

GOODBYE TO ISHERWOOD: THE RISE AND FALL OF A LITERARY REPUTATION

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This article analyses the critical reception of Christopher Isherwood. In the first half, using the oft-quoted words *I am a camera* as a starting point, it illustrates how at the outset this phrase was redolent with political commitment. This idea is reinforced by using two contemporary texts: Isherwood's own view of Germany; John Lehmann's contemporary assessment, itself based on Virginia Woolf's remarks on the comparative merits of fiction and poetry. The second half traces how the situation has radically altered. The three deciding factors in this critical sea change are first, biographical: his decision to leave England; second, the emergence of Isherwood as a key figure in the gay movement, and third, Isherwood's elusiveness. Some of these factors are well-known, others are not, but brought together in this way, they will hopefully prepare the ground for a critical reassessment of his early work.

Keywords: Christopher Isherwood, John Lehmann, 1930s, literary reception, Berlin, modernism, gay studies

I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite, and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed. (Isherwood 1969: 7)

It would be no exaggeration at all to say that the first simple sentence of this quotation, the second paragraph of *Goodbye to Berlin*, has determined the reception of Isherwood's entire literary output from its moment of publication in 1939. Take, for example, Thomas's '*Goodbye to Berlin: Refocusing Isherwood's Camera*', which begins with the classic statement that the camera "has become almost the obligatory starting point for discussions of Christopher Isherwood's fiction" (1972: 44). The simplicity of *I am a camera* has led to multifarious interpretations both in terms of the book's form and content. The simplest and least questionable gloss would be that it demonstrates how

important still photography and cinema were in Isherwood's life. Novels centred on cinema, such as *Prater Violet* (1946), chapters dedicated to cinema in other works, such as in *Lions and Shadows* (1938), Isherwood's unsuccessful flirtation with Hollywood as narrated by Lehmann (1987) or Parker (2004) would all indicate that Isherwood was a cinema director manqué. However, the controversy surrounding this statement stems less from a quantitative perspective – how much did the cinema interest him? – than from a qualitative perspective – what did he use this trope for? How politically active or passive is Isherwood as a writer? He was writing at a time when the power of the cinema was central to political life; we only have to think of Leni Riefenstahl's work or Walter Benjamin's seminal account of its power to indoctrinate in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production' (1936). By accident or on purpose, Isherwood lighted on a memorable image that suggests that the writer remains in control to point the lens where he wills, in this case, run-down, seedy, politically violent Berlin, very much in the tradition of the politically-committed writer of reportage of the 1930s. As a representative appreciation of this fact, in his influential study *The Auden Generation*, Hynes argues that "Isherwood was the best documentary writer of the thirties" (1976: 342). This he attributes to the absence of great events and people, and Isherwood's focus on the lost, *The Lost* being the intended title of his Berlin stories. Hynes argues that Isherwood strives for coherence by juxtaposing the many elements that make up the lost: the fate of the rich as opposed to the fate of the poor; Jews, as opposed to Gentiles; the Communists against the Fascists, and so on. In other words, Isherwood imposes symmetry (1976: 355). Even in this brief extract we have an illustrative example: a man and woman performing their daily hygiene; the images are held together by the internal rhymes: recording...shaving...washing" and "window...woman...washing" (Isherwood 1969: 7). The idea that the narrator is passive is therefore difficult to uphold.

What Hynes is stating is amply supported by Isherwood's virtually unknown article 'German Literature in England', a companion piece, in terms of time, to *Goodbye to Berlin*. It was published in the left-wing American journal *The New Republic* in April 1939. On a biographical level, this is very soon after Isherwood and Auden had left Britain, a question to which I will return. The article's title refers to literature only but its contents reach out far beyond. Isherwood starts off by insisting that he and his contemporaries reacted to the "blind chauvinism" of their parents' generation, which had considered the Germans "ravening beasts". The younger generation naturally rebelled and Germany became "the most cultural and artistic nation in Europe" (1939: 254). Isherwood suggests that in the 1920s "younger English writers and the British public at large were becoming increasingly pro-German" (1939: 254). I would stress that he uses a generalisation, "the British public at large", which would not survive closer inspection. It is true, however, that there was a real perception that the Versailles Treaty was unjust and that Germany had been treated atrociously by the allies. He goes on to say that the post-war period lacked an artistic representation of the horrors of modernity and modern warfare and it was precisely the German filmmakers who dared to do this. This portrayal of horror, whether in drama, films or art responded to the interests of contemporary youth in London; Isherwood is reluctant to extend its influence farther. This is, I believe, due to his hesitancy in formulating a motif which runs through much of the article, namely, that Anglo-American art of the time looked

