

THE KNOWLEDGE OF MAN IN THE WORKS OF
CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

To be a novelist in the thirties meant that one inevitably felt the pressure of the social, economic and political struggle. If a writer was interested at all in his fellow-men, he could no longer afford to live in an ivory-tower ; he almost necessarily became involved in the conflict which stirred up Europe and in which the life of every individual was at stake. Even those who were not moved by the political issues were forced to face, at least, the economic crisis and the social disturbances. Christopher Isherwood belonged to a left-wing group of writers which also included C. Day Lewis, Spender, and Auden, with whom his name is usually associated. They were all indignant at the abuses of capitalistic, decaying democratic or dictatorial societies. Their interest in politics had its origin in their interest in Man, and with most of them it collapsed when they realised that politics offered no real solution to the world's problems. But for some time most of them took a more or less active part in the battle. Their opinions are naturally reflected in their writings, and some of their works deal directly with the contemporary situation. Yet, even at the time when he was most involved in the anti-fascist campaign, Isherwood never stated his own view of the problems explicitly in his novels and stories. He deliberately eschews abstractions to concentrate on people. He is interested first and foremost in individuals, however much these may be dependent on the group to which they belong. At first, he revolts against the group whose pressure threatens the individual's development, and this refusal to conform to social conventions leads him to political revolt ; but this in its turn gives way to a more critical examination of the forces at work in the individual.

All the Conspirators, published in 1928, is the first manifestation of his revolt. It opposes parents to children : on the one side are Philip Lindsay, who wants to give up his job in order to paint and write, his friend Chalmers and his sister Joan ; on the other, Mrs Lindsay, who loves her son in her own way, but is absolutely blind to his aspirations and wants him to achieve success on her own terms. She finds an ally in Victor Page, Joan's fiancé, who, because of his acceptance of conventional valuations, belongs to the 'enemy' camp. The novel illustrates the inevitable conflict between the young and the old, and shows that, whether right or wrong, the younger generation must prevail. The interest lies in the author's attempt to express what 'his' generation feels and wants, what it is like to be young

and expectant but feel thwarted by the lack of understanding and by the narrow-mindedness of the older people who naturally assume that experience gives them the right to lay down the rules. If this is indeed the author's purpose — and the introduction to the new edition of the novel, written by Isherwood himself in 1957 seems to confirm it — it is imperfectly worked out. Philip is a rather poor impersonation of youth. He is often irritating, seldom convincing, not really 'young'. We do not mind his weaknesses, but we do mind his negative attitude. Philip never gives himself, not even to his art, except when it requires no sacrifice on his part. If he eventually gets what he wants, it is not by asserting himself. The 'Enemy' surrenders because Philip frightened them by running away, which makes us feel that he did not play fair. In many cases, however, there is evidence of the author's true insight into character — for instance, when Philip comes home after his first escape and must face his mother, or when Chalmers calls on Philip, hoping to meet Joan. But if the novel is a study of weakness (as Mr Bantock⁽¹⁾ and Mr Connolly⁽²⁾ say it is), Isherwood's intention is not clear, for, obviously, he is on the side of the weak and does not seem aware of their weakness. Isherwood was only 21 when he wrote *All the Conspirators* and he was thoroughly convinced of the right of the people of his generation to assert themselves — he insists on this in his introduction and it appears clearly from *Lions and Shadows* and from the recently published *Mr Lancaster*. It is very doubtful then that he was sufficiently detached to make anyone of his generation share in the responsibility of a failure.

It is in *Lions and Shadows*, his autobiographical novel, that Isherwood most impressively voices the feelings and aspirations of the young, their outlook on life and their revolt against all conventional and established authority. It is a dramatized account of the author's youth, his education and formation as a writer, conditioned as it was by the social and literary background of the twenties. Isherwood seems still to have been under the spell of many a youthful fancy when he wrote it, for he takes an evident pleasure in remembering them. One of the most authentic characters is his friend Chalmers who was a 'natural anarchist, a born romantic revolutionary'; his influence on the boy that Isherwood then was, 'an upper-middle-class puritan, cautious, a bit stingy', seems to have been decisive.

Above all things, Chalmers loathed the school to which he invariably referred as 'Hell'. His natural hatred of all

(1) G.H. BANTOCK, *The Novels of Christopher Isherwood*, in 'The Novelist as Thinker', edited by B. Rajan, London, 1947.

(2) C. CONNOLLY, Introduction to the Travellers' Library edition of *All the Conspirators*, 1939, quoted by G.H. Bantock.

established authority impressed me greatly and I felt it was a weakness in myself not to share it. (p. 19)

