

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CIVIL MONSTER

Mr. Norris Changes Trains

I had arrived in Berlin with a look out for civil monsters. And since my imagination had very little contact with reality, I soon persuaded myself that I had found several.

— Christopher Isherwood

Since the publication of *The Memorial* in 1932 Christopher Isherwood had written nothing worthy of his name. In March 1933 he contributed 'An Evening at the Bay' to Michael Roberts' *New Country*. Based as it was on a visit of Isherwood and Edward Upward to Freshwater Bay in the spring of 1928, the work shows the artist's penchant for placing himself directly into the text. As early as 1931, during his stay on Reugen Island with Walter, later joined by Spender and Auden, Isherwood started to think, as he wrote to Roger Berford, about 'a book of stories and novels about Berlin' (quoted in Finney: 1979,85). The book was to be called *The Berlin Stories* or *The Lost*, originally thought in German to be *Die Verlorenen*. Berlin had, for Isherwood, a peculiar fascination, and his trip to Germany on March 13, 1929 structured the artist's literary career during the thirties.

Isherwood spent his years in Berlin mostly by attending communist meetings and translating several reports on the communist organization. He used to come across Nazi monstrosity under the leadership of Hitler. A rebel by birth, Isherwood ultimately hit back. He sided with the communists and even wished to become a member of the Communist Party: 'It's the next nearest thing to being a Communist' (Isherwood: 1993,108). But Isherwood never became a communist, a Marxist either. An artist as he was, he abhorred political chauvinism, and much like T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, shows his acute awareness of the 'modern inferno' that Hitler's Germany was.

While in Berlin, Isherwood kept a detailed diary which would later supply him with most of the material to create the period and ambience of the Berlin

novels. In the preface to *The Berlin Stories* he writes : 'From 1929 to 1933, I lived continually in Berlin Already, during that time, I had made up my mind that I would one day write about the people I'd met and the experiences I was having' (v). Evidently, the external events in which Isherwood got involved and the individuals he met in Berlin structured Isherwood's life and literary career as well. In May 1930 he came in contact with a bisexual, Walter, who would appear as Otto Nowak in the Berlin novels. A few weeks later Isherwood moved to a neighbouring slum of middle class Berlin. Here he came across Jean Ross, Gisa Soloweitschik and Wilfred Israel who would later appear in *Goodbye to Berlin* as Sally Bowles, Natalia Landauer and Bernhard Landauer. Again, sometime early in 1931 Isherwood came across Gerald Hamilton, a journalist, portrayed in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* as Arthur Norris. But the most significant event that occurred in Isherwood's life during these years was his meeting with Heinz, a seventeen-year-old German. Isherwood lived with Heinz as his homosexual partner until Heinz's arrest and imprisonment in 1937. The relationship played an important part in the artist's quest for identity, for asserting independence of an adolescent from his familial or parental ties. However, Isherwood turned to these persons repeatedly to establish a sense of self and to refine his artistry. As he had in *All the Conspirators* and *The Memorial*, in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* Isherwood presents himself and his concerns, but here with added investigatory elements which deepen the meaning of experience and purpose. In the Berlin books, the artist is found to be more introspective. He looks more broadly at the outward world in order to look inward more deeply, which catalyzed the artist's process of self-quest and of the ethics of salvation.

Mr. Norris Changes Trains, published on August 1934, is a pruned product from the heavily plotted novel, *The Berlin Stories*, later called *The Lost* but it never materialised. Indeed, both the Berlin books were derived from *The Lost*, as both of them were intended by the author to portray those who have lost their way — that German mass who were now marked down as Hitler's victims and those whom respectable society regards as moral outcasts. G.S. Fraser in *The Modern Writer and His World* writes : 'The deep theme of both books is the decay of a civilization, the decay of tradition and its tragic or stultifying, or sometimes absurd and ridiculous effects on individual human lives' (1961,91).

