

CHAPTER THREE

THE HALLOWED DEAD

The Memorial

It was to be about war, not the war itself, but the effect of the idea of War on my generation. It was to give expression to my own 'War' complex.

— Christopher Isherwood.

All the Conspirators was published in the summer of 1928. At that time, as Isherwood's biographer, Jonathan Fryer, records, Isherwood was at Freshwater Bay, where he came across an ex-soldier, Mander. Mander with his bitter experiences of war awakened in Isherwood the feelings of trauma about war, which later supplied inspiration for *The Memorial* (1932). Mander also prevailed upon Isherwood to go in for the medical courses. Accordingly, Isherwood got admitted to the King's College of medicine at the end of October 1928. Isherwood's decision for studying medicine seemed to be partly influenced by his desire to leave home and to break free of all familial ties with his mother. Encouraged as he was by Edward Upward, Isherwood believed that the medical career would help him avoid facing the Test since people accorded doctors respect and they did not have to fight in wars: 'With a medical degree in my pocket, I had fancied, I could face the world' (Isherwood:1985, 187).

However, by the end of the first term of the course, Isherwood got flabbergasted with his medical career, and the examination performances being poor, he decided to leave the medical college. He felt that he 'hadn't advanced an inch, really, since those Cambridge days' (1985, 187). He needed a change, a total change from England and old life. In his autobiography Isherwood records his feelings thus: 'First of all, I must leave England altogether — the break with the old life must be complete ... I'd go to Berlin' (1985, 188). With this longing, on 14 March 1929, Isherwood left for a two-week visit to Berlin to find a new lease of life in Germany to see the Weimar Republic from inside. However, back home that summer, both Auden and Isherwood got engaged on *The*

Enemies of a Bishop, an unrealized play. Auden also prevailed upon Isherwood to translate Baudelaire's *Journaux Intimes*, a work that appealed to Isherwood since Baudelaire's journal reflects anger and antipathy towards his family and rebellion against the weakness of the will — the feelings that Isherwood experienced at home with his mother, Kathleen and that sparked off *The Memorial* that followed soon.

Published as it was in 1932, *The Memorial*, which had for its author the private title 'War and Peace' is concerned with the attempt of the self to transcend its subjective boundaries and to merge with the world at large. As Isherwood was thoroughly obsessed with integrating his life into his fiction, the novel traces, in graphic details, various stages of psychological development through which he, as an individual, passed on his way to maturity. It also reflects the universal problems of adolescence : the movement away from parents, the establishment of a sexual identity and the acceptance of individual responsibility in the world. If *All the Conspirators* concentrates on the goal of independence, the major concern of *The Memorial* is paradoxically the necessity for involvement, a theme avidly pursued in all his subsequent novels. Indeed, Isherwood's second novel, as Alan Wilde observes, 'is concerned with the attempt of the self to transcend its subjectivity by managing both to assert its independence of the world of others and, on another level, to establish a connection with it : to achieve individuality while overcoming isolation' (1971,37). Whereas *All the Conspirators* may be described as an emotional version of Isherwood's life or a discharge of emotions, *The Memorial* is an expression of emotions.

The seminal theme of *The Memorial*, as Isherwood announces in *Lions and Shadows*, 'was to be about war : not the War itself but the effect of the idea of "War" on my generation. It was to give expression, at last, to my own "War" complex' (1985,182). Isherwood's ideal was no less a novel than Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, as his ambition was to present the whole panorama of the life of his generation through the history of a family : 'Like Tolstoy, I would tell the story of a family; its births and deaths, ups and downs... all "The Externals".... I was out to write an epic;... an epic disguised as a drawing-room comedy'

(1985,182). But the social problem and upheaval of a whole generation is too ambitious and colossal a theme to be treated in a 'drawing room comedy.' Unlike *All the Conspirators*, Isherwood deals here with the aftermath of war, that is, with a social problem rather than a personal one, and at the end, the real theme of the novel turns out to be the deformity of time.