tame in comparison. The rest does focus on literature, but I would insist that in each of the cases I go on to analyse, it is useful to bear this suggestion in mind. For example, he puts forward the premise, perhaps even less controversial now than in 1939, that the best war literature is German, and in particular Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), a book banned and publicly burnt by the Nazis. Isherwood develops his major thesis that British art of the time is basically a German invention. This can only be done by maintaining a steadfast belief in high art, or more specifically in the case at hand, high modernism. For example, he says that "If you asked the average educated young man what German authors he most admired, he would probably say Hölderlin, Kafka, Rilke, Thomas Mann. Some might mention Heinrich Mann, the Zweigs, and if politically minded Toller and Brecht" (1939: 254). All this must be easily available in translation, because he then goes on to talk about books which are only available in their original tongue. Clearly, if taken at face value, the average educated person of 1939 was extremely well educated! It is hard **not** to identify this *average educated young man* with Isherwood and his circle, who then make their appearance.

First is Stephen Spender, who is *German* for two reasons. One is that he promotes Hölderlin's ideas and second that Spender's poetry reflects his literary education, which took place, Isherwood claims, in Germany. Rilke and Kafka become the major authors of our time for the simple reason that they best personify the *Zeitgeist*. Rilke, because "as loyalties twist into paradoxes, and strange and unwelcome allies invade the political camps, Rilke and what he represents must seem, to many people, the only valid assertion, the last things still fit to fight for" (1939: 255). Similarly, Kafka is "the mirror of our age and all its terrors". For Isherwood, Germany was the source of great literature, which Nazism strangled. Isherwood uses the phrase *German Republican literature* as the best term to describe this period of experimentation and great art, often referred to as *the art of Weimar*. Isherwood concludes by suggesting that Kafka's world might soon be our own; that the forces of horror he depicts are precisely those which threaten the surviving democracies. Consequently, the exiles or those out of favour with the Nazis "are our allies" (1939: 255). Isherwood maintains a clear distinction between those who benefit from and those whose suffer at the hands of the regime. That seems a laudable objective, at the risk of repetition, as late as 1939, but at the same time it demonstrates a keen awareness that Nazism both promoted and denigrated art in a most emphatic way, as analysed by Spotts (2002). This leads on to three important conclusions. First, art is inextricably linked to politics. Isherwood insists that highly motivated artists-cum-translators like Spender or the Muirs share a desire to communicate the value of German literature to an English-speaking readership; they truly act as cultural bridges capable of conveying the realities of a Kafkian world. Second, this highlights the importance of the incident in the section 'A Berlin Diary' in which a pacifist bookshop is burned to the ground whilst a looker-on comments, "No More War.... What an Idea!" (202). Isherwood is aware, as it would have been impossible not to, that such burning of books would turn the concept of a politically uncommitted writer into a contradiction in terms. Third, a voyage to Berlin is a voyage to Europe's most dynamic culture.

Throughout this article, I will often refer to terms such as *the thirties* or *writers of the thirties*. Such terms, as occurs with *the lost generation*, are inevitably used as labels, but

that does not necessarily mean that they are nothing else, nor, as often happens, that they are invented years later for matters of convenience. On the contrary, I would stress that this feeling of belonging to such a group is one shared by its component parts as World War II approaches. Isherwood's friend, John Lehmann, director of the Hogarth Press, was also involved with Penguin. He was the founder of the Penguin New Writing Series and responsible for the Pelican special issue *New Writing in Europe* (1940), a surely remarkable project for such a fateful year. For Lehmann, the economic crisis brought about by the Wall Street Crash "cracked the world of the 'twenties beyond repair" (1940: 19). This comment is pretty obvious, but it is fundamental to the reception of Isherwood and his contemporaries. That a crisis has economic causes is a straightforward idea, but in this case it has led many critics to believe that any author of the 1930s who writes like this, who uses a materialist approach, was a paid-up Marxist. For example, if the writers of the 1930s had, to borrow the title of Johnstone (1982), a will to believe, the critical commonplace has been to offer the binary of communist or fascist. Cunningham takes a different tack by rightly insisting that the Communist Party in Britain was "tiny" (1988: 30) in 1930, consisting of just over 3,000 members. On the next page, Lehmann argues that while the West underwent crisis, living conditions in the Soviet Union improved, thereby disaster and achievement are further highlighted in symbiotic form. Lehmann dates the feeling of brotherhood as far back as 1932 with the publication of *New Signatures*, a collection of poetry written by W.H. Auden, Julian Bell and so on. Lehmann's foreword begins:

My aim in this book is to review what has been one of the most interesting developments in our literature for many years: the growth, during the early nineteen-thirties, of a group of poets and prose-writers who were conscious of great social, political and moral changes going on around them, and who became increasingly convinced that it was their business to communicate their vision of this process, not merely to the so-called highbrow intellectual public to which their predecessors had addressed themselves, but to the widest possible circles of ordinary people engaged in the daily struggle for existence. But these writers cannot be considered in their island isolation; they were European writers almost as much as they were British writers, deeply influenced by events and thoughts beyond our own shores. (1940: 13)

I have quoted the passage at some length because it is an extremely concise description of what influenced Isherwood and his contemporaries. Of the many points made, I would emphasise the belief in the nexus between English literature and its continental European counterparts, so often forgotten in the studies of the period. Indeed, I would argue that critical accounts of the thirties, even those so different in style, politics and objectives as Johnstone (1982) or Cunningham (1988) suffer from not having available such a clear statement that the highly politicised concept of the writers of the thirties was born with the thirties themselves. At the same time, Lehmann's account portrays Isherwood with amazing perspicacity.

That said, the basis for Lehmann's analysis of Isherwood is Virginia Woolf. He states throughout the early pages that for the generation of the thirties Virginia Woolf is the great literary innovator, primarily for her critical dismissal of realism and promotion of experimentalism. Therefore there is no incompatibility between the search for form and the promulgation of reality and ideas, as what artists convey is "their vision of this

process" (1940: 13). The third chapter of his study, entitled 'Refitting the Novel', a very nautical metaphor, uses as its theoretical basis her 1931 essay 'Letter to a Young Poet', published in the volume *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. Having talked about English and German authors, it is possible that Woolf is reworking Rilke's earlier publication of the same name; however it is equally probable that the title is such a common one that what we have is nothing more than a coincidence. Initially, it might seem odd that, if the genre which is being refitted is the novel, Lehmann should begin his chapter with Woolf on poetry. However, Lehmann holds with Woolf's view that poets have been shirking contact with life. They have become increasingly introverted, frequently ignoring questions whose principal concern is not the poet's mind. Her point is that dealing with reality is something which canonical English poetry has done marvellously; she cites Shakespeare, Crabbe and Byron as examples. Previously, she says, English poetry was full of characters rather than the poets' muse. Perhaps the Romantic concept of the artist's uniqueness is her real target. She implies that contemporary poets are unable to write about reality in its most basic, mimetic sense because they are so obsessed with questions of form. Woolf imagines the frustration this might cause.

And while you write, while the first stanzas of the dance are being fastened down, I will withdraw a little and look out of the window. A woman passes, then a man; a car glides to a stop and then – but there is no need to say what I see out of the window ... for I am suddenly recalled from my observations by a cry of rage or despair. Your page is crumpled in a ball; your pen sticks upright by the nib in the carpet. If there were a cat to swing or a wife to murder now would be the time ... the rhythm which was opening and shutting with a force that sent shocks of excitement from your head to your heels has encountered some hard and hostile object upon which it has smashed itself to pieces. Something has worked in which cannot be made into poetry. (1961: 182)