Though he was reticent and afraid to assert his revolutionary ideal when still a public-school boy, when he came to Cambridge, he rejected every restraint and when he occasionally compromised, he was always secretly ashamed of it. His university life centres on his association with Chalmers and on the creation of their combined imaginations : the Mortmere dream-world. He vainly tries to adapt himself to the university system, then ceases to worry about it altogether and escapes into that private world. Chalmers and Isherwood have determined to remain true to themselves and to each other, and to resist any attempt of the 'poshocracy' to influence them. The 'poshocracy' are the so-called 'nice' people : the dons, and among the students : the snobs, the rich boys, the people who feel that they 'belong' and are the pick of the university. They can be identified with the older generation since they accept their authority. In *The Memorial*, Isherwood was to identify the 'poshocracy' with the bourgeoisie as the political enemy. The central theme of the Mortmere stories is the eternal antagonism between the romantic youth and the traditional values, represented here by the university system and the 'poshocrats'. Even if the reader realises what the stories meant to Isherwood and Chalmers, he can hardly share the author's enthusiasm for them : Isherwood tells us what kind of myths they created, but he does not re-create them, he does not make us share in the dream ; their effect is thereby partly destroyed. Moreover the myths have no effect on the 'Enemy', who are not even aware of their existence, nor of their author's hostility. This conflict with the poshocracy is not Isherwood's only concern. He is also disturbed by his effort to overcome his « war complex ». Like other people of his generation, Isherwood was obsessed by a sense of shame because he was too young to fight during the first world-war and had not 'tested' his manhood. He thus devises different tests that he wants to pass but always dreads, like riding a motor-bicycle though he is terribly afraid. He usually fails, either because he does not have the courage to face the test, or because he solves the difficulty by devious ways. In one test, however, he did not fail : he carried out the plan that would allow him to assert himself as a writer. He managed to be sent down from Cambridge, tried several jobs, first as secretary to a musician, then as a private tutor, became a student in medicine, but finally decided to leave for Germany, live on his own and become a writer. One may object that his break with England was the consequence of his incapacity to settle down. If we are to believe Spender's account of Isherwood's life in Berlin (3),

(3) G. SPENDER, *World within World* (1951), p. 121-125, e.g. « Eating

we may assume that Isherwood's decision required at least a certain detachment and a strong determination to be independent. What did that break mean to Isherwood? In general terms, it meant 'being pure in heart', and one could only be purified by being true to one's own nature, by gratifying instead of controlling one's desires, and by allowing the 'tree of life' to grow freely. Through Auden, who had just been converted to the theories of the American psychologist Homer Lane (4), he came to see that what the individual needed was freedom from restraints and from all pressures from society. Isherwood who could not fit into English society refused to submit and accept compromises which would stifle his personality. He moved to Berlin where, as a foreigner, there was no need for him to belong to a particular class or group, where he could be truly himself.

In Germany, he finished his second novel *The Memorial*, the story of a family. In order to break the dullness of chronology or continuity, he combines a series of 'snapshots' by using flash-backs: the characters live and re-live significant experiences covering a period extending from the years just before the first world war to the late twenties. The central event in the novel is the dedication of the War Memorial, which allows Isherwood to trace the influence of the war on the people of his generation. Whatever their age when the war broke out, all the characters have been affected by it. Now, they have to face the dissensions arising from two different conceptions of life. On the one side are the conservatives, whose life is ruled by traditional values that have lost their meaning and their justification. Lily Vernon is the best representative of that attitude: she tries to fill the emptiness of her life by faithfully invoking the past, her ideal and romantic life on the family estate, the fading memory of her husband, who was killed in the war. She has learned nothing. On the contrary, it seems that by emphasizing the break between the old and the new way of life, the war has made her more eager to cling to the old world and what is left of it: old houses, tea with a retired army officer, whatever may recall the past. On the other hand are those who have broken with traditions, people who pretend to be free from all restraint, who lead the 'hectic' life of the twenties, going to parties, trying to be funny and to enjoy themselves at all cost, 'anxious to be amused' but most of the time bored. These people have merely devised another kind of conventionalism, which is just as meaningless as the one they have given up.

such food was a penance for Christopher to which he attached an unstated but disciplinary importance » (p. 124).

(4) ISHERWOOD explains the theory of Homer Lane at the end of *Lions and Shadows*, pp. 300-308.

The danger is that they imagine they are the representatives of a genuinely new social order. One soon realises that their so-called democratization is not authentic, that in their very quest of new pleasures, they are being conventional. They are as disappointing as the traditionalists. Both attitudes are the outcome of a decadent society, unwilling to be regenerated by genuinely progressive forces. Some people, like Mary, do not have to choose between these alternatives, nor need they revolt against them. Mary is above social conventions of any kind. Hardship and experience have made her tolerant and understanding. She lives in the present, free from the burden of tradition and beyond the need of new conventions. Both groups claim her but she does not really need them. She stands on her own firm ground. She takes people for what they are and her relationships with them are strictly personal. That is why she is accepted and even appealed to by everyone. But for young people who feel the need to make a choice, to commit themselves, life is not so easy. Erich (Lily's son) has for a long time unsuccessfully endeavoured to resemble his mother's conception of a nice young man and his failure has made him awkward and unhappy. He is a very good student at Cambridge, but he leaves it at the time of the General Strike and dedicates his life and his income to welfare work. He eventually finds peace in catholicism, a solution that could hardly be satisfactory to all young people in quest of a meaningful life. So that the novel states a problem but fails to point to a solution, unless one considers Erich's conversion as an inducement to individuals to find their own answer. Such an interpretation would be far-fetched. As it is, the novel is even less explicit than *All the Conspirators* though its scope is much wider. Like the first novel, it gives utterance to the revolt of young people, but the revolt is now directed against English society as a whole. The formalism of that society prevents young people from developing according to their own nature by frustrating their impulses and censoring their desires.