Mr. Norris Changes Trains is concerned with the problem of deception and political hypocrisy. The title of the book was intended by the novelist to mean not only that Mr. Norris keeps changing trains — that is to say, keeps changing countries in a hurry to escape his creditors and the police — but also that he keeps changing allies and political colours. Alan Wilde observes: 'Mr. Norris's drama and those of all the characters in the book are played out against a larger political and social background — specifically, the coming to power of the Nazi Party in the chaotic Germany of the 1930's'⁷ (1971, 60). In short, the secretive Mr. Norris, with his wig and equivocal habits of speech, is the most complete example of the tissue of lies, evasion and deceits which also characterised the sexual and political underworld of Berlin in the novel.

The novel has at the heart of its story Mr. Arthur Norris whom William Bradshaw, the narrator, once meets in a train to Berlin. Arthur's behaviour towards the passport officers rouses Bradshaw's suspicion, yet he cannot imagine Arthur to be a real rogue. Then after his arrival in Berlin Bradshaw goes to Arthur Norris and is at once puzzled by the two doors of the house — one, with a nameplate 'Arthur Norris, Private' and the other 'Arthur Norris, Export and Import'. Bradshaw's suspicion mounts when he finds a German young man, Mr. Norris's secretary, Schmidt, to appear at the 'Export-Import' door and after a short while, to reappear at the other. The narrator senses some mystery in the behaviour of both the employer and the employee who play regular hide and seek to dodge a creditor who finally goes away threatening Mr. Norris. He also partakes of the masochistic pleasures offered by stern young ladies in leather boots and accepts other people's perversions without qualms. Like Isherwood's friend, Hamilton, Norris is an epicurean, a leaden butterfly tasting the nectar of flowers across the world. One day Bradshaw is implored by Norris to go to the Swiss Sports Resort accompanied by Baron Von Pregnitz, alias Kunc, to be introduced to Mr. Van Hoorn. At the Swiss Sports Resort he tries to know the identity of Margot, a business tycoon of France. Suddenly a telegram comes to William from the communist Ludwig Bayer, asking him to return to Berlin. Bradshaw rushes back to Berlin immediately and meets Bayer, who tells him that Norris is a foreign spy and Van Hoorn is none but Margot. He also manages to know that Arthur Norris collects information about the communists by posing to be a sympathizer

to them and sells it to the agents of the French Secret Service. However, Mr. Norris, who ultimately turns out to be a political fraud, a spy and is expelled from Germany by the political police, is the medium through whom Bradshaw has his first acquaintance with Berlin life.

The whole story of Mr. Norris, shrouded as it is in mystery and suspicion, has resemblance with a detective or a mystery novel. Bradshaw's first impression of Arthur in the train is 'of a schoolboy surprised in the act of breaking laws' (*Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, 1). There is an air of mystery when the narrator comes across two nameplates in Arthur's drawing-room — 'Arthur Norris, Private' and 'Arthur Norris, Export-Import.' Moreover, Arthur's wig to which Bradshaw's eyes repeatedly stray and equivocal habits of speeches become the major expression of the attempt to disguise reality with contrived appearance. Indeed, everything about Arthur, including the elaborate ritual of the dressing table, suggests that he is not what he seems to be. Alan Wilde remarks: 'Both the narrative technique and characterization of the book are at least superficially analogous to those of the mystery novel' (1971, 56). But in a mystery novel the reader's interest centres round some mysterious incident and he tries to understand who has done it. In *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* the interest is centred round the protagonist. Wilde himself offers argument in the following words: 'For the "who-done-it" of the detective novel, Mr. Norris substitutes the "What-is-he" of the modern roman d' aventure. The question is most insistent with respect to the titular hero of the book himself' (1971, 56-57).