However, unlike his contemporary writers of war, say, Rupert Brooke, Rex Warner, Wilfred Owen, Isherwood does not concentrate on the pity and pathos of war but on the crippling effect of the idea of war on the surviving generation. He was not a combatant in the Great War; he was simply a casualty. But the trauma of the war was psychologically so profound on Isherwood that he could curb his own pathological obsession from rearing its ugly head in his books. Piazza's observation may be noted here. He pertinently says that 'to Isherwood, the idea of war is far more nightmarish than the actual fact of war' (1978,80). D.H. Lawrence writes in a memorable chapter in *Kangaroo*, called 'Nightmare', that it was at home that 'the world was lost', at home that 'the proud human spirit collapsed' and 'sordid, rampant, raging meanness' triumphed. 'The bite of a jackal is blood-poisoning.... And they bit us all. And blood-poisoning... set in' (Lawrence : 1968,221). Isherwood's *The Memorial* presents an embittered and debased post-war England where the shell-shocked and amnesiac people have inherited nothing but 'a heap of broken images.' They are physically alive, but in every other respect benumbed. They show disintegration, frustration and despair — all symptoms of a world in the grip of a moral disaster. George A. Panichas vividly exposes the effect of war on Isherwood and his generation in his introduction to *Promise of Greatness* (1968): 'After 1918 the values of a settled civilization were gone. The years of the war remained as the chief remembrance of things past and the future was uncertain.... Those who lost their lives lost all their bitterness. But those who survived felt sorrow without end' (quoted in Piazza : 1978,81). Indeed, to Isherwood, war is an apocalyptic event, an ancestral curse inherited by his generation; it invests 'the atmosphere of pessimism' and 'impending ruin'.

In *The Memorial* Mary Scriven, Lily's sister-in-law, is a middle-aged lady of aristocratic birth, who forgets her past and leads a hectic life while launching

into self-delusion of doing social work. She sees the Memorial at Chapelbridge as a hypocritical bore which must be shut out of her consciousness. Her room with its 'camouflaged divan surrounded by the day's debris' (*The Memorial*, 10) is symbolic. The disorder in the room suggests disorder in the life of the characters and makes it clear that like Anne, Mary's only daughter, who cannot find a sleeping place in the 'roomful of rubbish', the children of England were in quest of some solid support among the wreckage of life in the post-war England. Maurice and Anne lead an amnesiac life, deliberately opting for death of love. Edward Blake vacantly loiters; his mind is hammered by the irrevocable loss: 'Richard is dead ... This is what we have got ^{left} of Richard' (*The Memorial*, 123). Eric Vernon, the protagonist of the novel, whose father died in war, is a mass of neuroses and finds certain satisfaction by causing injury to his health. But, of all the war-survivors in the novel, Lily, Eric's mother, is perhaps most pathetic; war makes her emotionally derelict and psychologically maimed. Indeed, what Eric and Edward Blake speak of the moral repercussion of the war is true for all the characters of the novel: 'We are indeed at the crossways: every way lies tragedy, every way sorrow: the world must choose between evil and lesser evil; but always evil' (quoted in Piazza: 1978,85). There pervades in the novel a moral and psychological epidemic abroad, which leaves no one unaffected. It is this moral context which lends importance to the novel. 'The only assertion' says Brian Finney, 'which is given narrative authority ^{left} its position at the end of the novel is a negative one: "war ..., it ought never to have happened"' (1979,100).

The title of the novel is ironically derived from a scene of Chapelbridge Memorial where the war survivors of the Vernon family pay tribute with wreaths of flowers to the memory of the war victims. The Memorial service brings all the members of the family into a sort of unity and sets into relief all the varying features of the different characters. However, the sense of unity and relief proves to be short-lived as the shell-shocked war survivors soon differ in their attitude to war. The Memorial cross becomes symbolic of the cleavage between two generations: on the one side of the cross stand those whom Isherwood labels the 'Others' who romanticize in the Rupert Brookean manner the cause of war; on the other, stand Isherwood and his generation, embittered, disillusioned and neurotic who suffer from guilt for not participating in war and find no nobility in

the terrible massacre of what D.H. Lawrence calls 'a pack of jackals'. Lily, Major Charlesworth and old Mr. Vernon would line up on the far side of the cross, while Mary and her children would presume to join the embittered young. Eric and Edward would belong to Isherwood's 'My Generation'. Again, the Memorial cross might bear biblical allusion. It stands as a blasphemous antithesis to the cross of Christ. Its disciples are not animated with life, but sentenced to life-in-death like Eliot's Wastelanders. Paul Piazza's observation seems to be pertinent here as he says, 'inheriting nothing but "a heap of broken images", they are debased figures crouched in the shadow of a sterile cross' (1978,86).