The German society does not offer more cheering prospects, but since it has no claim on Isherwood, though he is not a mere spectator, he can view it with detachment. The sight is rather distressing ; the tragi-comical episodes of *Mr Norris Changes Trains* only bring out its hopelessness. Mr Norris is a most extraordinary character, a rogue living on his wits, constantly engaged in doubtful transactions. The Weimar Republic with its economic and political troubles is a suitable field of action for him. Yet, for all his cunning, his sexual perversity, his unscrupulous propensity for taking advantage of everything and everybody, including his friends, Mr Norris remains attractive. Isherwood does not judge people, he accepts them as they are and their shortcomings are no obstacle to friendship. What

matters is the relationship ensuing from their encounter. He knows that Arthur Norris is no hero, but he watches his doings with affectionate indulgence and humour, and he conveys the same feeling to the reader. Mr Norris' dealings are intimately connected with the economic and political background. Unemployment, disorder and corruption are driving the country to such helplessness that people will be glad to welcome Hitler as their saviour. *Mr Norris Changes Trains* is not a political novel; references to politics are incidental, but politics obtrude themselves on everybody's life in Germany. A gesture, an attitude, a commonplace conversation make us conscious of what is going on in Berlin. A few direct allusions crystallize what the characters experience : a state of civil war in Berlin, hate exploding everywhere in street fights and brutal attacks, the despair of the unemployed, and in the midst of it all the terrible indifference of the people, an indifference that was soon to make it possible for Hitler to seize power.

Good Bye to Berlin recalls in more pithy sketches the disintegration of a society, the defeat of democracy and the beginning of the new order. *Mr Norris Changes Trains* though alive to the contemporary scene strikes us more as a humorous evocation of Arthur Norris, whereas *Good Bye to Berlin* is more deeply marked with the consciousness of the impending catastrophe. The characters in this novel belong to all the classes of society, from the poor Nowaks to the rich Landauers, including a considerable bankrupt middle-class, the nondescript people one is likely to meet in cheap pensions in big cities, and of course Sally Bowles. Sally, like Mr Norris, is a curious blend of innocence and immorality. She is by turns affectionate, easily taken in or egoistic and brazen, and we feel that behind her flippancy, there is an anxious desire to please and to be happy. Through the characters we perceive the destructive elements that weaken the German society and make it an easy prey to nazism : Fräulein Schroeder, the landlady whose guests become insolvent, Bob the bar-tender who loses his vitality with his job, the women whose good fortune depends on the political success of their friends, and people like the Nowaks, poor, jobless, with one son turning to communism, the other to nazism, the father who understands nothing about politics and is ready to accept anything. Bernard Landauer, the refined and tormented intellectual is conscious of another threat : the fate awaiting the people of his race ; his conversations with Isherwood or the garden-party at his country-house foreshadow the doom of the Jews and his own death in a concentration camp.

I have said that Isherwood was not a mere spectator. Indeed, he knows these people and likes them, and he shares their life. Together with their own surroundings, they are part of his

Berlin experience. That is probably why he succeeds in making them so real to the reader for, obviously, he is at his best when his subject-matter is real people. These novels have two main qualities. First, Isherwood's interest in human beings and in human relationships. Whatever the characters' attitude or their opinions, they are never regarded as the representatives of the usually accepted conception of good and evil, or as the embodiment of political ideas. They are individuals experiencing what life offers them and reacting in different ways to their experience. Though referring to his association with them, Isherwood is very discreet about himself. What counts is the contact, the mutual understanding resulting from his encounter with human beings. Second, Isherwood's sense of the impact of the situation on these people's lives. The political situation is both secondary and extremely important. It is secondary in that it remains a background : there is no systematic study of the political scene, no desire on the author's part to analyse the situation, but he does suggest the prevailing confusion and the threatening disaster. Its importance lies in the fact that, as a background, it pervades people's lives and becomes an incentive to their behaviour. Actually, its influence on their existence is such that it can't possibly be ignored. But Isherwood alludes to the political scene without giving a clear-cut picture of it. He works it into the life of individuals because only individuals matter, and it is through their attitude and their conversations that we get to know it. The effect of such concrete presentation is that Isherwood appears not to be involved when depicting the political scene as well as when portraying the characters. His reticence results from his conception of the novel. His purpose seems to be not an interpretation of reality through imaginative perception of the forces at work in it, but a direct rendering of the human scene. The picture is there for the reader to view it, and it is up to him to draw his own conclusions. Nowhere does the novelist suggest what values are involved or reach beyond the actual scene. Most of his novels are autobiographical, not that he tells his own life, but on account of a constant relationship between himself and the people whose experiences he relates. His own thought is discernible to some extent in his portraiture of others but, except in *Lions and Shadows*, there are few direct references to himself. His object is the knowledge of Man. In his pre-war work, he tries to attain it by observing the behaviour of his fellow-men ; it is only later that he aims at self-knowledge. He is not interested in what people 'think', but in what they 'do' ; he does not scrutinize thought but facts. Consequently, he does not construe the human behaviour by means of abstract thought but through conversations and concrete situations implying the motives of action. He mistrusts intellectualism and he purposely

