

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

More and more I write for myself, I think, more and more writing is appearing to me as a kind of self-analysis.

— Christopher Isherwood.

At the end of *Down There on a Visit*, Paul says to the author - narrator: 'You know, you really are a tourist to your bones .... That is the story of your life' (Isherwood : 1985, 269-70). The story of Isherwood's life is the story of each of his novels in turn. In other words, 'a traveller, a wanderer' as he thoroughly was, Isherwood puts into his works the varied experiences as he confronts his self at different periods of his life : his early iconoclasm at home, his flirtation with communism and his latest conversion to Vedantism. At each successive transition the artist finds some new revelation and each new revelation urges him on to a further probing into his identity until the final revelation comes only at the end of his career. In an interview with Stanley Poss, Isherwood thus said : 'More and more I write for myself, I think, more and more writing is appearing to me as a kind of self-analysis' (Poss : 1961, 42). This relentless search for self, for establishing his identity as an artist, is what precisely underlies all that Isherwood wrote right up to the end of his career. His novels, in fine, constitute, as it were, a long 'Bildungsroman', tracing as they do the whole trajectory of a rebellious artist's evolution towards self-discovery.

Born in the turbulent period of the twentieth century, Christopher William Isherwood Bradshaw (1904) along with the group of writers of the thirties, say, W.H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, Stephen Spender etc., with whom he was generally associated, found everything rocking round, the self remaining the only stable element in the mercurial world. In fact, the writers who came of age too early for World War I and too late for the Second were overpowered by the generation's anxiety and perplexity, more so by the dilemma they confronted over their private and public selves : for them the problem was achieving integrity. Virginia Woolf points out in her essay 'The Leaning Tower'

that the tumult and revolutions around the globe were what prevented my younger colleagues in the thirties from producing meaningful art. A sense of dislocation seemed pervasive, prompting Stephen Spender to label the era 'The Divided Generation'. Ostensibly, then, the writers of the thirties, caught as they were between, as Day Lewis put it, 'two worlds at war', desired some accommodation between self and world, and all of them took as their favourite subject matter the 'comparatively stable' self. Art and experience could not be neatly divided, for public events did affect private sensibilities, especially when these reflected disorder. W.H. Auden, for example, in 'Psychology and Art Today' defined art as tied to both individual and society, and sought reconciliation between private and public selves; Day Lewis related the search for personal identity in 'It is Becoming Now to Declare My Allegiance'; Spender explored the tension between compromise and self-betrayal in his autobiography, *World Within World* (1951). Similarly, Isherwood's novels, perhaps all of them, exemplify a tussle between private and public issues — a dilemma as to how to express a feeling that had started as a public emotion and later became private. Right from *All the Conspirators* (1928) down to his last novel, *A Meeting by the River* (1967) Isherwood shows a sustained attempt to establish contact with the objective world around. The reasons are not far to seek. The overriding concern with the time's deformity and the anxiety of the generation led the young authors of the decade to be exclusively aware of their self, of the importance of individual identity as a source of stability.

The common 'anxiety' that figures so prominently in the literature of the thirties writers may be said to have originated from their acute awareness of the historical as much as the contemporary political and social conditions of the century. They were keenly alive to what happened around them and survived their terrible tests : 'The Great War and its lacerating effects from which the world had not yet recovered, its shattering aftermath, Marxism, Freudianism, the Spanish Civil War, the Sino-Japanese war, Pre-Hitler Germany, the Second Great War and the moral and spiritual crisis of the time...' (Piazza : 1978,195). The Great War of 1914-18 which was to end all wars settled nothing, composed nothing and satisfied nobody. The Treaty of

Versailles (1919) which imposed unbearable war debt upon Germany only intensified the Second World War (1939). However, the inter-war years were the worst years of economic depression, widespread unemployment, chaos and despair. People became neurotic and their ruling emotions were fear and anxiety at the gathering storm of an imminent war. War-phobia became the dominant metaphor and recurrent image in most of the contemporary writings. Graham Greene's *It's a Battlefield* (1934), W.H. Auden's *The Orators* (1932), *The Dance of Death* (1933), Christopher Isherwood's *The Memorial* (1932) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) offer a bleak picture of a class struggling against bourgeois values and haunted by a sense of guerilla war. Samuel Hynes says: 'Indeed, social, political and economic conflicts together seemed to amount to another war, a third shadow over the thirties that touches lives and imaginations as deeply as the shadows of these wars, the one that was past and the one that was coming' (1976,41).

