

*Closing Time in the Gardens*

disposed of, at a tangent, in two or three brief sentences of Waugh's *Decline and Fall*, but now sudden death and random violence became commonplace material, popular Gothic. So did ominous travels, journeys to world frontiers, dangerous quests, soldiers at checkpoints, threatening military machines, walls of barbed wire, the strange landscapes of Rex Warner's novels. Aeroplanes flew over with lethal or absurd cargoes, like the dog dropped from the air to explode on the rooftop terrace in Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936). The world was littered with violence and casualties, from the wounded of the Great War or the clubbed strikers of Grassie Gibbon's *A Scot's Quair* to the many psychological victims of the age. For a sense not just of social crisis but psychic danger filled the novel. Most writers shared, it seemed, a guilty self-suppression, a sense of betraying or having betrayed. Psychology offered a solution, or if not a solution then an explanation, or a mythological accountability, for the errant desires, the vulnerable passivities, the lack of moral focus, the unheroic selves of the day, and in some writers like Graham Greene seediness, lovelessness and betrayal became a metaphysical modern condition. Indeed one result of all this was a heightening of the metaphysics of fiction in the face of absurdity, Pascal's "endless territory of death." So realism merged with surrealism, objective reportage with subjective confession, to construct the style of the "new" fiction in what was inescapably a nightmare age, and it left the modern novel with an enduring legacy.

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If there really was a distinct Thirties fictional climate, which significantly shifted the direction of the new or modern novel, then one of the writers who most evidently embodied it was Christopher Isherwood, who, while still a student at Cambridge in the mid-Twenties, was – according to Spender – already presciently being considered "the Novelist" of his generation, just as his friend Auden at Oxford was being considered "the

Poet." At Cambridge Isherwood was to produce the most famous piece of unpublished fiction to come out of the period, the sequence of stories he wrote in collaboration with another friend, Edward Upward, called "Mortmere" (the matricidal implication is deliberate). Collaboration was another common concern of the Thirties, when individual voices wondered if they were enough; Isherwood would produce some of his most interesting work with Auden, using the common ground of Expressionist poetic drama. As Isherwood tells it in *Lions and Shadows*, the Mortmere tales were "a dream, a nightmare, about the English," set in an "anarchist paradise" which was "a private place of retreat from the rules and conventions of university life." The chief surviving fragment is Upward's "The Railway Accident" (finally published, after much private circulation, in his *The Railway Accident and Other Stories*, 1969), and it shows the intended spirit of surreal fantasy very clearly. This is fiction that reaches out of a failing bourgeois world to the gap in the pavement, the door in the wall, that would lead into an "other world" of fiction that could be superimposed on the real one. "Mortmere" already displays that distorted, half-psychological, half-political texture of prose that would become so familiar in the Thirties, when distinctive moral and existential domains (Greene's Greeneland) were so often laid over the almost familiar "real" world. It is also appropriate that "Mortmere" is an aborted, uncompleted work. So, in fact, were all Isherwood's early fictions, which, according to his own account, always came from something much larger - a massive unfinished project that history, or personal weakness, never allowed him to complete.

When he left Cambridge, Isherwood planned another large-scale project, an "immense novel" that would be called *The North-West Passage*. All that survives is the intention: it would be a large portrait of the post-war generation, seen from the standpoint of the "Truly Weak Man," the anti-hero making his indirect and deviant journey toward the America of life. If it remained unwritten, that was part of the point; the modern writer was indeed the Truly Weak Man, no longer in control of