discards any intellectual interpretation of the human conduct. Life itself is more important than ideas, which may be an auxiliary to life but should never control it. Moreover, abstraction or the discussion of ideas are only within the scope of a limited number of individuals and may estrange them from their fellow-beings. Bernard Landauer is incapable of normal human contacts. His 'experiments' in the field of friendship fail because they are the conscious offspring of his intellect, not a spontaneous manifestation of feeling. Isherwood's method has another drawback : it cannot suggest his understanding of the problems with which the characters are confronted. However, when the reader is made aware of these problems, he expects the writer to explore them. This means that the interpretation should be the result of the author's own thought, the benefit derived from the re-created experience. But Isherwood is a non-committed spectator, and since his description of characters and situations is essentially dynamic and concrete, questions arise that are left without an answer. There are examples of this non-commitment in *Lions and Shadows* ⁽⁵⁾ and in *The Memorial*, and the same flaw, perhaps more objectionable, appears in *The World in the Evening*, as we shall see later. However, when he wrote *Mr Norris Changes Trains* and *Good Bye to Berlin*, he was obviously committed. He sympathized with the left and in *Mr Norris Changes Trains* even goes so far as to enrol in the communist party. Nevertheless, he is conscious that he cannot get rid of his bourgeois education and that he will never really 'belong' : « One day perhaps, I should be with it, never of it ». We realize that in spite of his good-will, he is only a 'parlour-socialist' — as he often calls himself — not a militant. His sympathy for the left is emotional ; it springs from a sense of injustice and a conviction that marxism could cure many of the world's evils, particularly fascism. It is not the expression of a political commitment. Actually, he is an individualist and a « non-conformist ».

The plays written by Isherwood in collaboration with Auden are usually considered as his most representative work in the field of « littérature engagée ». They are now very seldom performed, but they remain interesting expressions of their authors' attitude at the time they were written. They probably reached a wider audience than either their novels or verses had. They were meant to stir the public conscience by presenting important problems and striving to transform indifference into action. The theme of these plays are social and political : *The Dog Beneath the Skin* satirizes capitalism, the traditional represent-

(5) In *Lions and Shadows*, Isherwood writes about the General Strike : « I wanted to lock myself away in a corner and pretend that nothing was happening », p. 179.

atives of the English upper-middle-class : the Army, the Church, the Gentry, it parodies small reactionary and despotic monarchies, it caricatures a fascist state, its leader, the hysteria of the people, racialism, the cult of personality, and so on. *On the Frontier* denounces the machinations of capitalism and the decadence of democracies. Its main attack is against war, but since it is impossible to remain a pacifist in such circumstances, it insists on the necessity to commit oneself. These plays constituted an experiment in English drama. They were directly influenced by the German theatre, particularly by Brecht. They contrast with Isherwood's novels since they appeal primarily to the intellect and were intended to make the reader think about the problems presented. They did not aim at creating characters with whom the spectator could identify himself. On the contrary, they maintained a certain distance between the hero and the spectator, which gave the latter an insight into the situation with which he was confronted.

The approach to *The Ascent of F6* is slightly different : the problem treated involves an individual, not a group. Michael Ransom, the hero, is not the mouthpiece of the authors' opinions but a character who has to face the claims of his own nature and those made on him by society. It must be noted, however, that his struggle is mainly intellectual — except when it is affected by his love for his mother — and that the play is not more moving than the other two dramas. The hero indicates a further development in Isherwood's investigation of character : it is his first expression of a progress towards self-knowledge. Ransom has been asked to climb a mountain, F6, in order to save his country. He is free from self-deceit and realises that the real motives behind great achievements are not virtue or knowledge but the desire for power. If his brother James wants him to climb the mountain, it is in order to satisfy his own lust for power. Michael's motives are not pure either : he hopes that his achievement will gain him the love of his mother, who has always seemed to prefer James ; the people of England appeal to him to save them but he knows that the help he will give them will also give him power over them. However, government (or power) requires the exercise of the human will, which is a source of evil. That is why the individual is destroyed by his own power. This can be avoided by a complete renunciation, a surrender of the self, but it is not a satisfying alternative because it breeds another form of pride and indicates a refusal to assume responsibilities. Ransom fails to make a choice ; he goes on climbing as he is expected to do, and the friends who had followed him out of admiration for him die, the victims of his pride. His own destruction testifies to the weakness of man. The end of the play is obscured by an ambiguous symbolism. Moreover, the main problem is overshadowed by one of

its minor aspects : Ransom's excessive love for his mother, so that we have the impression that Isherwood has failed to explore the problem, or by-passed it at the moment when we expect light to be thrown on the central point at issue. Nevertheless, it is interesting to remark that as early as 1936, Auden and Isherwood were already contemplating the benefits of detachment and spiritualism — advocated in the play by the abbot — and were drawing attention to the dangers of power, even when wielded by an enlightened man.

Early in 1938 Auden and Isherwood went to China together. *Journey to a War* is their travel-diary ; it reports on the Sino-Japanese war. The narrative is written by Isherwood, it ends with a sonnet sequence and a verse commentary by Auden. While condemning the Japanese for the war itself and for their atrocities, Auden and Isherwood show the same compassion for them as individuals (the prisoners, for instance) as for the Chinese. Isherwood's account is essentially descriptive. He very seldom goes beyond his immediate perceptions. He describes the people he meets and pictures what he sees with precision and objectivity, but it is in Auden's verses that one finds the expression of the Chinese tragedy. It is interesting to note that Isherwood shows the same characteristics in his travel accounts as in his novels : his interest is for people, and the importance of the conditions in which they live is here emphasized because the war makes them more terrible than they already were, but he lets the reader draw his own conclusion and merely expresses his goodwill and his helplessness.