This violent account of poetical frustration – swinging a cat, murder, smashing things to pieces – obeys Woolf's own views that the prose of her generation does indeed come into contact with life. Crucial to my analysis of Isherwood is her use of the metaphor or synecdoche of the window: look out, rather than in, is the message here. It is precisely Isherwood who opens *Goodbye to Berlin* with the words "From my window, the deep solemn massive street" (1969: 7). It is impossible to know whether Isherwood was conscious of Woolf's essay when he wrote these words, but if so, it would simply reinforce his intention to describe the lost. Unlike Woolf's introverted poet, he has avoided "the ornate and the obscure, with a vocabulary as close to the colloquial as possible". Lehmann humorously states that "Isherwood has digested his Hemingway well" (1940: 48). However, what makes Lehmann's Woolfian version of Isherwood different from all other accounts is his claim that Isherwood is a moralist. By this, he means that Isherwood consciously tackles the question "of social injustice" on two levels which have Berlin at their intersection. First, he is aware of the lost, and second, because he "was one of the first prose writers of his generation to receive the full impact of Europe as the Fascist tidal wave began to roll over it" (1940: 50). Isherwood's central theme is thus "social illness" (1940: 51). In short, Isherwood is a politically committed writer who fulfils to a tee the conditions for being considered a new writer in Europe.

Lehmann also gives a perceptive defence of Isherwood's constant use of odd characters. First, they form part of Isherwood's wide panorama: "He almost invariably prefers to take eccentric and fantastic characters as his central pivots, the extreme products of the anarchy and pathological condition of modern society" (1940: 51). The fact that Isherwood looks out of the window, committed as he is to recording the *comédie humaine* of modernity as Balzac had done in the previous century, is the pivot of the argument. It should be pointed out that Lehmann's insistence on Isherwood's role as a realist sidetracks other concerns, such as modernism, voyeurism or the role of the *flâneur*.

The aim of the second half of this essay can be summarised in a simple question: if Isherwood and Lehmann are so acutely aware of the cracked world, why has the reception of Isherwood gone in a radically different direction? This can be briefly illustrated by Thomas (1972) when he discusses Friedman (1955), who wrote that Isherwood's camera statement meant filming, "without apparent selection, 'a slice of life'". Friedman concludes his critical remarks with the statement that "To argue that the function of literature is to transmit unaltered a slice of life is to misconceive the fundamental nature of language itself; the very act of writing is a process of abstraction, selection, omission, and arrangement" (1955: 1179). Friedman believes that if we want a slice of life, we simply need to go to a street corner; we do not need books for that. For Friedman, Isherwood's stance (the camera) represents the ultimate denial of an author's role, responsibility or function as stated by Lehmann himself. Isherwood, from Friedman's stance, has become as socially useless as Woolf's introverted, solipsistic young poet. He has metamorphosed into the opposite of what he appeared to be eighteen years previously. What has brought this about? The first of the three reasons is the joint decision by Isherwood and Auden to leave Britain for the United States in 1939.¹

For many contemporaries, Auden and Isherwood had not simply left Britain, they had abandoned Europe at the worst possible moment, just as it was about to plunge into war. To make matters worse, both writers fully understood the effects of war, not only because they knew about the bloody street-fighting in Berlin but because they had published as co-authors, in that very same year, *Journey to a War* (the war being that waged in China). On the whole, it seems a puzzling, disjointed effort; puzzling, because it betrays an almost non-committal or indifferent attitude towards suffering and death; disjointed, because its mixture of prose and poetry seems gratuitous, little different from a cut-and-paste exercise. Commitment and fellowship for the suffering of others have vanished. Lehmann himself is surely being sarcastic, particularly in the light of Auden's experience in Spain, when he describes in indirect speech, their anticipation. "A war of their own! ... Not the front stall of the Spanish War, so crowded already with celebrities, from Malraux to Hemingway to their own English friends" (1987: 40). Note the particularly disturbing image of the front stall; for them it is a spectator sport watched from a suitably comfortable vantage point. The usually sympathetic Lehmann insists on this idea of a celebrity trip to war. He adds that "[t]here was a great deal of

¹ In January 1939, Isherwood emigrated; *Goodbye to Berlin* and *Journey to a War* were published in March; the article in *The New Republic* appeared in April.

publicity about their departure with cameras at Victoria, which Christopher thoroughly enjoyed" (1987: 41). Furthermore, the memoir includes one well-known photograph of the pair in front of the train, cigarettes in their hands, big smiles on their lips as if they were about to go on holiday, which seemed to be uncomfortably close to the truth.