Mr. Norris Changes Trains has got historical value and political significance not because of the book's political commitment but because of the novelist's brilliant record of the social decay and political hypocrisy that prevailed in Berlin during the last days of the Weimar Republic. The scene of the bootfetish house, with its obnoxious portrait of the homosexual Pregnitz reclining 'in the embrace of a powerful youth' and Mr. Norris enjoying his debasement before a painted prostitute underlines this decay. Indeed, Isherwood, a foreigner in a doomed capital, brilliantly records as he saw everywhere civilization crumbling, everywhere war more immanent: 'Berlin was in a state of civil war. Hate exploded suddenly, without warning, out of nowhere...' (*Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, 107).

Apart from this, Mr. Norris's self-centred hedonism parallels the attitudes of the Berlin population. His sexual masochism resembles the political debasement of the contemporary Berlin demagogues. Arthur's distortion of language to conceal the truth from Bradshaw and everyone else is but a literary analogue of the debasement of linguistic meaning by the politicians and the press as the political confrontation between the Right and the Left heightens. Isherwood uses Norris's long absence from the book to bring the political situation to the forefront of the narrative. There are frequent authorial interjections describing the political scene in Chapter XI and XVI. Almost all the characters become embroiled in the political maelstrom. We are not, however, given a lot of abstract argument about how Hitler rose to power or about the moral implications of Nazism, but we can perceive Isherwood's insight into political themes. What the novelist exactly does in portraying the contemporary political situation is finely observed by Hena Maes-Jelinek: 'Isherwood does not discuss the consequences of the event but shows how it affects people' (quoted in Piazza: 1978, 90).

In *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, as in the earlier novels, Isherwood is preoccupied with the self and its relation to the world: Here he sets to write a 'dynamic portrait' and uses the term for Mr. Norris as he sought to describe the novel as one whose interest depends on the gradual revealing of a character rather than an action, crisis and confrontation. What the action of such a novel does is to remove layer after layer of the 'skin' of outer appearance — thus taking the reader inward from his first superficial impressions and too hastily formed judgements until he is face to face, at last, with the 'real' individual. Isherwood wanted to keep the reader's attention concentrated on Norris, which is why the narrator, the 'I' of the story, William Bradshaw (a name derived from Isherwood's own, Christopher William Isherwood Bradshaw) had to be as unobtrusive as possible. The narrative method encourages the reader thoroughly to put himself in the narrator's shoes, to share his experiences, to identify with him in all his reactions. As the novel progresses, it is William Bradshaw, even more than the reader, who becomes aware of the double dealing of Arthur Norris. The narrative method of the story thus enables the narrator also to know his own self in the process of exploring that of Mr. Norris.

In the earlier novels, *All the Conspirators* and *The Memorial* both Philip and Eric made themselves approachable heroes to reorder their private lives. But they were not, like William in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, gifted with the investigative approach. Bradshaw does not merely tell us how he feels, he questions whether his feelings, perceptions or judgements are correct or valid; and if not, why not. Arthur Norris's story is simply an occasion for the reader to understand William Bradshaw: why he is attracted to Arthur, what he learns, what his ultimate motivation is etc. And as the story advances, some advance is also noticeable in the character of the narrator: William undergoes a form of education out of his experiences of the world he faces and of the individuals he meets *en route*. What Alan Wilde remarks, speaking of the use of 'I' narrator in Isherwood's fiction, is relevant here: 'All of Isherwood's first-person novels, whatever their ostensible subjects, concern the education of the narrators' (1971, 63). The William Bradshaw who emerges at the end of Arthur Norris's story is but a continuation of the Christopher Isherwood himself who sets off at the end of *Lions and Shadows* for Berlin.

On the surface, *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* is concerned with the adventures of a small-time con man in pre-Nazi Germany. Beneath the surface can be discerned the story the narrator wishes to tell, of himself, a story directly related to Isherwood, the man. At the novel's outset, as soon as William meets Arthur and sees his fear at having his passport checked, he says, 'I felt more than ever protective towards him at that moment', and with hindsight he understands how 'this affectionate protectiveness, which he so easily and dangerously inspired in me, was to colour all our future dealings' (*Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, 10). A year later William receives Arthur's letter explaining his unannounced departure from Germany and admits that 'My feelings for Arthur had been largely possessive' (*Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, 100). Throughout the whole course of the novel's action William maintains this 'protective' and 'possessive' attitude towards the 'amazing old crook', who conceals his criminal activities from the world adopting a mask of snobbery and aestheticism.