In 1939 Auden and Isherwood emigrated to the United States. Their departure was considered by many people in England as an act of treason and cowardice. People felt that they, who had encouraged them to struggle against fascism, were leaving the country precisely when the fight was actually starting. John Lehmann is careful to point out ⁽⁶⁾ that they had left long before the invasion of Poland or even of Czechoslovakia, and that the fight against Hitler had thus not even begun. C. Conolly wrote : « the departure of Auden and Isherwood to America is the most important literary event of the decade » ⁽⁷⁾, and S. Spender : « they were both severely criticized for having left when they did, and their departure helped discredit the movement of the 1930's. But this movement had been made bankrupt by events » ⁽⁸⁾. Indeed, the writers of Auden and Isherwood's generation had been divided between their literary vocation and the urge to fight fascism, and they had tried to reconcile the two

(6) J. LEHMANN, Foreword, the London Magazine, October 1959, vol. 6, No 10. Id., *I am my Brother*, London 1960, p. 31.

(7) C. CONOLLY, quoted by S. Spender in *World within World*, p. 297.

(8) S. SPENDER, *World within World*, p. 297.

calls. But it seems that they only met with public indifference, for after all, many of the people who were shocked and reproached them with their departure, had witnessed with apparent unconcern the massacre of the Viennese socialists, and had accepted the policy of non-intervention in Spain; they had hardly protested when their government had signed the Munich agreement. What about these writers' disappointment then? From their point of view, the battle against fascism was lost before it had been fought. It is true that they chose the wrong moment to become pacifists, and it may seem odd that Isherwood, who had suffered from a sense of shame because he had not been able to participate in the first world war ⁽⁹⁾, should have missed the second. Did he still dread the test or had it lost its meaning? Considering what the circumstances were, this seems to be the more likely answer, although we must admit that, at this juncture, his attitude was bound to suggest the impression he often gave of himself: non-committed and detached. But do we have the right to judge the motives and the attitudes of individuals if we are not sure to understand them? Spender is undoubtedly right when he writes that « the only important question was whether they could produce better work in the United States than in England ». Both Spender and Lehman ⁽¹⁰⁾ regret that Isherwood could not write stories about London and Manchester in the Blitz, or about the occupation in Germany but as Spender says: « that one can imagine such works and miss them is a tribute to the power and originality of the writer » ⁽¹⁰⁾.

The question is whether Isherwood's break with England and emigration to the United States was as fertile as his German experience had been. Immediately after the war, he published *Prater Violet*, a long story recording his meeting and collaboration with a Viennese poet and producer. It recalls the political events of the thirties and the different reactions they aroused. The author admits that it is of little use to care unless one is prepared to dedicate one's life to a cause, and he meditates on the meaning of his life, but the story lacks the spontaneity of the Berlin stories. His post-war work includes the relation of a voyage to South America *The Condor and the Cows* and translations: Baudelaire's « Intimate Journals » and several Indian works among which the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Isherwood had then become converted to Hindu spiritualism, thus following his inclination for complete detachment. His new creed permeates *The World in the Evening*, the only novel published since the war by which we can judge the development of his talent.

(9) See *Lions and Shadows*.

(10) J. LEHMANN, *I am my Brother*, p. 31. — S. SPENDER, *World within World*, p. 297.

I have mentioned his object in his early work, namely the knowledge of Man. In *The Ascent of F6* he had gone one step further ; he had acknowledged the superiority of the man who knows himself and had suggested retirement as a possible means to peace and serenity. *Prater Violet* also contained a vague attempt at self-knowledge but the story as a whole is too slight to deserve consideration. However, for the first time, Isherwood was no longer a mere spectator ; he was emotionally involved in the story, and his relationship with Bergman was an important factor. In *The World in the Evening*, self-knowledge becomes the main theme, a fundamental condition to the mastery over spiritual disorder ; it is attained by self-communion in solitude and conduces to freedom and to life. This new approach to the study of man required a greater commitment and the renunciation of the limits which the author had hitherto maintained. The action takes place in 1941 : Stephen Monk, a wealthy Anglo-American, is betrayed by his wife Jane. He takes refuge with Philadelphia Quakers and an accident forces him to remain with them. He finds himself during his compulsory retirement. After the death of his first wife Elizabeth Rydal, a writer, he had collected her letters with a view to publishing them. The state of mind he was in before and after his marriage with Jane had made such a task impossible. Now, that he is forced to stay in bed, he reads the letters and relives his youth and his life with Elizabeth, so that the novel covers a period extending from the late twenties to the beginning of the war. This recollection conduces to self-examination : he is a weak man who has always refused to assume responsibilities and is unable to deal with any serious situation. Fear, cowardice and guilt determine his behaviour. He is a coward because he systematically avoids any situation which frightens him, and he feels guilty afterwards because his attitude often entails deplorable consequences for others. Sarah, an old friend of the family and a quakeress, raised him and took care of everything for him. When he marries Elizabeth, he is 22 and she is 12 years older than he. Because she is older and self-assured, he expects her to take charge of everything. At the beginning of their marriage, he resents meeting her friends, who make him feel inferior because they are all active whereas he has no permanent job or occupation. But he refuses to assume the responsibility of making a decision about it. It is Elizabeth who breaks with her friends, simply by leaving England (it is typical that Isherwood should have imagined such a solution, even from Elizabeth. He is afraid to face the truth when he realizes that Michael Drummond, a young man whom Elizabeth and he had more or less adopted the first year of their marriage, has actually fallen in love with him. When their affair goes wrong, at least for Michael, Stephen runs away, leaving

