Paul Piazza

Christopher Isherwood:

MYTH

AND

ANTI-MYTH

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From this Cross the lives of the main characters take definition. Lily typically fastens "the eye of her brain upon a needle-point of concentration. Richard, she thought, Richard" (M 102). To her the Cross symbolizes Richard, her life. She also seizes the moment to usher Mr. Vernon as chief mourner dramatically to the front of the Cross where he lays the first wreath of flowers. Mary sees the Cross as a hypocritical bore which must be shut out of her consciousness, lest she be haunted by the echoes of her goblin footfalls. Maurice is not even present. Eric, standing next to Anne, welters with guilt because he is not lucky enough to be one of the hallowed dead. Edward Blake vacantly loiters in the background, his mind hammered by the irrevocable loss:

> Richard is dead. And this is what remains, said Edward to himself, seeing the doll [Lily] in her black, the slobbering old man [Mr. Vernon], the gawky boy [Eric] getting into the carriage. This is what we've got left of Richard. (M 141)

The Memorial Cross stands as a blasphemous antithesis to the Cross of Christ: its disciples are not filled with life, but sentenced to life-in-death. They are futile flesh-and-blood memorials to "that War [which] ought never to have happened" (M 294). Inheriting nothing but a "heap of broken images," they are debased figures crouched in the shadow of a sterile Cross.

Isherwood finished the first draft of *The Memorial* before departing for Berlin in 1929. Why did he go to Berlin? That question presupposes another: Why did Isherwood leave England? At the time, Isherwood, enrolled as a medical student at King's College, London, was absolutely miserable.[17] Medical School was "Cambridge again, but worse. Worse, because this time, I was honestly trying, seriously doing my best" (LS 288). He felt that his "Art was a flop, a declared failure in the open market. And I couldn't hide myself in Mortmere: Mortmere had failed us, dissolved into thin air" (LS 288). Thus he had reached the brutal conclusion that "I should never make a doctor. The whole thing had been a day-dream from the start. It was madness ever to have joined the medical school at all" (LS 288).

What, he agonized, was to become of him? "Was I to go back to tutoring until I got too old to impress the parents? Was I to try for another amateur-secretary job, and spend the rest of my life messing about on the outskirts of Bohemia? Was I, indeed, a total misfit, a hundred per cent. incompetent?" (LS 288).

Isherwood felt that he "hadn't advanced an inch, really, since those Cambridge days" (LS 304). He needed a change, a total break from England and the old life, the kind of severance Philip Lindsay and Eric Vernon unsuccessfully sought.

But why Berlin? In an article published in 1939 in *The New Republic*, "German Literature in English," Isherwood explains why Germany, and *a fortiori* Berlin, had such an irresistible power over his generation:[18]

> (1) After the War, the younger generation reacted against the blind chauvinism of the war years. Because the older generation claimed that the Germans were barbarians,[19] the younger inferred that they were the most civilized people in Europe.
>
> (2) Young people became pro-German because they sympathized with the unfair treatment of Germany after the War. "The New Germany was represented by a charming blond girl or boy who strode with open-necked shirt, harmlessly hiking through the Black Forest."
>
> (3) "Youth always demands its nightmares (perhaps in our case they were the horrible dreams of the war we had so narrowly avoided)": Germany supplied them. "Amateurs of the macabre, we reveled in the early Ufa films."
>
> (4) Youth delights in war novels, and Germany led the way for such fiction.
>
> (5) Youth's most admired writers were German: Hölderlin, Kafka, Rilke, and Mann.[20]

Most important, and a personal factor Isherwood would not have alluded to in his article in 1939, "Berlin meant Boys" (CK

2). As a homosexual, Isherwood could not "relax sexually with a member of his own class or nation. He needed a working-class foreigner" (CK 3). Introduced by Auden to Berlin's boy bars, the Cosy Corner in particular, and already "absolutely infatuated" from an earlier visit (CK 10) with a boy whom Isherwood calls "Bubbi" (Baby), Isherwood, on March 14, 1929, left London by the afternoon train for Berlin, there to join his own tribe. The trip profoundly altered the course of Isherwood's life: Berlin so stirred his creativity that, at least for his generation, Berlin would inevitably be his city, as Dublin is Joyce's and Paris Hemingway's. There Isherwood found himself both as a homosexual and as a writer: he enjoyed a prolonged affair with Heinz, the model for Otto Nowak and Waldemar, and there finished *The Memorial,* published it, and gathered material for *The Berlin Stories.*

Although Berlin was a break from medical school and furnished rich experiences for his best work, Berlin was not a break from the past. Indeed, Berlin was condemned by its past. The bitterness of defeat in a war which cost 1,773,000 lives in a losing cause; the Germans' bitterness in feeling that they had been betrayed into surrendering; the bitterness at the harsh terms of the Versailles Peace Treaty; spiralling inflation, social unrest, threats of revolution, the rise of the Nazis—all hurtled Germany into another world war. And Isherwood, a foreigner in a doomed capital, recorded what he saw: everywhere civilization crumbling, everywhere war more imminent.