The Memorial presents, though not as much pronounced as in *All the Conspirators*, a conflict between two generations : the 'Old Gang' and the 'New'. There is, on the one hand, a portrait of the dead world of the past with its moral and physical debris, as symbolized by Lily Vernon, a widow who lost her husband in the front and clings to obstinate mourning according to all traditional rites and rituals; on the other, a world of the living where people try to liberate themselves from the dead weight of the past. This world is represented by Eric Vernon and Lily's sister-in-law, Mary Scriven. Lily withdraws from the world to pass the rest of her life in endless mourning. It is ironical that instead of being overwhelmed with grief at the Memorial service in honour of those killed in war, Lily's attention is drawn to the orthodox rites and rituals. She silently repeats the name of Richard before the Memorial, although in the innermost recesses of her heart there is a depressing thought: 'Richard isn't anywhere. He's gone. He's dead' (*The Memorial*,90). Lily is, in fact, the relic of a world which is dead. On the contrary, Eric belongs to the new world born after the communist revolution when the old world crumbles out of existence. The result is the estrangement between an Edwardian mother and her rebellious son desperately trying to find an authentic self.

Mary Scriven, Lily's sister-in-law, who in her youth eloped with an ordinary bank clerk and subsequently after the birth of a boy and a girl was divorced, is a foil to Lily and a representative of Isherwood's 'My Generation'. Indeed, Isherwood's characterization of Mary and Lily, two mother-figures, is based on sharp contrast. Although Mary leads a truncated life, she crowds her personal

life with noisy excitement. She reveals a determination not to be borne down by the assumptions and demands of the past. She achieves a degree of liberation which no one does in the novel. Mary's house, as described by her daughter, is 'rather like the inside of a caravan' in contrast to Lily's empty, lifeless flat. She stands for a vigorous, mobile and happy-go-lucky way of living in the present as opposed to Lily who has adopted a death-in-life way of living. As Mary stands in front of the Memorial cross, she thinks: 'All this cult of dead people is only snobbery.... Living people are better than the dead ones. And we've got to get on with life' (*The Memorial*, 98). Indeed, Lily denies life, Mary impersonates it.

Eric Vernon, repulsed as he was with his mother's constricting grief, naturally responds to the elan of Mary and her children, Anne and Maurice, who indulge in moral *laissez faire*. He believes that if he could live with Mary, not with Lily and his cousins, 'he could expand like flower, breaking out of his own clumsy identity gaining strength and confidence' (*The Memorial*, 150). Their life at Gatesley is the affirmation of mother-child love, and Mary here stands just opposite to Lily: 'In aunt Mary's house he was a different being. The presence of his cousins seemed to give him power. He felt wonderfully calm and sure of himself' (*The Memorial*, 145). Indeed, Mary seems to be Isherwood's and consequently Eric's dream of motherhood come true. But what is interesting is that Eric is always haunted by his mother's ghoulish grief and the guilt it has planted in him. Infact, the past that had begun with his father's death and his mother's mourning clings to Eric. Eric cannot forget Lily 'hideous with grief. Her eyes swoll'n into slits... her face blotch'd and sallow' (*The Memorial*, 132). He vows never to marry and to live for ever with her. Lily, on the other hand, indicates very early in the novel her feeling that the present is of no use to her, and with Richard gone, Eric will become her only comfort and companion.

In *The Memorial* Isherwood presents the mother-figure of Lily as contrasted with the monstrous mother, Mrs. Lindsay of *All the Conspirators*. Although both of them continue the tradition of Evil Mother, there is now a telling shift in motivation. Both mothers are 'evil' in that they do not allow their children to grow into independence. Mrs. Lindsay is always alert about her sense of dominance and never allows her son to break free of her. Lily Vernon, on the contrary, seems

to be sympathetic to her son's problems and tries to understand his needs. Because she is not overtly malicious and as inhuman as Mrs. Lindsay, there is softening in the portrait of the mother-figure, and because the mother-figure softens and mellows, the protagonist can emerge fully, showing, and becoming more aware of, his inner feelings. One may recall here that Isherwood's stay at Berlin, owing to prolonged absence from his mother, enabled him to obtain this new understanding with regard to his tie with his mother. He is aware, as much as Eric, of why he quarrels — he wants his mother's love and needs her concern and at the same time he needs his own independence. What Isherwood presents here is an adolescent's classic dilemma — one who seeks to solidify his new identity and to modify his parental ties. In *The Memorial* the novelist shifts from the unbridled anger and rebellion of the son in *All the Conspirators* to an awareness of the hurt which caused it, indicating a growing awareness of himself as a self-determining individual. Isherwood invests Eric's concern with that of his own and gives vent to one of the worries dominating his own life: how to modify his ties with his mother so that he can develop his own identity while still maintaining the tie.