Michael and Elizabeth to make a decision. When Jane becomes pregnant, he resents the coming of a child but he manages to make 'Jane' do something about it. He runs away to Sarah when he is convinced that Jane betrays him, and he was running away from Sarah when he broke his thigh and was forced to remain where he was. His sense of guilt is as overwhelming as his cowardice ; he feels guilty towards Sarah after his first sexual experiences, guilty towards Elizabeth when he lets her assume responsibilities, when he betrays her with Michael and later with Jane, guilty towards Michael because he makes him suffer and later because Michael is fighting in the Spanish war while he is doing nothing but pitying himself ; he feels guilty towards Jane after her abortion, guilty because he feels useless or because he doesn't care enough about the world situation. He is forever guilty towards someone or about something and he does nothing about it. Though we have no reason to believe that *The World in the Evening* is an autobiographical novel, yet, Stephen's resemblance to other characters in Isherwood's previous novels and to the author himself is such that it cannot be ignored. There is a certain similarity between Stephen's weakness and repeated flights and Philip (in *All the Conspirators*) or Mr Norris. Stephen's desire to test his manhood ⁽¹¹⁾ reminds us of Isherwood's similar attempts, and *Lions and Shadows* is full of instances expressing his sense of guilt. Stephen's spiritual disorder reminds us of Isherwood's own troubles ⁽¹²⁾. It does not necessarily follow that *The World in the Evening* is a confession ; the important fact is that Isherwood's own experience may have induced him to insist on self-knowledge as a cure to personal troubles.

How does Stephen get to know himself ? His new awareness derives from his gradual acknowledgment of the spiritual forces Elizabeth and Sarah stand for. Their strength is the more obvious when compared to his own weakness. When he lived with Elizabeth he took it for granted that, though physically handicapped, she was so strong, so sure of herself that she could be relied on in any difficult moment. Reading her letters to Mary Scriven, he realizes that she had her own weaknesses, which she overcame at the cost of desperate efforts. She never ran away from a situation. She faced it with the conviction that she would find, if not the best solution, at least the best within her means. Her confidence and her strength lay in her

(11) *The World in the Evening* : « Had I really thought of Paris as an initiation-symbol, a dreaded test of my manhood ? »... p. 86.

(12) In *The Condor and the Cows* (1949), Ish. writes referring to T.E. Lawrence : « He is a part of the mess I am in. What bind me to him are his faults — his instability, his masochism, his insane inverted pride. Like Shelley and Baudelaire before him, he suffered in his own person the neurotic ills of an entire epoch. And I belonged to that epoch » (p. 178).

self-knowledge, her absolute sincerity towards herself and towards others, and her determination to settle things in the same spirit of frankness and honesty. For instance, she knows that if Stephen does not leave her for Michael, it is not only because he is emotionally so much dependent on her, but also because, sick as she is, she depends on him too. The kind of life they have had together makes their relationship indestructible and that is why she is so sure of herself. Towards the end of her life, she feels that death is coming. At first, she is terribly afraid — though she wants to prepare herself for the Great Night — until she finds peace in an impersonal God. We recognize here the influence of Hindu philosophy on Isherwood :

Still I do believe in Him — or in my version of Him, which I prefer to call 'It'. At least, I'm sure now (I used not to be) that there's a source of life within me — and that It can't be destroyed. I shall not live on, but It will... Everything that was ever born is part of It. I, like everything else, am much more essentially in It than in I. Yes — I know all this. I know that Stephen is essentially in It... (pp. 260-1)

Stephen does not believe in God, not even in that impersonal God, but he is convinced of the immortality of the soul, for he invokes Elizabeth and has a long talk with her as if she were alive. He asks her to help him and she tells him that they are not separate people, that she will stand by him as long as he needs her. He even thinks that, in a way, she is responsible for his breaking his thigh, and that she did it to stop him from running away from himself. That is how she forces him to find himself. Thus, there is a communion between the living and the dead. Sarah's source of strength is Quakerism, but whereas Isherwood explains clearly enough the spiritual strength of Elizabeth, he does not clear up the nature of Sarah's. She had always been courageous and devoted but later she seems to undergo a kind of spiritual transformation which makes her understanding and tolerant, and gives her the same kind of intuition as Elizabeth. Both Gerda and Stephen feel that change but are unable to account for it :

The look in her eyes wasn't hers. I had an uncanny feeling — it was very close to fear — that I was somehow in the presence — but of what? The whatever-it-was behind Sarah's eyes looked at me through them, as if through the eyeholes in a mask. And its look meant : yes, I am always here ! (p. 323)

The least we can say about such a passage is that it is extremely banal, and that it suggests nothing of the essence of

Sarah's spiritual power. It is doubtful whether Isherwood himself understood it for Stephen merely thinks :

I didn't dare admit that I had seen what I'd seen. That would be getting in too deep. The whatever-it-was was so vast that I daren't let myself go toward it. (p. 323)

which is really evading the problem.