Because Isherwood brilliantly recorded what he saw, *The Berlin Stories* is a valuable social document which provides an insight into Isherwood's handling of political themes.[21] It also gives us a purchase on Isherwood's use of fantasy, influenced by Mortmere and the German cinema, discussed in the next chapter.

Isherwood's stories achieve political significance not because of their ideological content, but because of their heightened

sensitivity to the obscure dread, the vague, unnatural menace inherent in the last days of the Weimar Republic. Occasionally, Isherwood's narrator reports directly on the civil war in Berlin:

> Berlin was in a state of civil war. 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, rebounded from the iron roofs of latrines. In the middle of a crowded street a young man would be attacked, stripped, thrashed and left bleeding on the pavement; in fifteen seconds it was all over and the assailants had disappeared. Otto got a gash over the eye with a razor in a battle on a fair-ground near the Cöpernickerstrasse. The doctor put in three stitches and he was in hospital for a week. The newspapers were full of death-bed photographs of rival martyrs, Nazi, Reichsbanner and Communists. My pupils looked at them and shook their heads, apologizing to me for the state of Germany. "Dear, dear!" they said, "it's terrible. It can't go on." (N 86)

Even in summations of this sort, as the extreme selectivity of detail suggests, Isherwood's method is to catch the unrest and shabby chaos of the larger life around him in the microcosm of the individual. Isherwood is not an archivist like Orwell, prying into totalitarian atrocities, but rather a seismographer capable of reading the subtlest tremors that ripple across his personal landscape. John Lehmann was the first to spot this capability.[22] Isherwood's comments on a short story, "My Enemy" by André Chamson, further reveal Isherwood's *ars politica.*[23] Chamson recounts the adventures of two French boys, avowed enemies, finding friendship by overcoming a common obstacle: they climb an arduous mountain and reach the top with new respect for each other. Once they descend, however, they resume their inveterate hatred, ashamed at being seen together. Isherwood

writes to Lehmann that Chamson's story "makes one feel that a real artist can write about absolutely anything and still produce all the correct reflections about fascism, nationalism, etc. in the reader's mind, a trite observation but it always comes as a fresh surprise."[24] In this story the humanity of the two boys is stifled by the political atmosphere. No political speculations are necessary, for, in catching the truth about human nature, Chamson implies his political point. Hena Maes-Jelinek offers as an example of Isherwood's fictional treatment of politics his description of the people in front of the "Darmstädter und National" Bank on the day it is closed by the German Government:

> A little boy was playing with a hoop amongst the crowd. The hoop ran against a woman's legs. She flew out at him at once: "Du, sei bloss nicht so frech! Cheeky little brat! What do you want here!" Another woman joined in, attacking the scared boy: "Get out! You can't understand it, can you?" And another asked, in furious sarcasm: "Have you got your money in the bank too, perhaps?" The boy fled before their pent-up, exploding rage. (GB 57)

Maes-Jelinek's conclusion: "Isherwood does not discuss the consequences of the event but shows how it affects people."[25] Auden's poem "The Model" offers an insight into Isherwood's gift by summarizing a political method that fixes the eye of the reader on the "essential human element." In the poem Auden uses the analogy of a portrait painter and his female subject:

> So the painter may please himself; give her an English
> park,
> Rice-fields in China, or a slum tenement;
> Make the sky light or dark;
> Put green plush behind her or a red brick wall.
> She will compose them all.
> Centering the eye on their essential human element.[26]

The "essential human element" in Isherwood's Berlin pieces composes all, gives the various genres a sustained, unified impact, and reveals the main lines of the epic he originally intended. As the political situation deteriorates, Isherwood's portraits darken. There is an increasing sense of suffocation, a sinking of human consciousness, as people discover themselves locked in hopeless situations, trapped by the approaching horror of Nazism. Indeed the subjects of Isherwood's portraits support Lehmann's assertions that anyone reading *Goodbye to Berlin* with *The Last of Mr. Norris* will catch "glimpses of the bigger work which never materialized,"[27] which Isherwood planned to name *The Lost,* or its German equivalent *Die Verlorenen.*

If we take *The Berlin Stories,* then, as the epic Isherwood intended, the first piece we encounter is a novel, *The Last of Mr. Norris,* narrated by Isherwood's namesake, William Bradshaw. Norris is an essentially comic character, a colorful *flaneur* delighting in mysteries, dabbling in communism and fascism, reveling in the decadence of wigs and scents and vintage wines.[28] Before the dressing mirror he displays all the vanity of Zuleika Dobson, tweezing his eyebrows, coloring his cheeks, and powdering his nose. His sexual tastes are comically perverse, his reading matter unashamedly pornographic, his manner clandestine and affected. Eventually, however, Norris' double-dealing and chicanery rebound, and he leaves Berlin, dogged by his servant, the Nazi-like Schmidt.