In the thirties, literature became socially and politically a conscious art. The outstanding writers of the decade, say, George Orwell, Graham Greene, Stephen Spender, Christopher Isherwood, C. Day Lewis show an acute awareness of contemporary politics. Politics formed the prominent subtexts in novels or poems. Rex Warner has clearly enunciated this peculiar marriage between politics and literature: 'Moreover, we have learnt that a novel can exercise as much (or even more) political influence as can a procession or an official leaflet' (1946,129). Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* (1937) catches the atmosphere of politics of the day and convey an overriding sense of disruption and dislocation, confusion and anxiety of its generation. In Greene's novels of the thirties we notice his preoccupation with the thought of an impending war and neurosis of the people. His early novel, *Stamboul Train* (1932) is tinged with politics, while *In the Quiet American* (1955) presents two opposing forces: communism and colonialism, materialism and catholicism. Rex Warner in *The Aerodrome* (1938) and *The Professor* (1941) reveals how the radicals and the reactionaries were at war with one another in this decade. This sense of dislocation and disintegration, crisis and despair led Stephen Spender to call the era 'The Divided Generation.' Virginia Woolf believed that uncertainties and tumult possessed her younger colleagues so

much that 'they had nothing settled to look at, nothing peaceful to remember, nothing certain to come' (1967,176).

A significant aspect of the writers of the thirties is that they were largely Leftist in their political leanings. The Spanish Civil War promised a new course as the young found their opportunity to rally in support of the Republican Government's attempt to resist a Franco aided by both Hitler and Mussolini. They entered the Communist Party or flirted with Marxism. The instant success of Russia in economic sphere following Lenin's New Economic Policy prompted the contemporary intellectuals to believe that communist system would provide a panacea for all their political and economic problems. Thus W.H. Auden and his followers, basing their thought on left-wing political ideology took up the causes of the poor masses with genuine sympathy and often with striking sympathy. C. Day Lewis' *The Magnetic Mountain* (1933) is one of the poet's best political verses, which clearly traces Auden's strong influence. Lewis found hope for a distracted world in left-wing political ideals. Stephen Spender, a member of the Auden generation, served as a non-combatant with the Republican armies during the Spanish Civil War. His *Poems* (1933) and the autobiographical book, *World Within World* (1951) clearly expose the attitudes of the generation and show the writer's political faith in the Left. Christopher Isherwood, an anti-Fascist as he was, gives expression to his proletarian sympathies and flirtation with Marxism in his Berlin novels. In *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), for instance, he takes up the cause of poor Otto and offers a vivid account of how Otto became a victim of politico-economic conditions under which he was living. W.H. Auden in his drama, *The Dance of Death* (1933) portrays the decline of a class, its members' dream of a new life, which is no more than a secret desire for the old, for there is only death inside. The fact is that the writers of the decade were all bourgeois artists in revolt. In short, they were all individualists and their major preoccupation was to present a picture of the decaying world order. As regards the political character of the thirties writers, Virginia Woolf's observation seems to be pertinent here : 'In 1930 the youngmen at college were forced to be aware of what was happening in Russia, in Germany, in Italy and in Spain.... They read Marx. They became communists. They became anti-Fascists' (1967,172).

During the inter-war years vested interest in psychological research turned the novelists to a deeper investigation of the hidden impulses of man. The fact is that owing to the outbreak of the First World War the acknowledged values of life were shattered and the process of inwardness was quickened, fostered by the writings of Bergson, Freud and William James. Freud's 'Dream' analysis and the concept of 'Father Fixation' or 'Mother Fixation' opened the way to the exploration of the vast fields of the subconscious and unconscious, and thus inspired the novelists' tendency to dwell more and more within the mind of their characters. The leading novelists of the period, say, Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf resorted to the technique of 'Stream of Consciousness' to capture the ebb and flow that occur, concur and even clash in the dark chamber of the human psyche. The term 'Stream of Consciousness' was taken over from *Principles of Psychology* by William James in 1890. James said : 'Consciousness does not appear to itself chopped up in bits .... It is nothing jointed; it flows.... Let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life' (quoted in *Robert Allen* : 1954,331). However, this technique of 'Stream of Consciousness' along with the interior monologues has been used in plenty by the novelists of the period to catch the pre-speech level of consciousness and to enable the reader to share the epiphanies and the continuous as 'present' of the consciousness of the characters.

Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1915-35) presents a mental history of Miriam Henderson, whose impressions recorded from time to time enable her author to convey the very sense of life. Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) marks a complete break with the traditional novels in respect of subject matter, technique and language. The novel is written in a variety of styles, and seeks to reproduce not only the sights, sounds and smells of Dublin but also the memories, emotions and desires of his people in the drab modern London. Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) depicts the psychological time as contrasted with the mechanical time. The chiming of the clock serves an artistic purpose helping the novelist to portray the very shift of thought.