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life. Nonetheless it was undoubtedly this that spawned his first two published novels, *All the Conspirators* (1928) and *The Memorial: A Portrait of a Family* (1932). Both return to many of the "Mortmere" themes, above all the struggle with the repressive mother and domestic and bourgeois life. In *All the Conspirators* the young would-be artist Philip Lindsay struggles against the conspiracy of the old with his new, distinctly neurotic, conspiracy of the new. The method now is not surreal but naturalistic, but various Modernist devices are also used; as Isherwood commented, "there were several 'thought-stream' passages in the fashionable neo-Joyce manner which yielded nothing, in obscurity, to the work of the master himself." Thirty-five years later, Isherwood, now in Hollywood, returned to his phase of his life and writing in the retrospective novel *Down There On a Visit* (1962), and targeted the key theme and flavour of both of these novels in defining his own character: "Perhaps his strongest negative emotion is ancestor hatred. He had vowed to disappoint, disgrace and disown his ancestors." The second, better, novel *The Memorial* treats the same demonumentalizing theme with somewhat more sympathy. Isherwood confessed a debt to E. M. Forster, who dealt with large themes in terms of personal relations, and called this a "potted epic . . . disguised as a drawing room comedy." This is another novel of attempted escape from the monumentality of the past, an anti-war book in which all those left behind by the war become the modern wounded, "living on in a new world, unwanted, among enemies." The novel ends by following out Isherwood's own course, as its anti-hero escapes to the Berlin of the Weimar period. During the writing of the book Isherwood, on Auden's enthusiastic recommendation, made the same journey, which in the event was to prove a voyage toward his most fundamental material. For the land of homosexual freedom, sun worship, oiled male bodies and Weimar decadence, his natural destination, was also the place where contemporary history was unfolding. Isherwood remained in Berlin from 1929 to 1933; over that period Nazism rose, and Hitler became Germany's chancellor. A relationship could be forged between

the figure through which he perceived himself, that of the weak and enfeebled modern writer, and the rising crisis of the age.

Another large project was planned, a novel called *The Lost*, which would deal with life in Weimar Berlin over the five years up to Hitler's coming to power. This too was never finished, but the shattered fragments from the larger idea would produce Isherwood's major work. Over the course of several years there emerged a network of novels and stories – *Mr Norris Changes Trains* (1935), *The Nowaks* (in *New Writing*, 1936), *Sally Bowles* (1937), *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) – which were at last collectively presented as *The Berlin Stories* in 1946. They formed an essential narrative of the Thirties, though the main material belongs to the dying of the Weimar age, the Modernist decadence. Lehmann (who plainly thought the work brilliant, but felt it could do with ideological improvement) accounts for it in *New Writing in Europe* as a work whose “implication” is revolutionary, even though Isherwood disappointingly avoids dealing with “revolutionaries” and “almost invariably prefers, on the contrary, to take eccentric and fantastic characters as his central pivots, the extreme products of the anarchy and pathological condition of modern society.” Yes indeed. Lehmann also uncomfortably admits that “one is forced to read the last few pages [of *Mr Norris* . . . ] shaking with laughter. While this is a source of disappointment to one part of Mr Isherwood's public, I cannot help suspecting it is the secret of his popularity with the other.” It is also, of course, the secret of success, but in the Thirties History was not to be laughed at, and historical satire not always an easily understood form. The point about all these stories is that they are rendered on a note of almost neurotic passivity, with a first-person, plainly autobiographical narrator variously rendered as “William Bradshaw” and “Herr Issyvoo,” who describes himself as “a half-hearted renegade from my own class, my feeling muddled by anarchism talked at Cambridge, by slogans from the confirmation service, by the tunes the band played when father's regiment marched to the railway station, seventeen years ago.” He is ostensibly the reporter, or, more passively still, “a camera.” “I am a camera with its shutter

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open, quite passive, recording, not thinking," he notes in *Goodbye to Berlin*. "Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman with the kimono washing her hair. Some day all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed." Meanwhile, though, it stays, as intended, provisional, immediate, almost improvised. As the German critic Walter Benjamin wrote in his *Small History of Photography* in 1931: "'In our age there is no work of art that is looked at so closely as a photograph of oneself, one's closest relatives and friends, one's sweetheart,' wrote Lichtwark back in 1907, thereby moving the inquiry out of the realm of aesthetic distinctions and into social functions. Only now this vantage point can be carried further." Isherwood, we can say, does.<sup>7</sup> The camera, of course, does not simply record; it is an object from the age of mechanical reproduction, challenging the authority of art by its instantaneous collusion with its subject. It has lenses, angles, shutter speeds; it quotes from reality, renders life as instant; it snaps, magnifies, distorts, frames and excludes, creating, here, a variety of mixed and almost random images from an age of surreal absurdity, when life is already reportage and will soon be history. So beyond the woman in the kimono and the man shaving, or the English nightclub whore Sally Bowles, the fastidious British adventurer Mr Norris, with his wigs and whips, the wandering expatriates seeking decadence, the gay young men seeking the sun, the Nowaks and the Lindauers, are the racial tensions, the rising hatreds, the glimpse of the baton

<sup>7</sup> It was as if Isherwood was deliberately reflecting the condition examined by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936: reprinted in *Illuminations* [London, 1970]): "...that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art ... Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines or newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former." He later adds that mankind's self-alienation "has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art."

and the concentration camp; a nightmare evolution from reality to decadence to violence is unfolding.