While Norris flits about with the epicene pomp of a *fin-de-siècle* aesthete, tragedy is all around him. For example, the Baron von Pregnitz (Norris and Bradshaw's communist friend) shoots himself in a railroad station lavatory. Meanwhile, as Isherwood had stated earlier, Berlin is in a state of civil war. But the reader's attention is focused on Arthur Norris' comic inferno and Bradshaw's amused toleration rather than on the tragedy. Even the ending is ironic, as Arthur, unable to elude

the ubiquitous Schmidt, writes to Bradshaw, "*What* have I done to deserve this?" (N 191).

Perhaps the model for Norris, Gerald Hamilton, from whom Norris' absurd charm is derived, did not lend himself to tragedy. In *Christopher and His Kind,* Isherwood finds Hamilton "enchantingly 'period'" (CK 75). Auden, Spender, and others treat Hamilton "like an absurb but nostalgic artwork which has been rediscovered by a later generation" (CK 75), referring to him as "'a most incredible old crook'" (CK 75). As a "man of the world . . . Gerald had to hobnob with buyable chiefs of police, bloodthirsty bishops, stool pigeons, double agents, blackmailers, hatchet men, secretaries and mistresses of politicians, millionairesses even more ruthless than the husbands they had survived . . ." (CK 76). It is not surprising that Norris is comic.

The sequel to *The Last of Mr. Norris* is *Goodbye to Berlin,* which begins and ends with Isherwood's two Berlin diaries. Here the tonal change is immediately clear from the very first line, a sentence fragment: "From my window, the deep solemn massive street" (GB 1). The narrator Christopher Isherwood, unlike Bradshaw, senses the imminent menace of Nazism and himself feels its terror. To illustrate the gradual shift from edgy watchfulness to icy despair, Isherwood's four stories, or portraits, will be treated first; then the diaries will be discussed as focal points epitomizing the moods of the stories they frame. "Sally Bowles" follows "A Berlin Diary (Autumn 1930)." Sally, after Christopher himself, is the most memorable character in *The Berlin Stories.* Isherwood's Sally, however, has been so transformed by the art of other people—for example, Julie Harris in John van Druten's *I Am a Camera,* Jill Haworth in the stage musical *Cabaret,* and Liza Minnelli in the film version—that Isherwood, writing forty years after the publication of "Sally Bowles," cannot remember his first meeting with Jean Ross, the real-life original of Sally, but only Sally the fictional character.

Like Arthur and like all Berliners, Sally is oblivious to the debacle around her. In Isherwood's story she is an English expatriate who lives for fast money and success as a cabaret entertainer. But like Arthur she is a poor actor, at once innocent and naughty, sophisticated and naive, gallant and frightened. In the end, she is duped by a sixteen-year-old con man who calls himself Paul Rakowski, a pretended European agent from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer who promises her a leading role in a new movie. Like Arthur, she also manages to escape from Berlin.

But escape will soon be well-nigh impossible. "On Ruegen Island," which follows "Sally Bowles," is a pastoral interlude before the collapse in the final stories. This piece takes place away from Berlin: though fascism is present in a Nazi doctor, in flags on the beach, in a conversation at an ice cream shop, politics are not as obtrusive as they are in the earlier and later stories. Instead, the story centers on the conflict common to all relationships: love-hate. In this case, the lovers are homosexuals, Otto Nowak and Peter Wilkinson, observed by the uninvolved narrator, Christopher—in actual fact, however, Isherwood and Otto—Heinz in *Christopher and His Kind*—were lovers for many years. Peter is a warped, hypersensitive Englishman, about Christopher's age, unable to cope with the shallow, but violently sensuous Otto: they snap and claw at each other until Otto leaves. An apparently innocent game played on the beach compresses into a single episode the hostility of their relationship as well as the bullying tactics of the Nazis for those unable to meet their standards.

One afternoon a narrow-minded Berlin surgeon, who is vacationing on the island and whose Nazism has been a provocative nuisance throughout the story, literally coerces Peter,