The explanation Isherwood gives in his diaries for emigration is difficult to take at face value: "Why were we going to America? I suppose, for myself, the chief reason was that I couldn't stop travelling" (1997: 4). Isherwood has exchanged his concern for the lost for a romantic wanderlust. It might not be completely clear from this brief citation what their motives for choosing America as their destination were, but both writers were fully conscious that they were leaving Europe on the brink of war. In addition, Auden and Isherwood were hardly two ordinary citizens: they were considered part of the artistic vanguard lacking what was expected of them: a real commitment to the cause of freedom when the crunch came. Whereas three years previously, artists had taken up the case for Spain both by publishing manifestos and by volunteering, Auden and Isherwood, it seems, had briskly abandoned their left-wing idealism.

Lehmann stresses the attraction of America as a more liberal country, notes Isherwood's involvement in an erotic triangle at that time, but in the end even he cannot condone the decision. To say that someone gets into "a panic frenzy" in the events leading up to Munich is hardly flattering; but worse is to come. Lehmann continues

As we read the latest editions of the evening papers, I said to Christopher bitterly: 'Well, that's the end of Europe as we wanted it', and voiced the fear that unless further betrayals were imminent Munich could mean the postponement of war and not its avoidance. And in an unguarded moment Christopher replied; 'That doesn't matter any more to me: I shall be in America'. (1987: 48)

Lehmann tries to soften the effect of this cynical comment by adding that at that moment Isherwood had no intention of taking up American citizenship, something which he did do in 1946. This reads as a damage-limitation exercise. Even for such a close friend and champion as Lehmann, Isherwood's behaviour reveals the suspicion that the latter's commitment to the shared ideals of the 1930s had swiftly evaporated. However, more telling than the bitterness in Lehmann's voice is the fact that these words were not written in 1940, when surely there would have been more grounds for a gut-reaction, but in 1987, nearly forty years later; a suitable time had surely elapsed for reflection if not forgiveness. Isherwood's literary standing as the camera which recorded the hardship of the world was wiped out at one fell swoop.

Yet Isherwood's reputation as a committed writer returns in the post-Stonewall 1970s, but from a different perspective: that of his homosexuality. His novel *A Single Man*, first published in 1964, has become one of the most important novels in the gay canon, as has the re-written autobiography of his youth, *Christopher and His Kind* (1976). The novel has become a milestone, yet, as its plot is so hackneyed, an impossible love quest, initially it might not be apparent why this is so. It is narrated as taking place in twenty-four hours. Its time framework can be seen as a tribute to Virginia Woolf (*Mrs. Dalloway*) or James Joyce (*Ulysses*), though I would argue that this obvious literariness is more likely to be a conscious attempt to establish canonical status.

Edmund White and David Hockney both show immense respect for Isherwood as a whole and for this novel in particular, which indicates some success. Although it is widely seen as an innovative gay novel, there is nothing remarkable in its description of sex: in terms of explicitness, by present-day standards, it is rather tame. Critical attention pinpoints its importance, as is evident from the most recent substantial collection of critical essays, *The Isherwood Century* (2001). One of the contributors, David Bergman, in an essay entitled 'Isherwood and the Violet Quill', gives the most convincing account of its significance: "In contrast to such tormented and self-destructive gay writers as Truman Capote or Tennessee Williams, Isherwood provided a calm, sane, and productive counterexample whose work was imaginatively rich, stylistically challenging, and politically and spiritually engaged" (2001: 203). However, *politically* now refers primarily, and in some cases exclusively, to sexual politics. Consequently, an interesting reappraisal of Isherwood's pre-war work is brought about. As an illustration of this, Marsha Bryant reads *Journey to a War* as subversive, in complete contrast to Lehmann. For her, it was written in opposition to "the tough masculinity of George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* and Ernest Hemingway's dispatches from the Spanish Civil War" (2001: 172). Although it "provides a triple coverage: Auden and Isherwood cover (report) the war, cover (conceal) their sexual confrontation, and cover (re-perform) prior acts by straight men" (2001: 178), it is coded, as both reporters fail, in a highly camp way, to perform the straight masculine role of war reporters. If that is the case, then the situation has been reversed: whereas Auden – and Lehmann for that matter – can be criticised for being homosexuals but never really tackling it in their writing, now Isherwood is revered for being politically committed to the gay cause all his life! The knock-on effect is that his status as raconteur of the Berlin underworld and as a social critic withers away to almost nothing. Whereas the down-and-out were previously the subject of his Berlin novels (the down-and-out of all classes, of all ideologies), Berlin now becomes the scene in which sexual drama is enacted; foreground and background have changed places, or at least the distinction has melted away.