Before the thirties, no other generation had shown so close an interest in psycho-analysis, instinctual life and spiritual disturbance as to create a growing assumption that all men are cases to be diagnosed. In fact, after

Richardson, Joyce and Woolf in the twenties, Graham Greene, Rex Warner, Christopher Isherwood in the thirties reproduced the flow of man's thoughts, feelings and reveries, and we notice in their writings the influence of dream upon reality and reality upon dream. The ideas of death-wish, the supremacy of the unconscious, repression and guilt, conflict between ego and super ego, neuroses and anxiety abound in the novels of the thirties and testify to the influences of Freud, Groddeck and Kierkegaard. Freud had shown the effect of interaction of the various elements in man's mind upon his activities and asserted that the unconscious is the major and more dominant level of the mind. The mind is the reservoir of our dreams and desires and the source of our instincts. But to Groddeck, the unconscious is a part of the psyche, a part of the 'Id'. The 'Id' being the deepest recess of man represents the instinctual side of his existence. The 'Id' is something similar to Shaw's 'Life Force'. Freud's concept of the neuroses or Love's psychosomatic theory of diseases and of the harmful effects of repression and Groddeck's theory of illness are well noted in the novels of Isherwood and Auden. Isherwood felt that 'Sigmund Freud was responsible for the greatest literary event of his time' (quoted in Fryer : 1977, 78). It is significant that through Freud Isherwood as well as the whole lot of his contemporaries accepted the belief that their parents were responsible for absolutely everything that stunted the growth of their children. The parents' crime was that they failed to recognize that a psychological revolution had taken place. 'It was all their fault' Isherwood says 'and we would never forgive' (quoted in Fryer :1977,78). Victor in Isherwood's first novel, *All the Conspirators* (1928) is left sexually crippled as he used to repress his feelings in accordance with the ethos of his elders, which ultimately made his life 'one gigantic lie'. Isherwood's indebtedness to Groddeck may be traced to his awareness of the 1920's myth of psychologically determined illness of the intellectual younger generation. Both Auden and Isherwood write of the prevailing guerilla warfare that is being waged between the young and the old, a concept principally derived from Groddeck. This formed the very theme<sup>of</sup> Isherwood's *All the Conspirators* (1928) and *The Memorial* (1932).

Graham Greene entered the field of psycho-analysis and pathology in the powerful accounts of the tortured souls. *The Power and the Glory* (1940) and *Brighton Rock* (1938) are studies of morbid psychology. In *The Wild Goose Chase* (1937) and *The Aerodrome* (1938) Rex Warner studies the neurotic men of the thirties, and is concerned chiefly with the drama of the soul. In *All the Conspirators* (1928) Victor's thought-stream in which he is thinking of Philip's sitting-room as a specimen of 'an adult male extrovert', in which he would see 'observable tendencies of narcissism' and 'claustrophobia' shows Isherwood's vested interest in the flow of man's thoughts and reveries. Another novel *Down There on a Visit* is Isherwood's successful attempt of reproducing 'that nether world within the individual which is the place of loneliness, alienation and hatred'.

But the most prominent influence that the writers of the thirties imbibed in the presentation of 'the despairing mass of displaced persons and paralysed Hamlets' came from Soren Kierkegaard, the father of Existentialist philosophy. The thirties was mainly the decade of anxiety and the term 'Angst' that became recurrent in the literature of the period was derived from Kierkegaard. In Kierkegaard's concept of 'Dread' and 'leap into faith' the writers found a convincing solution to the problem of guilt and anxiety that overpowered man's soul. The anxiety that the writers of the period gave clear and loud voice to in their work was the dilemma they faced in their attempts to connect their individual self to the society they lived in. The writers were aware of the current social issues, of the fast-changing public world and of their impact upon their private lives. The young intellectuals such as Auden, Isherwood and Orwell were torn between writing and the urge to accommodate with the world. Auden in such poems as 'O What is That Sound' and Spender in 'The Shadow of a War' and *World Within World*, Greene in *The Power and the Glory* and Isherwood in his Berlin novels like *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1935) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) shows actions as self-consciously symbolic and analyse social issues as allied to the conditions of self. The anxiety, then, that sprang from their desire to connect the self to the objective world or their 'desire to be whole, to be

human' as Mrs. Virginia Woolf puts it (1967, 176) indicates the influence of Kierkegaard on the thirties writers.

