

The Myths of Christopher Isherwood

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Liberation: Diaries, Volume Three: 1970–1983

by Christopher Isherwood, edited and with an introduction by Katherine Bucknell, and a preface by Edmund White
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1.

Most of Christopher Isherwood's novels are autobiographical. Many are narrated by someone named either Christopher Isherwood or William Bradshaw. Despite this, Christopher William Bradshaw-Isherwood—the name he was given at birth in 1904—was in some ways the least egocentric of novelists. The narrator who shares his name seems almost invisible, merely a hole in the air. All the other characters, who reveal their secrets to him while asking nothing in return, are physically real and emotionally larger than life. The rogue and double agent Mr. Norris in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1935), the bohemian chanteuse Sally Bowles in *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), the titanic film director Friedrich Bergmann in *Prater Violet* (1945), the dissolute archaeologist Ambrose and male courtesan Paul in *Down There on a Visit* (1962), and, in Isherwood's fictionalized memoir *Lions and Shadows* (1938), the eccentric Hugh Weston, modeled on W.H. Auden, are all flamboyantly themselves, while “Christopher Isherwood” scarcely exists at all.

In his nonfictional memoirs, Isherwood writes about himself as if he were not a single person but a disconnected sequence of persons. In *Kathleen and Frank* (1971) and *Christopher and His Kind* (1976) he writes about his present-day self in the first person, as “I,” and his younger self in the third person, as “Christopher.” Even his present self is less an individual than a generic member of a collective tribe—the gay tribe of *Christopher and His Kind*—or the replaceable occupant of a social role, as he describes himself in the title *My Guru and His Disciple* (1980). To an editor who met him infrequently, he seemed a different person each time.

He reported to a friend in 1939, “I am so utterly sick of being a person.” He was already, in private, convinced that he wasn't one. “As a *person*, I really don't exist,” he told his diary in 1938:

That is one of the reasons why I can't believe in any orthodox religion: I cannot believe in my own soul. No, I am a chemical compound, conditioned by environment and education. My “character” is



Bettmann/Corbis

Christopher Isherwood and W.H. Auden in London on their departure for China, 1938

simply a repertoire of acquired tricks, my conversation a repertoire of adaptations and echoes, my “feelings” are dictated by purely physical, external stimuli.

In 1939, after leaving England for America, he took up Vedanta, a religion he had never heard of earlier. Journalists and friends imagined that he had experienced a conversion to new values and a new sense of himself. In fact, he had adopted a religion that, unlike the cradle-Christianity he was reared in, confirmed what he already believed, that his personality was an illusion from which he must escape.

Introducing a collection titled *Vedanta for the Western World* (1945), he envisioned “all the teachers and prophets” telling him: “Christopher Isherwood is only an appearance.... He has no essential reality.” A few years before his death in 1986 he told an interviewer that he still thought as he did in 1938: “I have no sense of myself as a person exactly, just as a lot of reactions to things.”

A *Single Man* (1964) was the first of his novels in which he made no secret of his homosexuality, and the book launched his public transformation into someone whom younger readers valued as a “gay icon” and a “role model.” Icons and role models are inherently generic; the more personal and idiosyncratic someone seems, the less other people can project on him an iconic, idealized version of themselves. Isherwood the gay icon provoked simple and intense reactions, both for and against, of a kind that Isherwood the man never prompted. Two book titles, *The Isherwood Century* (2000) and *Middlebrow Queer* (2013), suggest the opposing extremes of his reputation.

Much as he enjoyed iconic status—“my biggest emotional thrill” on a speaking tour “was my reception at the Gay Academic Union meeting”—he never confused his generic image with his private self. “I’d enjoy posing as one of the Grand Old Men of the movement,” he wrote in his diary. What gave him the most pleasure was not personal adulation but the collective response of one group to another:

The kind of love which young people feel for old figurehead people like me is perfectly healthy, beautiful indeed, not in the least silly and woe unto young people who are incapable of feeling it.... *But* it is so important for the old figureheads *not* to take this love personally; to understand that it is simply an effect of the interaction between age groups—to understand this makes it more beautiful, not less.

Yet his pleasure was mixed with his sense that an icon’s “warmest supporters are the ones who do the most...to make you look ridiculous.”

During his lifetime, *A Single Man* was the only book in which Isherwood portrayed himself as a fully formed individual, not as a repertoire of reactions or a member of a tribe. His fictional representative, George—like his author, an English expatriate teaching at a college in Southern California—has the titanic feelings and appetites that, in his other books, were reserved for everyone else:

I am alive, he says to himself, *I am alive!* And life-energy surges hotly through him, and delight, and appetite.