But as the novel progresses, the readers are at once aware that Eric has submitted neither to Lily's past nor to Mary's present. He is tossed between two contrary forces of Lily and Mary — the forces that split him as a child and at the same time continues their destructive work in his adulthood. Propelled as he was by an inner urge to assert independence and at the same time to get involved in the objective world around him, Eric abandons a promising career at Cambridge. He temporarily embraces Marxism and tours the slums at Wales. He accepts catholicism which ultimately proves to be a temporary escape, yielding no permanent solution to his personal problem. His confused motives rattle him. Eric becomes a tense, befuddled adolescent. It is here that one may construe a mutual tie between Eric and Edward Blake as both of them are destined to face the same conditions of life and as both are propelled by the same spirit of identity. To Edward, Eric is 'the only person I can trust' (*The Memorial*, 47), as Edward reveals in his suicidal note. Again, it is from a letter to Edward that we come to know Eric's decision to become a catholic.

Both Eric and Edward represent what Isherwood in *Lions and Shadows* calls 'the neurotic hero, the Truly Weak Man' (1985, 128), and the two characters are meant to suggest 'the two halves or aspects of the same person', one is to become 'an embodiment of the other's dream of himself as an epic character' (1985, 130). Edward Blake, in his search for something that will excite him and make his life meaningful, makes sincere attempts to break out of his limitations and to find a resting place in an unsatisfactory world. In fact, 'most self-conscious and self-aware, most active and mobile of all the characters in the novel, in his inabilities and frustrations', Alan Wilde observes, 'Blake is the Fisher King of Isherwood's 1930's *Waste Land*' (1971, 50). However, Edward and Eric are what is called the 'Truly Weak Man'. Both are doomed in the face of a hostile world — Edward commits suicide, while Eric is defeated.

Eric's problems, as those of Philip in *All the Conspirators*, stem from his commerce with his mother : he is a prey to his mother's constant, nagging mourning, 'to the semi superstitious fear... of meddling with the past' (*The Memorial*, 136) and to the simmering discontent with, and rebellion against the whole way of life as represented by his mother. What is implied here is that like Philip, Eric is drawn to the movement of life, but he always guards himself against involvement and ultimately retires into her personal 'inferno'. His life in Mary's household inspires him to evolve a fresh identity but his mother appears before his mind's eye like a demon — an obsession which he tries his best to exorcise but always in vain. Torn as he was between the claims of past and future, of Mary and Lily, of death and life, Eric leaves no stone unturned to find his authentic self but moves relentlessly back to the starting point. His movement from Cambridge to the Communist Party and then, finally, to catholicism, only reveals disintegration of his personality and will, and his absence from the third section of the novel shows his retirement into the state from which he started his quest for self-identity. For Eric, life is constantly a Test — a succession of hurdles which he never manages to tide over, and Isherwood's characterization of Eric is, indeed, an exploration of, and an obsessive concern with, the idea of failure. Isherwood here indicates that what seems to be the gesture of commitment may be simply and ultimately the refusal to make contact with life.

What one, then, derives from *The Memorial* is a world where isolated people make frantic attempts to make communications with others, but they ultimately recede to the Prufrockian inertia. The characters in *The Memorial*, unlike those of *All the Conspirators*, face a more oppressive world, not because they fail to communicate with each other, not because they struggle against the 'Old Gang' but because they struggle against the conditions of life in general. The result is that no one succeeds either in making communications with others or in modifying his parental ties; each one vacillates, as Eric does. As a character, then, Eric remains opaque, undefined; but as an embodiment of a problem he is distinct. We hardly develop any sense of Eric's individuality : what sort of life he leads, what gives him pleasure, what he thinks, whom he loves etc. In Eric there does emerge a fairly clear portrait of an adolescent making gestures to fashion and solidify a new identity, although it remains only a shadow portrait of a man.

Isherwood's knowledge of self thus influences his graphic portrayal of an adolescent artist seeking to establish a new identity as an independent adult. In *All The Conspirators* the rebellious artist remained thoroughly at loggerheads with his mother; in *The Memorial* Eric makes frantic attempts and becomes, to a certain extent, successful in modifying his ties with his mother and other people around him. He demonstrates a growing awareness of the meaning of experience and shows a better understanding of himself in relation to other characters who people the world of the novel. The novel thus marks a turning point in Isherwood's career and shows a step further in the artist's quest for self-identity. But Isherwood does not know what identity to give to his persona or, indeed, with whom to identify; yet the desire to do so is strong. In his subsequent novels like *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, *Goodbye to Berlin*, *Prater Violet* and *Down There on a Visit* Isherwood solves the problem of authentic portrayal by placing himself directly into the text, by identifying himself with the narrator protagonist — a device which would allow him to deal with the self as both subject and object and enable him to turn inward in order to confront outward reality more objectively.