Although this reversal of fortune is a salutary lesson in the fickleness of literary history, we have to see how it interacts with the question of political commitment which I have stressed as being such a fundamental component of the aesthetics of the thirties. Clearly, if Isherwood is a lifelong concealer, as Bryant suggests, then his fame after 1964 is simple to understand: he is one of the first writers to come out of the closet. His earlier writing, with England and Germany as locations, is primarily a preparation for that key moment. However, up to now, my approach has been entirely different, namely, to stress how politically committed he was in the 1930s. Much recent interpretation of Isherwood at some point turns to a highly evocative phrase from *Lions and Shadows*, "homosexual romanticism" (2000: 78). In a similar fashion, near the end of *Goodbye to Berlin*, Landauer comments "By Jove, Christopher - what a romantic life you lead" (1969: 176). If that is the motif of his pre-war work, what does it imply? I will concentrate on two recent major studies, one specifically on Isherwood (and Auden) and the other about the thirties' generation as a whole. The first is Norman Page's *Auden and Isherwood: the Berlin Years* (1998).

It makes certain points of great interest to this essay. It argues well that Berlin

replaces Paris as the cultural and sexual Mecca for the aspiring author. As we have seen, Isherwood's own defence of Germany and its culture fit the mould of this idealisation. Page also insists that Berlin was an especially attractive destination not simply for sex but for pleasure in general (1988: 3), but by going on to describe Auden's preference for violent sex (1988: 14), Page is not totally consistent. In addition, he is adamant that Berlin represents "the nexus of class, sexual colonialism" (1988: 36). This desire – Berlin meant Boys! – for Germanic youth of the working class is neatly put, but it increases the evidence for there being, in the end, little or no distinction between pleasure and sex. In his analysis of *Goodbye to Berlin*, Page is also critical of Isherwood's use of the camera as a trope, believing that it is logically untenable, as someone has to point it somewhere. He argues that Isherwood "plays down the drama of contemporary happenings" (1988: 184). This does not represent the extreme views of Friedman, but expresses a similar concern. Page is particularly astute in his analysis of Isherwood's female characters. First, he states that it is inexplicable that the narrator feels no pangs when Sally disappears from the text. Second, his insistence on Isherwood's misogyny, in the notorious sanatorium scene for example, is extremely convincing. Page's contribution shows, in my opinion, that for him Isherwood is politically – but not sexually – non-committal. Alternatively, and more challenging in the light of Page's prestige as an important critic of English literature, would be the suggestion that his study shows that the two political currents never successfully merge; this unsuccessful combination contributes significantly, for Page, to his inferiority to Auden as a literary figure.

If that is so, what about the thirties as a whole? For a tentative answer, we must turn to Valentine Cunningham's comprehensive *British Writers of the Thirties* (1988). This is a huge study, so packed with information and documentary evidence that it would be risky to engage in a study of the period without prior consultation. I stress this because my intention here is to point out one of its peculiarities, not to criticise it as a whole. Cunningham's hostility is even more marked than Page's, yet whereas as the latter is perceptive and deeply sceptical, the former is often unreasonably aggressive. Of the new Isherwood, he argues that "he turned into an almost excessively clamant Gay Liberationist in the seventies partly from guilty hostility towards his own earlier concealments and unoutspokenness" (1988: 153). This sounds convincing, perhaps at first reading, but as an interpretation, it has two drawbacks. First, even though all the Berlin books and *Lions and Shadows* are to a certain extent coded or occasionally muted in their description of boys, clubs and Berlin in general, one would have to be extremely ingenuous to argue that that adds up to concealment. Second, it is incompatible with Bergman's insistence on the quiet, sane nature of latter-day Isherwood. Cunningham does not stop here. For him the whole Lehmann circle exists primarily to promote the writing of his homosexual friends (1988: 149). The whole generation is corrupt: "They're a troupe of middle-class voyeurs ... able to achieve heroic stature for themselves only by pretence, by proxy, in metaphor and other literary figures" (1988: 170). This is surely a huge generalisation, which like most generalisations contains certain grains of truth, but nothing more. As to the camera, Cunningham is adamant: Isherwood, we are assured, "turned himself ... into 'a camera'" (1988: 329). This forthrightness leaves no space for discussion. Cunningham traces two possible sources. One is "the *Camera Eye* sections in Dos Passos's *USA*. Both authors doubtless knew of