Isherwood's novels, in particular, exemplify how society or the objective world affects the individual and demands his involvement. It is involvement, not escape, finally, that gives meaning to the artist's life. He emphasized society and the world at large but always with the individual at the centre. Isherwood chose the novel as his means of self-exploration indicating thereby his desire to examine his beliefs dramatically as well as emotionally, reflecting at the same time upon them as a private individual. It is this overarching concern with the self that lies at the heart of his novels and presents a sensitive appreciation of the social forces and emotional needs that define and shape a man's life. The dramatization of the interaction between the self and the world is thus crucial to Isherwood as his novels form a 'Bildungsroman' recording the growth of the artist as he confronts his self at the various stages of his development.

Isherwood started his career as an iconoclast, revolting against the authority of his parents at home. Because 'ancestor worship was vile' (Isherwood: 1971, 304). He junked the image of his warrior father and chafed at the idea of living all through as 'a Sacred Orphan'. The first two books, *All the Conspirators* (1928) and *The Memorial* (1932) sprang from this initial revolt. *All the Conspirators* is, as Alan Wilde says, 'meant to sound the cry to the barricades' (1971,27) and stressed Isherwood's gesture of defiance against all that is spurious in the 'Old Gang'. In the second novel, *The Memorial*, dealing with the Great War of 1914-18 and its crippling effect on his generation Isherwood reverts to the theme of his first book :dislocation of time or intergenerational conflict. In both the novels, indeed, the artist, a self-styled Angry Young Man, directs his rebellion against the authority of his parents, as all familial ties were believed to stunt his growth as a self-determining individual. They mark for Isherwood a turning point in his career as they force him to turn inward in order to confront outward reality more intimately. But the problem that one never misses in the first two novels is: what 'identity' to give to his persona, or with whom to identify. It is in his two



most popular Berlin novels, say, *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1937) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) that Isherwood tries to negotiate the problem of the authentic portrayal of self by placing himself directly into the texts.

After completing *The Memorial* Isherwood decided to leave England. As he feelingly puts it in his autobiography, *Lions and Shadows*, 'I hadn't advanced an inch, really,...' (1985, 187). He needed a change, a total change from England and the old life. On 14 March 1939, at the invitation of W.H. Auden, Isherwood left for Berlin to seek a fresh lease of life in Germany after the war. The years spent in Germany during Hitler's rise to power which prompted *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin* also saw the process of the artist's self-discovery continue unabated. The two Berlin books hinge on political themes, but they are no less concerned with the artist's private experiences. The story of Mr. Arthur Norris, a con man, is an occasion for the young artist who wants to see things as larger than life itself and wants to present himself to the outside world in broad connection. However, it is with *Goodbye to Berlin*, dealing largely with the contemporary political goings-on during the final days of the Weimar Republic, that Isherwood shows his psychological development and change of attitude to the Communist Party to which, along with Auden, he was earlier drawn. He displays his disgust in 'tomorrowless politics' of Europe, a growing ease in confronting various forces which he once revolted against and thus asserts his independence in its wider range, as best as he can. In fact, an awareness of who he is and how he acts marks the artist's further probing and growth and demonstrates an advance upon the earlier novels.

Isherwood's emigration to America in 1939 and his growing interest in Eastern religions and subsequent conversion to Vedantism which gave birth to his religious novels beginning with *Prater Violet* (1945) and culminating in *A Meeting by the River* (1967) marked the third and the most decisive stage in the artist's search for the self. The emphasis now shifts from that of the earlier novels like *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* or *Goodbye to Berlin*, from how people relate to the narrator to how the narrator relates to others. For establishing his identity an artist should necessarily determine not only who he is but who he is in terms of the world at large. Evidently, the theme of

connection or union envisaged on Vedantic line becomes recurrent in all his novels written after his conversion. In *Prater Violet* (1945) and *The World in the Evening* (1954) Isherwood explores the problem of intimacy, of concord, but the kind of intimacy he longs for remains still unrealized. It is in *Down There on a Visit* (1962) that he is aware that bonds between people are what provide definition to the self and that the bonds are the bonds of love. In his last two novels, *A Single Man* (1964) and *A Meeting by the River* (1967), by giving plenty of references to the Hindu philosophy of Vedantism, Isherwood solves the problem of identity by merging his individual self with the Universal Self, Brahman, the God Transcendent. Vedanta, indeed, shows him the right path to transcendence and offers a fitting conclusion to the artist's prolonged search for the self.