Early in the book George thinks of himself as belonging to the homosexual “minority,” angrily at odds with the heterosexual majority, competing with other minorities for recognition of its sufferings. Later, the book unobtrusively transforms George from a partisan of one minority into an Everyman

who shares with everyone else his membership in “the ranks of that marvelous minority, The Living.”

The price George pays for being himself is loneliness. He is a single man, not merely because his lover, Jim, has died the day before, but because the novel is built on two of Isherwood’s deepest beliefs, which he never fully articulated. One was his belief that he could enjoy any kind of relationship only by denying or suppressing his personality and either becoming a member of a tribe or filling a generic role. (He role-played, he said, “to reassure myself *that I wasn’t alone!*”) The other was his belief that he could, in fact, exist as an individual person, with an individual’s complex motives and contradictory feelings, but only secretly and in solitude.

He portrays himself in his diaries as a unique person, but during his lifetime he kept this portrait secret, even from his companion of thirty years, Don Bachardy, though he assumed that Bachardy would read and publish the diaries after his death. He was willing to let other people see who he was, but only when he was no longer there to be seen.

Unlike the insubstantial narrators of his novels and memoirs, the Isherwood of his diaries is emphatically tangible. Like Montaigne, he records bodily realities—physical discomforts, the consistency of his stools, his favored sexual position, his weight—in the same pages in which he thinks about society and art. The three posthumously published volumes of his diaries are more vivid, memorable, and complex than almost everything in his novels and memoirs.

In his last novel, *A Meeting by the River* (1967), Isherwood divided himself into two brothers whose diaries and letters narrate the story. One brother withdraws from the world to become a Hindu monk; the other returns to the world of emotional betrayals, public success, and sexual appetite. At the same time that Isherwood was simplifying himself into two cartoon figures who endure mirror-image doubts before settling back into their two-dimensional selves, he was portraying in his diary the tangled and unresolvable impulses of his single, solitary self.

2.

Isherwood was born into the English landed gentry, heir to two ancient houses in Cheshire. When he finally inherited, he was living in America, and signed over the estate to his younger brother. He was eleven when his father, who enjoyed painting and soldiering, was killed in World War I.

Isherwood spent much of his early life battling his mother, only intermittently aware that what he called his “puritanical nature” was a copy of hers. “I was an upper-middle-class Puritan, cautious, a bit stingy, with a stake in the land,” he wrote in a memoir. “At bottom, I’m stuffy and cautious,” he told his diary. “Snooty I must be,” he told a friend. At Cambridge he was too proud to accept anything less than the first-class degree that he had neglected to work hard enough to achieve, so he deliberately failed his exams by answering one question in sonnets and another with a textual analysis of the question itself.

His first two novels indicted his mother for the miseries of his whole generation. *All the Conspirators* (1928) reports its characters’ thoughts in a style derived from James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, but, unlike both his models, Isherwood was less interested in individual lives than in collective, tribal identities. In a preface to a later reissue, he observed that he had given inner lives only to the younger characters, even the contemptible ones; the older characters are merely surfaces:

Our youthful author is so emotionally involved in “the great war between the old and young” [a phrase from Shelley’s *The Cenci*] that he keeps forgetting his lesser loyalties and antagonisms. His motto is: My Generation—right or wrong!

His tribal enemies included his readers, from whom he concealed crucial events by describing them only in oblique retrospective comments. “I now detect a great deal of repressed aggression in this kind of obscurity,” he wrote later. His second novel, *The Memorial* (1932), was less aggressive, but still written more in Virginia Woolf’s style than his own.

Three years later, writing *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, he found the transparent, colloquial style that he used for the rest of his life. It is made up of simple declarative sentences, varied by an occasional subordinate clause, typically appended to the end of a paragraph like an afterthought:

After lunch, Arthur [Norris] lay down to rest. I took his trunks in a taxi to the Lehrter Station and deposited them in the cloakroom. Arthur was anxious to avoid a lengthy ceremony of departure from the house. The tall detective was on duty now. He watched the loading of the taxi with interest, but made no move to follow.

Isherwood used this style when narrating a story and describing his characters, but switched to a more elaborate, metaphoric style when setting a scene, as in the opening of *Goodbye to Berlin*:

From my window, the deep solemn massive street. Cellar-shops where the lamps burn all day, under the shadow of top-heavy balconied façades, dirty plaster frontages embossed with scroll-work and heraldic devices. The whole district is like this: street leading into street of houses like shabby monumental safes crammed with the tarnished valuables and second-hand furniture of a bankrupt middle class.

The next paragraph begins with the famous sentence in which he declared himself not quite a person: “I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking.” The transparent and poetic variants of his style correspond to the two writers he most revered, Chekhov and Virginia Woolf.