Dziga Vertov, Leninist film-maker” (1988: 329). No evidence is given to support either claim. However, if Isherwood did follow either Dos Passos or Vertov, he would certainly not be a mere voyeur, oblivious to the hardships of the thirties; following Cunningham, he would be at least a socialist if not a Leninist. From this brief explanation of how more recent studies approach Isherwood, hopefully it will have become clear that in both cases the revelation, the discovery, or more basically, simply an awareness of Isherwood’s homosexuality has made little contribution to the study of his pre-war output. The greater the importance of Isherwood’s homosexuality becomes in accounts of his Berlin books, the less he is seen as a socially committed writer. There is no reason why this should be so, why public and sexual politics should become irreconcilable, but this is the pattern criticism has followed, as the work of Page and Cunningham illustrates. The quandary, in the case of the former, and hostility, in the case of the latter, is sufficient proof. In no way am I trying to belittle two important studies; my only objective is to show how this surprising phenomenon has arisen in academic circles.

The final strategy for finding an explanation is an appeal to Isherwood himself. Initially, this would not seem a difficult task; after all, if the *I* is so central to Isherwood, then ample evidence must abound. The fact that *I* can be the first person singular, the first letter of Isherwood or the homophone for eye when applied to “I am a camera” (Isherwood 1969: 7) provides multiple possibilities. However, Isherwood was and remained throughout his life a loquacious but most elusive figure. As my previous account (2005) points out, *Lions and Shadows* (1938) is supposedly an autobiographical fiction describing his life before he left for Berlin; it contains things that he actually did, working as secretary to the violinist Cheuret for example. Nevertheless, the prefatory note tells us it is neither strictly autobiographical nor really true. This would seem to conflict with the book’s subtitle, *An Autobiography in the Twenties*. The use of masks, delaying tactics and simultaneously true and false identities is one of Isherwood’s literary games. That makes life difficult at times but not impossible.

However, pinning him down is no easy matter, as we shall see. In 1976, *Twentieth Century Literature* published an issue dedicated exclusively to Isherwood. In an interview, the editor, Carolyn Heilbrun, asked him about his sexuality; he replied, “I said in some interview that I felt that I would certainly have become heterosexual, if everybody else was homosexual – there’s a streak of that in my make-up” (1976: 257). This is witty but extremely unhelpful. For, just at the moment when gay writing begins to make its presence felt, one of its major figures debunks himself in a reply which playfully ignores the basic truth of human reproduction. This roguish reply, it must be noted, contains one of the most excruciating puns one could come across: “there’s a streak of that in my make-up”, a highly camp play of words whose irony farther distances literary figure from documentary proof. Indeed, there is only a small step from *make-up* to *mask*, so we are farther distanced from revelation. He adds that his new book will be more factual than *Goodbye to Berlin*, but this reference to *Christopher and his Kind* (1977) cannot withstand even the most cursory of examinations. If that was not enough, towards the end, he informs us that “I’ve really come to the conclusion, in the wisdom of my seventy-one years, that there are even more beautiful and terrible obstacles to enlightenment than sex. And one of them is writing” (1976:

263). This grandiloquent epigram by the grand old man of letters is difficult to decipher. It is clearly very ironic and meant to be amusing, but the moment writing reaches over the edge of creativity towards criticism, it openly defies any article writer to decipher his – Isherwood’s – texts.

Clearly, then, if both his writing and life seem to be based on concealment and the occasional deliberate deception, the search has to be for interviews where irony has temporarily been put aside and a more straightforward approach is taken. The onus is now placed on the critic to make moot judgements about what is and what is not ironic. The interview which I believe most useful is that conducted by David J. Geherin, which first appeared in volume 2:3 of *Journal of Narrative Technique* (1972) and was reprinted in Berg and Freeman’s *Conversations with Christopher Isherwood* (2001). That said, there are some very ironic comments. When asked why Forster did not publish *Maurice* (1971), he impishly replies that “First of all, it would have upset his mother”. He adds that as a novel, it is “absurdly militant”. He refutes the idea that he has written about homosexuality, “I’ve introduced some homosexual characters, but that’s not the same thing” (2001: 85). The point might be that he does not restrict himself to gay lifestyles, but it is hardly a convincing argument. So even in a relatively frank interview, Isherwood maintains his love of leading the reader down the garden path.