However, in spite of his duplicity and deception we are compelled to suspend our moral judgement because the transparency of his intended

deception lends him a pervasive charm. Nor is William Bradshaw ever found to carry through any confrontation with Arthur. The narrator thus mentions: 'Stage by stage I was building up a romantic background for Arthur.... I was fond of Arthur with an affection strengthened by obstinacy' (*Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, 44). Modelled on the character of Isherwood's friend, Gerald Hamilton, an epicurean, Arthur Norris is at any rate an unusual combination of charm and wit balanced by a complete absence of moral principles. His morning toilet, his habit of travelling first class, of eating at the best restaurants, of happily pawning the sitting-room carpet to finance his birthday party — all add up to the picture of a lovable eccentric — someone who deserves one's sympathy and understanding. In fact, what Hamilton said of himself that he was not 'everybody's cup of tea but a certain person's liquor' (quoted in Finney : 1979, 112) is true of Arthur Norris also.

The more one examines Norris's explanations of his conduct, the more one realises how gullible William Bradshaw is. On every occasion the narrator is outwitted by Norris. He unconsciously assists Arthur in his elaborate game of deception by turning him into a romantic criminal for the benefit of the 'old crook'. Schmidt, Arthur's secretary, assists his master in the crimes he perpetrates and bears all the odium attached to such immoral activities as blackmail and treachery. But the question that invariably arises is why does the narrator indulge in Arthur's crimes and fails to combat the sinister aspects of the rogue so blatantly apparent in his alter ego, Schmidt. David Thomas has suggested that William Bradshaw is a successor to Eric Vernon, another Truly Weak Man who 'attempts to purge himself of neurotic fears ... by the familiar Baudelairian descent into the nether world — the society of criminals, sexual eccentrics and revolutionary politics' (quoted in Finney : 1979, 114). Although Isherwood nowhere tells us anything about William Bradshaw's past, it is our assumption, however tacit, that he was a victim of puritanical English social and moral norms and was thus compelled to suspend all judgement.

John Whitehead has, however, offered a convincing interpretation of William Bradshaw's complicity with Mr. Norris. He points out that there prevailed 'a filial relationship between the narrator and Mr. Norris, who becomes for him

"a disreputable Father-figure", reminiscent of the relations connecting Hall to Falstaff (quoted in Finney : 1979, 114). William's relationship with Arthur allows the author, as in *All the Conspirators* and *The Memorial*, to explore whether or not a young person can have an independent life, yet still be close to and on good terms with a parent-figure. William sees Arthur as a Father-figure and feels an affectionate protectiveness towards him. Arthur also puts the matter most keenly, pointing out to William that 'After all I'm old enough to be your father' (*Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, 157). In many ways, therefore, the father-son relationship is inverted. William is also found to act as a steadying influence on the older man and is able to suggest how Arthur can overcome his troubles. This dimension of their relationship suggests the narrator's confidence in his own abilities.

Mr. Norris Changes Trains, among other things, portrays not only the adolescent's task of modifying relationships with parents but explores, unlike the earlier books, the limits of influence the individual possesses. The reader gains an understanding of William as one who tries to sway the objective world around him. Philip Lindsay in *All the Conspirators* could only rant and rave; Eric Vernon in *The Memorial* could only ask, 'why?' But William Bradshaw in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* displays a stronger sense of the self in viewing the world realistically rather than idealistically and in influencing the people he meets. We learn that William helps Arthur dress in the morning, that he feels an 'affectionate protectiveness' towards him and that he helps Norris, on several occasions, to tide over his difficulties. The narrator, therefore, develops a conviction in his ability to influence the life of others. Indeed, an awareness of who he is and how he acts is probably the most significant difference between Isherwood's protagonist in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* and those in the earlier fictions.