The casual tone of Isherwood’s stories about Berlin—its resident Communists, Nazis, and bourgeois, and visitors such as Mr. Norris and Sally Bowles—led critics to treat him as more noteworthy for promise than achievement. He “holds the future of the English novel in his hands,” Somerset Maugham said. Cyril Connolly called him “our most promising novelist.” He was celebrated for a light and tolerant comic touch, but as he insisted in his diaries, his comic style made a serious point. The frivolities in the foreground never fully concealed the suicides and political murders in the background. Anyone with the safety and leisure required to write—or read—these stories was someone who turned away from the disaster.

At school Isherwood had met Auden, who was three years his junior; they became close friends when they met again after Isherwood left Cambridge. In the 1930s they collaborated on three plays for the left-wing London-based Group Theatre—*The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1935), *The Ascent of F6* (1936), and *On the Frontier* (1938)—and a travel book about the Japanese invasion of China, *Journey to a War* (1939). Their collaboration linked Isherwood to Auden’s burgeoning reputation as a political poet, but their plays were failures because the two authors thought in opposite ways about politics and persons.

The published text of *Dogskin* (the authors' shorthand title) ends with a scene written by Isherwood in which the hero triumphs by affirming his collective identity. He tells his reactionary village neighbors: "You are units in an immense army.... I am going to be a unit in the army of the other side.... We are all of us completely unimportant." When the play was staged, Auden replaced this with a scene in which the hero is killed after urging his neighbors to renounce their passive existence as "units in an immense army," and to become individuals who can choose for themselves: "I can only show you what you are doing and so force you to choose. For choice is what you are all afraid of."

In January 1939 Auden and Isherwood sailed to New York, where Auden thrived while Isherwood, feeling lost and directionless, traveled west to find in Hollywood both hack screenwriting work and the Vedanta temple. Auden never lost his sense of Englishness; Isherwood, more than any other expatriate writer, transformed himself into an American, though it took him twenty years to adapt his prose to American vocabulary and rhythms—twice as long as he expected when he said in 1943, "I'll be working on that problem for the next ten years—to evolve an individual Anglo-American idiom."

In the first novel he wrote in America, *Prater Violet* (1945), he avoided that stylistic problem by setting the book in London in 1933–1934, while the Nazis consolidate power offstage. It is effectively the third volume of a trilogy that began with his two books set in Berlin. He next wrote a forgettable travel book about South America, *The Condor and the Cows* (1949), and what he described accurately as "my worst novel, *The World in the Evening*" (1954).

Isherwood was bored by writing these two books but fascinated by writing his diaries—and by rewriting earlier diaries and destroying the originals. In his diaries, and in his published work after around 1960, he made himself American by taking strength from two widespread American myths that seemed to confirm beliefs that he had held privately and secretly when in England.

One of these myths held that one can only become oneself by insisting on being alone, unencumbered by entangling alliances and obligations. This was an idea shared by writers as various as Mark Twain—Huck Finn lights out for the territory to avoid being adopted and civilized—and Henry James, whose heroes and heroines choose the lonely integrity of honor over the corrupting compromises of love.

The second myth, a corollary of the first, held that the only relations worth having with other people were not the corrupting individual relations between Huck Finn and Aunt Sally, or between Lambert Strether and Maria Gostrey in James's *The Ambassadors*, but those in which individual selves dissolve into something anonymous and collective. This myth is beautiful and moving in Walt Whitman; less so in twentieth-century fantasies, shared ambivalently by Isherwood, about every American's supposed need to find a collective ethnic or sexual "identity."

In public, and among groups of friends, Isherwood kept affirming his tribal identity as a gay man. "He always used the collective 'we,'" David Hockney remembered; "we must do this, we must do that." In private, in his diaries, he expressed outrage at injustices against his tribe, and at other collective injustices, but he wrote and thought as someone who felt alone in crowded rooms, someone who said "I" but not "you." In the diaries, even Don Bachardy seems to exist as an individual person mostly when he is away from Isherwood; in their relations with each other, the two are transformed into impersonal roles, figures in animal masks: Isherwood is "Dobbin," Bachardy is

“Kitty,” who goes “mousing” when pursuing sex away from home. These names are less embarrassing on the page than one might expect. Isherwood, in his role as Dobbin, writes at one point that he “was so bored he could have neighed with anguish.”

Isherwood asks himself: “Who are you—who writes all this?... What am I, I wonder?... Don is real, but I take him for granted.” A recurring theme in his diaries—sometimes guardedly visible in his novels and memoirs—is Isherwood’s habit of treating others as roles or useful objects, not as persons. In *A Single Man*, George comes to accept his lover’s death: “Jim is in the past, now. He is of no use to George any more.”

