylistic subtleties, in his experiments with wide varieties of narrators and in his use of letters and diaries, which are but ever congruent with the themes and concerns of the respective books. In his first two novels, *All the Conspirators* and *The Memorial* Isherwood uses the third person narrative method. In the two Berlin novels, *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin* the narrator is characterized 'I', 'the ventriloquist's dummy', who appears under different names. *Prater Violet* and *The World in the Evening* have namesake narrators, while *Down There on a Visit* abandons it and reverts to the earlier third-person narrative device. Again, in *The World in the Evening* and *A Meeting by the River* Isherwood makes use of the epistolary method, and we also see several diary notes. But what is significant about Isherwood's narrative method is not the variety of forms and techniques he employs, but the innovation he demonstrates and the new experiments he makes with them, to force the reader into discovering for himself the shape of his character and meaning, and also to enable him to grasp the concerns of his respective novels. He was rightly commended for his success with the new forms and was acclaimed as one of the most important novelists of his generation, who 'holds the future of the English novels in his hands' (quoted in Fryer : 1977,186).