William Bradshaw, the narrator of the story, who seems from the beginning a detached spectator of a game, apprehends terrible public consequences of Mr. Norris's private crimes. Alan Wilde, in this connection, observes that 'For a poet like Spender, the problem is to show what happens to the private self in the light of the public one; for Isherwood, as we have seen, it is to indicate the

public consequences of private acts' (1971,60). Evidently, then, Mr. Norris's whole drama of deception and moral *laissez faire* brings into limelight the whole panorama of political chaos and social and moral decay that engulfed the Berliners in the 1930's Germany. Any reader is at once struck by the profusion of 'animal' images in the book, say, lions, tigers, cats, cobras etc. When the novel opens, Mr. Norris and William are found to meet at Zoo station, and it ends with Mr. Norris's secretary, Schmidt, who is referred to as 'Reptile'. The 'animal' images only establish the truth of what lies beneath the outward civilized surface of Berlin life where the pimp Otto, the journalist Helen Pratt, Schmidt and even Mr. Norris are, in their respective amoral paths, struggling incessantly, to be among the fittest to survive. The whole of the novel is, in fine, a moral study of the nature and consequences of amorality that prevailed all over Berlin during Hitler's rise to power.

Only the communists, as Isherwood portrays them in the novel, particularly, Ludwig Bayer, show some signs of virtue and moral gesture. One day Bradshaw attends a party meeting. He is struck by the strength and restrained passion of the participants : what struck him 'most was the fixed attention of the upturned rows of faces; faces of the Berlin working class...' (*Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, 59-60). The crowd shows, by implication, an attractive enthusiasm for a commitment or cause to the humanity at large. The character of Ludwig Bayer, dedicated and astute as he is, is an embodiment of tolerance and virtue. When he exposes Norris's duplicity to William — 'Mind, I have not said against him as a man; the private life is not our concern.' — Bayer suggests the dominant ethical assumption, if there is at all any in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*. Bayer's 'animal eyes' and constant smile, his outmanoeuvring of Arthur Norris and his final rescue of Bradshaw from Norris's complicity only establish the fact that his actions are performed in the service of a cause which puts him in a class apart from others.

The moral flaws, however, which Bradshaw is rather late to detect in Norris reveals to the readers the fact that Norris is the 'civil monster' whom Isherwood was trying to find out in Berlin. Isherwood writes in '*Mr. Norris and I*' that 'I arrived in Berlin on the lookout for civil monsters. And since my imagination had very little contact with reality, I soon persuaded myself that I had found several'

(1966, 86). The communist leader Bayer discloses to Bradshaw the abominable features of Mr. Norris's character: 'Nevertheless it is true. I can prove it if you wish. Norris has been paid to keep an eye on us, to give information about our plans and movement' (*Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, 158). Norris, who uses Kuno in political spying and in gratifying his sexual perversions, is according to Alan Wilde, 'the slow unfolding of the psychology of a monster, egoistic, conscienceless, totally unaware of the evil he is doing' (1971, 59). The treachery to Bradshaw, to Baron Von Pregnitz and to the Communist Party, which is disclosed in the aftermath of the 'Swiss Project', provides the turning point in the reader's and in William's understanding of Arthur Norris. Isherwood writes: 'And if in my letters to England, I sometimes referred to him as "a most amazing old crook", I only meant by this that I wanted to imagine him as a glorified being: audacious and self-reliant, reckless and calm. All of which, in reality, he only too painfully and obviously wasn't' (*Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, 44).