The influence of Elizabeth — whether living or dead — on Stephen is intimately bound to their mutual love, which is a source of good, whereas the Stephen - Jane relationship which is merely physical is doomed to failure. Before *The World in the Evening* Isherwood had never dealt with love — except physical love. Mr Bantock's statement that « he can never suggest relationship » and that « the emotional complexity does not lie within his power »⁽¹³⁾ needs to be qualified in the light of Isherwood's last novel. For it is precisely the relationship between Stephen and Elizabeth that gives rise to Stephen's self-examination and makes the development of his character plausible. The attitude of Elizabeth reveals the true nature of love. At bottom, she is even convinced that their love transcends death :

What really hurts me, in my ignorance, is my attachment to Stephen as an individual, and the thought that I must leave him. I keep telling myself that we shall be together as a part of It... (p. 261)

Isherwood goes so far as to suggest that any kind of love is wonderful, if it really IS love, even between men. It is the first time that he refers so explicitly to homosexuality. Stephen's affair with Michael brings out one aspect of the problem ; if Stephen does not respond to Michael's love, it is because he is not — or convinces himself that he is not — a homosexual, though he has an ambivalent temperament, and we feel almost sure that, were it not for Elizabeth, he would follow Michael. Stephen's experience enables him to understand Bob and Charles Kennedy, but the reader doesn't, for this time Isherwood does not explore the nature of their relationship and its difficulties. What IS their problem if they love each other and get along well ? Could it merely be that Bob wants their relationship advertised or, at least, that people should accept them for what they are instead of ignoring them ? This is not enough to account for Charles' concern about Bob. The predicament is complicated by the latter's desire to be a pacifist and by his religious doubts. He eventually enlists in the army, allowing the question to remain unanswered ; the author's reserve and refusal to explore a theme to its conclusion leaves the reader dissatisfied.

(13) G.H. BANTOCK, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

This acceptance and even defence of homosexuality rests on Isherwood's conviction that every individual has the right to choose for himself what best suits him. Gerda tells Stephen :

One cannot judge people in any other way. Each must do what he thinks right. Or there cannot be true friendship. (p. 136)

In fact, the novel is one long assertion of the supremacy of the individual. What does not concern him immediately is only secondary. Isherwood implies that, however much the outside world may impinge upon people, these are primarily interested in themselves or in other individuals. Though they seldom admit it, they must make an effort to be concerned about the group. Elizabeth can only deal with individuals in her work as well as in real life. She 'translated everything into terms of individual human beings' (p. 99). Explaining the meaning of her work to Gerda, Stephen tells her :

She knew what most of us won't admit to ourselves, that number and size actually make tragedy less real to us. To kill a million people — can you grasp what that means? I can't. Elizabeth couldn't. She frankly admitted it, and so she kept to the kind of miniature, subtle effects she knew she could handle... (p. 135)

At times, Elizabeth is conscious of the egotism of individuals living in a troubled world and she convinces herself that 'one's private aches and woes are nothing — less than nothing nowadays' (p. 190). Later, however, she admits that she begins to feel fatalistically indifferent to the nazis, above all in the beautiful country where she is at that moment. Bob, who is going to fight in the war, says :

Compared with this business of being queer and the laws against us and the way we're pushed around even in peacetime — this war hardly seems to concern me at all. (p. 311)

As to Stephen, it even takes him quite a time to realize that there IS a war :

All through this last year, the War had existed merely as a loud, ugly appropriate background for my expensive private hell. Why shouldn't London blaze, why shouldn't Jews be tortured? as long as the great tyrant Me was suffering? It had seemed no more than natural. (p. 28)

He first thinks of it as a means to take away his guilt by fighting. Later on, he is astonished and ashamed that he should have been so insensitive to the whole outside world (p. 114). Even Michael Drummond who fights in the Spanish War does

not once refer to the reason why he fights. The only experience he mentions is that of his friendship with a young Frenchman. It is evident, then, that Isherwood's interest increasingly centres on individuals. He had dealt with important themes, the decadence and disorder of European societies, the danger of certain ideologies, but he had never given these problems full, serious, treatment, and when his readers apparently expected a more categorical expression of his opinion, he withdrew and seemed to lose interest in them. True, he was still aware of their importance and tried to make the reader aware too, but he hardly bothered to analyse them. In fact, he became more sceptical towards the value of a collective solution and insisted on the necessity for every individual to find the way which best suited his personality. However, we may wonder whether his individualism is not in some measure a form of weakness, a desire to protect the self from the demands of the outside world. Self-assertion through self-knowledge can be an excellent means to achieve harmony but it should also entail the consciousness of the individual as a social being. Stephen eventually joins an ambulance unit, but the general forgiveness at the end of the novel sounds more like a conventional 'Happy End' than like the expression of a deep moral conviction or of an enlarged vision of the world.

The World in the Evening is also the title of Elizabeth's last novel. This may suggest a relation between her work and Isherwood's. Such a comparison first comes to the reader's mind when Isherwood mentions the theme of her second novel, *As Birds do, Mother*, which has much in common with *The Memorial*: a tyrannical mother, grieving about the death of her husband, wants her son to keep mourning with her, whereas he would like to have his own life. In *The World in the Evening*, Elizabeth tries to re-create in the small private world of an English country house the disorder and the cruelty of the world. Explaining her intention, Stephen says:

Elizabeth transposed everything she wrote about into her own kind of microcosm. She never dealt directly with world situations or big-scale tragedies. That wasn't her way. But she tried to reproduce them in miniature, the essence of them. (p. 134)

Apparently, she failed to convey the deeper implications of her novel. Gerda does not understand it. She finds it clever but without any relation to the outside world. Bob thinks the story is sentimental. In all his other novels, Isherwood also transposed everything he wrote about into his own kind of microcosm. But if this was his intention in *The World in the Evening*, he fails to make it clear. The reader is not aware of any rela-

tion between Stephen's state of mind and the disorder of the world, precisely because Stephen, though now and then conscious that the world IS troubled, is too engrossed in his own turmoil to give it much attention. At the time of the Spanish war, for instance, he is in a mess and more affected than ever by his own misery. Even the presence of Gerda, the German refugee, hardly arouses his concern. Isherwood raises an important question, but one feels he is not really interested. Stephen's conversations with Gerda do not bring out the tragedy of the war, nor even that of the refugees. In the same way, we do not feel any real connection between Elizabeth's concern and the wider political scene, because she is only a remote witness and never experiences what is going on. Mr Norris did not refer to the contemporary scene, he belonged to it, whereas Elizabeth's attitude is prompted by thought and compassion.