A critical appraisal of Isherwood's novels shows that there may be quite a number of ways of describing Isherwood's achievements over more than forty years, 'but it is the theme of rebellion and growth', observes Vinson James, 'which dominates everything he has written' (James: 1976,705). As Isherwood's career amply demonstrates, the central core of his novels, written as they were vis-à-vis his personal life, may be studied as a series of initial movements towards selfhood, followed by a counter-movement of spiritual rebellion against self or ego. His nine novels are, in fact, nine autobiographical glimpses, and 'Taken together, these <sup>nine</sup> glimpses', says Paul Piazza 'coalesce to form a reflected image of what <sup>might-be</sup> called "essential Isherwood"' (1978,196).

In my dissertation I propose to explore the process of Isherwood's evolution as an artist in terms of his novels by challenging most of the existing critics who have tended to study Isherwood either as a Berlin communist or as an American Vedantist, practising *Sannyas* and nothing more. They do not trace the final stage as the culmination of a long spiritual evolution of the man and artist. Bruce Cook, writing for *The Critic*, is thus ready only to accept his three novels (*The Last of Mr. Norris*, *Goodbye to Berlin* and *Prater Violet*) as comprising the 'essential Isherwood'.

Isherwood's <sup>↑</sup> movement towards Hollywood where he met Swami Prabhavananda and subsequently became his disciple provoked his

distractors all the more. A number of contemporary journals like *Action*, *Reynolds* expressed their feeling of disgust and resentment at his eventual conversion to the Vedantism. To most critics and reviewers, however, the question was not merely whether Isherwood could write better fiction in America but whether he could write any fiction at all. But in spite of this critical disappointment one may note that two-thirds of Isherwood's fictional output were composed after his conversion. Moreover, attempts of critics down the years have been directed to estimate Isherwood's career in segregated form or by parceling out the artist's life into discrete fragments, which have always led to confusion in the comprehensive understanding of the 'essential Isherwood.' To speak of Isherwood merely as an iconoclast or a Berlin communist or as a Hindu mystic is to miss the whole thrust of his literary career of which the thirties were only the beginning and his final acceptance of Oriental religion its logical culmination.

Paul Piazza, in his book, *Christopher Isherwood : Myth and Anti-Myth* (1978), shows two mutually exclusive worlds in the artist's career : one is the world of false and traditional values that stunts the growth of a rebellious artist, and the other, the world of independence that evolves out of the artist's anti-myth, of his continuous revolt and rebellion. For Piazza, the two worlds remain apart. But his theory of 'myth' and 'anti-myth' is static and does not seem to reflect adequately the process of evolution in Isherwood's career. Carolyn G. Heilbrun in *Christopher Isherwood* (1970) and Brian Finney in *Christopher Isherwood : A Critical Biography* (1979) have made only detailed critical study of the themes of Isherwood's novels. Heilbrun offers an illuminating study of Isherwood and E.M. Forster and traces the formative influence of Forster on Isherwood's narrative technique. Jonathan Fryer in *Isherwood* (1977) has made a threadbare biographical account of the artist. But one would still miss the complete artist in these books. Alan Wilde's *Christopher Isherwood* (1971) is by far the most illuminating study of Isherwood and his novels. But the book has put its major focus on the novelist's 'ironic consciousness'. It is only Lisa M. Schwerdt who has recently made an attempt to trace the growth and maturity of Isherwood as an artist. But her critical study, *Isherwood's Fiction : the Self and Technique* (1989) is,

in the main, confined to Erik H. Erikson's theory of growth and maturation. She hardly takes into consideration the various psychological props and spiritual insights that prompted the process of evolution of the artist from iconoclasm to communism and then to Vedantism.

The objective of my study is, therefore, to explore comprehensively the evolving trajectory of Isherwood's career as an artist : to chart out the consecutive phases of growth and evolution of the artist in his search for the authentic self-hood as he confronts himself at various periods of his life. My attempts are also made to analyse contemporary political forces along with the psychological traumas Isherwood lived through and the spiritual insights that contributed to the process of the artist's evolution.

In fine, whatever Isherwood wrote during his long career of over forty years shows his ceaseless preoccupation with the self. His conversion, which ignited critical fire among some of his critics as well as friends, must not be studied as a break from the past. Indeed, what George Woodcock writes about Aldous Huxley that 'conversion is not a break from the past, but a redirection of it' (quoted in Piazza : 1978,199) is equally true of Isherwood. An iconoclast in the beginning of his career, Isherwood may be said to have ended up as an icon-worshipper in the widest possible sense of the word.