What we perceive from the remark is a young man who wants to see things as larger than life and wants to present himself as worldly with exciting connections. These are in fact not the wishes of the narrator; they are the concerns of Isherwood's life as well. As long as William is looked upon by Norris as a parental figure, he is incapable of sufficient distance from the latter. Not until Bayer, the communist, reveals the extent of his duplicity does the narrator achieve sufficient distance from him to see him in true colours. During his interview with Bayer he is compelled to realize his gullibility in his past dealing with Norris. When he discovers that Norris has used him as a decoy with Baron, he indicates that his anger with Baron is with himself 'for being such an idiot'. After this confession he is at best purged of his romantic fantasies about the criminal world to which he was so neurotically drawn at the beginning of the novel. Cyril Connolly has rightly observed that 'Bradshaw does undergo a form of education in the course of the book by the end of which he has grown up' (quoted in Finney: 1979, 114).

Isherwood's use of the first-person narrator in the books beginning with *Mr Norris Changes Trains* and ending in *A Meeting by the River*, provides the narrator with a powerful means of self-discovery. The narrator's perceptions and feelings during the whole course of the novel serve as a process of learning.

In *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* William Bradshaw's observations serve to tell us how William feels and thus allow us to discern a narrator who is more aware of his self than any other narrator Isherwood has ever presented:

I felt more than ever protective towards him at the moment (*Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, 10).

I was as hurt as a spinster who has been deserted by her cat (*Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, 100).

I felt myself harden towards him again (*Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, 204).

These feelings of the narrator form a kind of education which charts a possible growth in the character of William. What he obtains comes as a result of what he learns about Norris from the latter's part in the 'Swiss' affair. Although William Bradshaw maintained characteristic detachment from Norris and despite his failure in carrying through any confrontation with the 'amazing old crook', he does give evidence of self-development. Much earlier in the novel, when William came across a communist rally where Norris delivered a lecture with rhetorical gestures, he felt: 'One day, perhaps, I shall be with it, but never of it' (*Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, 60). This perception, whether it indicates Isherwood's own feeling or not, well suggests the narrator's growth in self-awareness, and as the novel suggests, and as the narrator looks back on his adventure, it is clear that he is never 'of it'. Indeed, the William Bradshaw, who at the end expresses his moralistic distaste at Arthur's duplicity and shows aloofness, is not the same person whom we met at the outset of the book. This reversal surely marks a step in the artist's search for identity and for stabilising it in the midst of an unstable world.

Mr Norris Changes Trains is an overt expression of Isherwood's homosexual nature. It is freer and more direct presentation of the author's sexual identity and preference than any of his previous novels. Although the narrator, William Bradshaw, maintains aloofness from Norris's excesses of sex; his sexual involvement is never glossed over. Instead of protesting against Baron's proposal of homosexuality, he agrees to meet him in the Baron's personal 'flat'. Indeed, William's apparent indifference to sex in the midst of a salacious environment only implies an obvious fascination for it. There is no reticence in portraying the sexual relationships, and the sexual scenes are more straightforwardly integrated into the text than they are in the earlier books. In *All*

the Conspirators, Philip's homosexuality is strained and self-conscious. Eric Vernon in *The Memorial* experiences repressed homosexuality, which is the symptom of his psychological disorder. But in the Berlin novels, beginning with *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, Isherwood openly proclaims his homosexuality and seeks to find out not only his sexual identity but explores whether a homosexual artist can find his place in the society. Isherwood, therefore, in his love for Heinz, is creating a new life, establishing himself on his own terms and realising his own desires, no longer concealing his homosexuality but committing himself, in word and deed, to this new identity.

In fine, the impression that we form of Christopher Isherwood in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* in the light of his awareness of Arthur Norris along with contemporary politics of Berlin and of his own sexual identity is further confirmed in the companion novel, *Goodbye to Berlin*. Here Isherwood's own circumstances and the political events of Germany, however, made him more self-reflective and serious. He moves away from his concerns with self and sex to wrestle with his place in the world as he works through the adolescent's task of viewing the world realistically rather than idealistically, of seeing people around him in true colours rather than romantically. Indeed, in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* one discerns a sense of adventure, intrigue and wonderment; but in *Goodbye to Berlin* one encounters a deeper sense of life, endurance and understanding, envisaging a fuller growth on the part of the artist.