So, Isherwood raises several questions without really exploring them : the war, homosexuality, Quakerism, a form of spiritualism unfamiliar to him. This failure reveals his incapacity to suggest the nature of a problem without resorting to a detailed description or a concrete situation, which he could hardly do with every problem he treats. Even in his choice of concrete elements, he does not always select the significant details that would imply an awareness of the values in human behaviour. Such a flaw is unfortunate because the main theme is important and marks Isherwood's progress in his study of human nature. In the development of that theme, Stephen's failure followed by his progressive acknowledgment of his own cowardice and lack of spiritual strength, his recognition of the real causes of his frustration, his realization of Elizabeth's generosity and tolerance, inspired by her love and sufferings, Isherwood is at his best. Elizabeth's letters are among the best passages ; Isherwood shows striking insight when he expresses what a woman can feel in certain circumstances (for instance, when she writes to Mary to announce her marriage to Stephen). But such a subject-matter required a new style. In his previous novels, the detailed descriptions and the conversations did create an impression, even if as Mr Bantock says, he 'relied on the reader's imaginative capacity to create the essence of the situation from the notes with which Isherwood supplied him' (14). Now, he uses a discursive style to express feelings, moods, motives which cannot be transposed into concrete situations. His minute observation is here replaced by Stephen's self-examination ; he leaves out no pettiness or deception which are sometimes humiliating to admit in oneself. But this absolute sincerity only works for Stephen in relation to the other characters. It does not even always redeem passages in which

(14) G.H. BANTOCK, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

the author, who obviously finds it difficult to express subtle shades of feeling or thought, simply states them and tries to explain them. That is probably why the tone of the end of the novel is half moralizing (when Sarah expresses her understanding and acceptance of homosexuality), or half sentimental (particularly Jane's attitude during her last interview with Stephen).

The novel indicates a progress in Isherwood's work because of its awareness, and attempt at analysis, of ethical values. It also shows his power to move the reader by the expression of deeply human feelings, when his sincerity is not mitigated by his reserve. On the other hand, it denotes his inability to deal with subjects whose essence can only be imperfectly conveyed in conversations or in concrete situations, and which require more than observation. It is difficult to foresee how Isherwood's talent will develop — and since he has started writing fiction again, we have a right to think that it will develop. A few months ago, he published in *The London Magazine* a long short story: *Mr Lancaster*.⁽¹⁵⁾ It is supposed to be the first episode of a longer work on the same pattern as *Good Bye to Berlin*. It recalls his first experience in Germany and takes place shortly before he settled there for a long time. A definite appreciation of the story would be premature, since we should view it in its full context. It seems, however, to confirm Isherwood's tendency to concentrate on individuals only. The story deals exclusively with Mr Lancaster's endeavour, and failure, to establish a personal relationship with the young man Isherwood then was. There is not a single allusion to their environment. The main difference between Isherwood's present attitude towards Mr Lancaster and his youthful version of the 'Enemy' is that he is now tolerant of the other side. Mr Lancaster is not merely the enemy, he is also a pitiable human being whose shortcomings Isherwood understands retrospectively. As in *Prater Violet*, the author is not an observer trying to maintain a safe distance between himself and the characters and events he records; he plays a prominent part in the situation he re-creates. In fact, his self-analysis is almost as important as the story of Mr Lancaster. The introduction to the story itself is long, and some episodes — e.g. the fishing party — lack the conciseness of *Good Bye to Berlin*. Isherwood does not revert to the style of the Berlin stories. Instead he goes on with the experiment he had started in *The World in the Evening*, and the discursive passages about himself are not always successful — e.g. when he is suddenly inspired with the subject of his second novel, we are willing to believe it, but we do not feel it. On the other

(15) *The London Magazine*, Oct. 1959, Vol. 6, No 10, pp. 17-54.

hand, he renders with much penetration the blend of timidity, aspiration to self-assertion, egotism and intolerant exactingness of the young ; he points out with perspicacity the awkwardness and helplessness of older people, who may be successful in their career, but crave for some affection and are paralysed by principles, false values and fruitless experiences.

The Berlin stories and Isherwood's association with the literary movement of the thirties have induced people to think of him as a portrayer of that epoch. But it is obvious that the background of his novels interests him only temporarily and that his choice of it depends on the characters because it is part of their experience. He aims at knowing Man and he starts by observing him in his environment and by picturing his outward behaviour. His themes acquire greater depth when he becomes convinced that environment is less important than the inner forces at work in the individual. The relation of the individual to the group is less important than his personal relationships with other individuals. But whether his analysis is superficial or thorough, Isherwood shows the same understanding, the same sympathy for people and their failure. Unfortunately, he is not always equal to the expectations roused by his qualities, and he has not yet found the adequate form to express his deeper insights into Man.

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