The major interest in this interview stems from some explicit commentary on the relationship between autobiography and fiction:

I was always concerned primarily with live models. But I was trying to show the inwardness of the models that I was using for my characters. That is to say, I was trying to show what it was about them that really interested me, why they seemed to me more than themselves, why they seemed to me to be almost archetypes, and therefore why I was writing about them, what was magic about them, what was numinous about them. In order to show that, I didn’t hesitate to alter actual facts and create scenes which never actually happened, invent circumstances of all kinds. The analogy I usually use here is that of a horse that you’re showing off at a show. You want to put it through its paces. In the same way you want to put a character through its paces, provide scenes which will make it behave in the way which is almost characteristic of itself. Therefore you very quickly get away from what really happened into what might have happened – that is say, you get into fiction. (2001: 75)

The first reaction to reading this citation could justifiably be that, in his usual exasperating fashion, Isherwood has avoided the question completely. He has told the interviewer nothing about the presence of himself in his fiction. Similarly, the use of *numinous* (holy, indicating the presence of a divinity) might correspond to Isherwood’s belief in Vedanta but says virtually nothing about his literary technique. However, his evasive tactics, whether deliberately or not, actually reveal an approach which is similar to that of the camera, even though the metaphor is completely different. Putting a horse through its paces supposedly draws the spectators’ interest towards the animal and away from its trainer. It is arguable that the metaphor of the camera strives to achieve that goal precisely: our attention is directed less to the new arrival than to the squalid Berlin and Berliners: in other words, reportage. Later on, Isherwood is very direct in his replies to two key questions. In an answer to one on the relationship between autobiography and fiction he states that “The whole endeavor of the Christopher

Isherwood persona in the novels is to be in the background as much as he can because what he is trying to do is tell a story. He's not telling *his* story at all, or only incidentally, and only just to explain why he was there with those people and what he was up to" (2004: 76). This unequivocally confirms my previous point: autobiographical presence means committed presence. Isherwood's reportage therefore predicts the importance of witnessing, which Rawlinson (2000: 11) sees as being so important to twentieth-century literature and fundamental to World War II narratives. When asked whether he believes critics have overemphasised the importance of the camera statement, he replies: "Yes, very much so. What I was simply trying to do was describe my mood at that particular moment. Obviously, the description does not fit Christopher in many of the other sections" (Geherin 2001: 77). This is the point made by Wilson when he says "the novelist is untrue to his original conception: of being a camera" (1976: 316).

In moving towards my conclusions, I must first make a very important point. There are some extremely perceptive accounts of Isherwood's literary style. For example, Wilde argues that irony, basically that of Schlegel, is central to modernity in general and Isherwood in particular. For Wilde, it is an existentialist response to "a growing loss of faith both in the reality of the external world and in the authenticity of the self" (1970-1971: 480). But I do not believe this to be necessarily the case in his fiction and certainly not in his other prose and interviews. Isherwood is simply playing hide-and-seek, with a great deal more hiding than finding. What surprises me is less the sharpness of Isherwood's darts than the virtual silence in critical writing on his extensive use of obfuscating irony which, in the end, locates itself somewhere on a scale between self-effacement and self-erasure. Therefore my major conclusion is a simple one: when Isherwood becomes a renowned figure in the 1970s, the possibility of reassessment presents itself. This certainly happens with his later gay writings and in reinterpretations of his earlier works through a post-Stonewall perspective. However, this has had three consequences. First, the idea that the Berlin stories inform the reader as reportage has eroded away, as has Isherwood's persona as a politically committed writer of the 1930s. Second, for reasons impossible to explain, this same pattern has imposed itself in critical circles, and there seems to be no way to bring together Isherwood's public and sexual politics. Thirdly, I would therefore argue that the result of this impasse is that Isherwood criticism has become stuck in a critical rut. Sadly, then, Peter Parker's biography, published in 2004, which is a wonderful achievement, rather than stimulate other studies, is something of a swansong.

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