"Youth always demands its nightmares," Isherwood noted in 1939, "... Germany supplied them." Without any artistic formality history suddenly enters the passively visual narrative. "Berlin was in a state of civil war," we suddenly learn in *Mr Norris* . . . "Hate exploded suddenly, without warning, out of nowhere; at street corners, in restaurants, cinemas, dance-halls, swimming-baths; at midnight, after breakfast, in the middle of the afternoon. Knives were whipped out, blows were dealt with spiked rings, beer-mugs, chair-legs or leaded clubs; bullets slashed the advertisements on the poster-columns . . . Frä. Schroeder's astrologer foretold the end of the world." By the end Hitler is in power, Mr Norris has become that primal figure of the age, the double agent, daily life goes on in its usual daily snapshots in the cafés – and Herr Issyvoo, "smiling," is ready to leave, his last photographs taken and ready to be developed. What makes these Berlin tales remarkable is not only the radical historical moment they capture through fragments, a moment which entered the English imagination as the sign of the way the world was moving, and provided the landscape of nightmares to come. It is also their frank aesthetic passivity, which emerges as an apparently flat reportage rendered to us by a narrator whose very passivity is a product of the way history is affecting artistic consciousness. They mark Isherwood's move out of an interest in Modernist mannerism to an endeavour in what came to be "reportage," but was also an experiment in self-cancelling autobiography set in history, the writing of a time when, Isherwood said, "everyone must be his own guinea-pig." They also made him a writer peculiarly dependent on the history to which he might bear witness, and when he moved to peculiarly historyless California in 1939, his subject largely died. Walter Allen once called Isherwood the great disappointment of the modern novel. But this is not because of the half-aborted tales he produced in the Twenties and Thirties; it was because his later life never allowed him the same peculiar intimacy between historical crisis and the neurot-

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ically conceived artistic self. Isherwood remained a camera: his next book, *Prater Violet* (1945), deals with an *émigré* European film-maker, and the making of a film, a story of the moving picture; he himself became an important Hollywood screen-writer. But the later fiction is work essentially of personal narrative rather than historical diagnosis. *The World in the Evening* (1954) deals with what is really sexual boredom in the Cold-War, comfortably alienating USA. *Down There on a Visit* (1962) returns him to his old life in the 1920s and 1930s, but acknowledges his role as essentially that of the tourist in history. *A Single Man* (1964), a work of vivid present-tense neurosis, is a tale of a historyless America and the portrait of a single man who cannot build a full identity and has chosen not to mature. Isherwood, as he knew himself, stayed eternally a novelist of the Thirties, a novelist whose work was focused and historicized by a decade.

The same is true of Edward Upward, the "Chalmers" of *Lions and Shadows* and the collaborator on "Mortmere." The first of the Auden group to join the Communist Party, he published various important short stories and worked slowly on his novel *Journey to the Border*, which appeared in 1938. This is another work from the nightmare world, showing the influence of "Mortmere," the story of a neurotic young tutor, working for a rich British family, who finds the familiar social world distorted to the point of surreal extremity. But, though Upward feels obliged finally to justify his point in *The Mind in Chains* that neurosis might disappear if one took the standpoint of the workers, the book's essential theme is not political but psychoanalytical, indeed neurotic. The "border" was the final place of Thirties fiction (and Auden and Isherwood published their related play *On the Frontier* in the same year), the bridge not simply between self and history but between identity and neurosis, reality and unreality; it is the margin of consciousness itself. The force of the book lies in the (Kafkaesque) way the worlds within and without erode each other, and the border tested is that of fictional realism itself. Upward, still Marxist, returned to fiction in the 1960s, with the novels about the