Isherwood noted in his diary that Auden, though he admired *A Single Man*, “was shocked when George thinks that he will ‘make a new Jim.’” Isherwood misremembered what he wrote—in the novel George resolves to “find another Jim,” not “make” one—but he remembered what he meant. “Jim” was a role that could be filled by anyone with the required bodily and mental attributes. Isherwood explains to himself in his diary that Auden “refuses to believe that this is my own attitude toward human beings.” Like Isherwood, Auden had turned to religion in his first years in America, but Auden’s Christian belief that he was obliged to love his neighbor as himself took as its starting point the value and dignity of the self whose whole existence Isherwood’s Vedanta denied.

A few years after *A Single Man*, Isherwood obliquely acknowledged the effect on another person of being made to play a role that someone else wants him to fulfill. He and Bachardy collaborated on a screenplay, *Frankenstein: The True Story* (1973), in which Frankenstein’s creature is beautiful when first created, then turns ugly as the process of creation starts “reversing itself.” The psychological point is that the person who is made to play the role of a beloved Jim never entirely loses his individuality, and thereby makes himself ugly to his creator by refusing to dissolve into his creator’s fantasy about him.

3.

Liberation: Diaries, Volume Three: 1970–1983 is Isherwood’s most complex and engaging self-portrait, a posthumous triumph of the real person whose existence he doubted. He owes much of his triumph to Katherine Bucknell’s extraordinary tact and skill as editor. As in *Diaries, Volume One: 1939–1960* (1996), *The Sixties: Diaries, Volume Two: 1960–1969* (2010), and *Lost Years: A Memoir, 1945–1951* (2000), Bucknell provides a sympathetic introduction, compact annotations, and an extensive “glossary” with biographical information about nearly a thousand people, many of them unknown to Wikipedia.

Bucknell’s notes highlight, among much else, Isherwood’s indifference to celebrity after years working in Hollywood. He visits the famous and notorious, but he also writes: “We visited Dorothy Miller who was adorable.... She is so full of inward joy that her complaints seem purely camp.” I assumed while reading this that he was writing about a film star; the glossary informed me that she had worked for Isherwood as a cleaner and cook.

Everything about Isherwood’s life is more nuanced in his diaries than in his books. He writes of his humility before his guru, Swami Prabhavananda, and another swami:

Don’t these two dear saints realize that it is the very height of pride for the proud man to have a few people before whom he humbles himself—as much as to say, behold, even I, in all my

greatness, am bowing down!/? That is exactly what T.E. Lawrence used to do.

His religion has less to do with escaping himself than with revering another self: “My religion is what I glimpse of Swami’s experience of religion.” Some of the prose equals his published best. After dinner with a friend and the friend’s boring companion: “It was like a meal with Frankenstein and the Creature: out of politeness to Frankenstein, you had to let the Creature ramble on and on, lest you should seem to suggest that Frankenstein had made a mess of him.”

He is glad to feel “a member of the tribe” when speaking in public, and rages intermittently against the heterosexual “Others.” Away from the public eye, he feels impatient with tribes and groups: “Oh dear, why do we have to go around in these tribes? I would so much rather be alone with any single one of them and *communicate*.” He is annoyed by anyone who behaves like a stereotypical group member, and is just as impatient with the members of his tribe when they act like “silly faggots” as he is with women who act tribally and stereotypically “cunty.” But he dislikes Jews merely for being Jews, no matter how they act.

A central theme of Peter Parker’s clear-eyed and indispensable biography *Isherwood: A Life Revealed* (2004) is Isherwood’s habit of reshaping facts when reporting them in letters, diaries, and memoirs, even when he claims to tell the truth about matters he had airbrushed earlier. “I keep wanting to rearrange and alter the facts,” Isherwood writes in his diary, “so as to relate them more dramatically to my reactions.” His transparent style makes his diaries read like vivid, objective reporting, but Parker notes how unreliable they can be, even about such easily verifiable facts as the plot of *Cabaret*, the film based on the Berlin stories.

Isherwood sometimes reports what seem to be facts, then reveals that he invented them, for example in an anecdote about his landlord, Norman Prouting, during a stay in London:

It turns out that Rory Cameron was the driver of the car which wrecked and so severely injured Norman Prouting, years ago, on the Riviera. Like the other passengers, all rich people, he apparently neglected Norman completely while he was going through the subsequent operations—Norman still limps slightly—and never offered to help him with money.

The next sentence exposes part or all of the story as Isherwood’s fantasia on a simple gesture that could have meant almost anything: “At least that’s what I infer, because of Norman’s reaction when I mentioned Rory’s name to him last night; he froze up solid.” Isherwood’s passive camera-lens style was the product of a shaping and insistent will.

In 1983, three years before he died of cancer, Isherwood stopped writing his first-person diaries. As he declined, Bachardy sat all day drawing portraits of him, leaving them on the floor as he finished them. A few weeks before the end, Isherwood roused himself to look at them and said, “I like the ones of him dying.”