

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD'S 'RIGHT' AND 'WRONG' ANTI-SEMITISM: A POLITICAL READING

EL ANTISEMITISMO "CORRECTO" E "INCORRECTO" DE CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD: UNA LECTURA POLÍTICA

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Abstract

There are numerous references to Christopher Isherwood's prejudices against Jews in scholarly literature; however, this subject has not yet been approached in depth. This study aims to fill that void by dissecting the author's bias against Jews: its origin and nature. The article discusses the references to Jews in the writer's novels, memoirs and diaries within the frame of reference of Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory, which holds that humans innately derogate those who are perceived as being opposed. A close reading reveals that Isherwood, in a specific social and political context, considered Jews alien to him and—in accordance with social identity theory predictions—he instinctually derogated them. Before his stay in Berlin, Judaism did not interest him and he disliked Jews because he regarded them as 'exotic'. During the rise and rule of Nazism, the writer felt compelled to support Jews—although reticently—because they had become the main target of persecution of national socialism. Later, once in America, Isherwood distinguished between 'right' and 'wrong' anti-Semitism and stated that Jewish politics were whining and belligerent. Even though he had Jewish friends, his diaries show a persistent instinctual dislike of Jews. Ironically, the anti-prejudice fighter could not help having his own prejudices.

Keywords: Christopher Isherwood, Jews, social identity theory, cognitive association, anti-Semitism.

Resumen

Existen numerosas referencias sobre los prejuicios de Christopher Isherwood contra los judíos en la literatura académica, pero este tema aún no se ha abordado en profundidad. Este estudio tiene como objetivo llenar ese vacío diseccionando el sesgo del autor contra los judíos: su origen y naturaleza. El artículo analiza las referencias a los judíos en las novelas, memorias y diarios del escritor dentro del marco de la teoría de la identidad social de Tajfel y Turner que sostiene que los humanos de manera innata derogarán a quienes perciben como opuestos. Una lectura atenta revela que Isherwood, en un contexto específico de factores sociales y políticos, consideraba a los judíos ajenos a él y, de acuerdo con las predicciones de la teoría de la identidad social, los derogaba instintivamente. Antes de su estancia en Berlín, el judaísmo no le interesaba y los judíos no le gustaban porque los consideraba “exóticos”. Durante el ascenso y el dominio del nazismo, el escritor se sintió obligado a apoyar a los judíos, aunque con reticencia, porque se habían convertido en el principal objetivo del nacionalsocialismo. Más tarde, en Estados Unidos, Isherwood distinguía entre antisemitismo “correcto” e “incorrecto” y sostenía que la política judía era quejumbrosa y beligerante. A pesar de tener amigos judíos, sus diarios muestran una persistente aversión instintiva hacia los judíos. Irónicamente, el activista contra los prejuicios no podía evitar tener los suyos.

Palabras clave: Christopher Isherwood, judíos, teoría de la identidad social, asociaciones cognitivas, antisemitismo.

1. Introduction

Christopher Isherwood’s thoughts and feelings regarding Jews have repeatedly been commented on. Stephen Spender wrote in a letter addressed to his friend: “After all, the Nazi attitude towards [...] Jews is in some respect like yours” (Isherwood 2012a: 66-67). Giles holds that “[o]ne aspect of fascist modernism which Isherwood does not avoid is its congenital anti-Semitism” (2006: 241). White remarks that “a year never goes by in his journals that he doesn’t attribute an enemy’s or acquaintance’s bad behaviour to his Jewishness” (2013: vii). The author himself admits anti-Semitic feelings in his diaries. In a 1960 entry, Isherwood writes that he needs to speak with the Jewish theatrical producer and director Jed Harris but he decides not to call him: “Why should *I* pay for a long call? Why not be the Jew for once? Jewish behavior, deliberately practiced, is a cure for anti-Semitism” (2011: 849, emphasis in original). In *A Single Man*, George Falconer—a character modeled on Isherwood himself—tells one of his students:

“The Nazis were not right to hate the Jews. But their hating the Jews was *not* without a cause” (2010a: 52, emphasis in original). Despite the interest of this subject, it has not yet been studied in depth. As Monnickendam observes, the critical reception of Isherwood has mainly focused on his ‘I’m-a-Camera’ literary style, his sexuality and his understanding of religion and spirituality (2008: 125-137). However, the study of other aspects, including the author’s open dislike of Jews, remains relatively uncharted. This paper intends to fill that void by dissecting Isherwood’s prejudice against Jews and its successive transformations.

This article shows that, in the 1920s and early 1930s, the young writer shared a not uncommon British dislike of Jews, but national socialism and its genocidal politics temporarily forced him to reconsider his stance. During the escalation of Nazism and World War II, his narrative reflects a more sympathetic author, but the subsequent ‘American’ writing contains harsh criticism of Jews and their politics. Ironically, the great fighter against prejudice could not help having his own. Methodologically, this research is partly guided by Tajfel and Turner’s social identity theory. These researchers provide a frame of reference for the study of prejudice which focuses on social categorization and universal intergroup attitudes. These factors are examined together with the author’s conception of literature and the role it played in his life: literature is the site where he negotiated “his relationship with others and, ultimately, with the universe” (Schwerdt 1989: 198). The writer considered all writing on specific topics to be political and there is every indication that he might have been acting as a sort of *undercover literary activist* who relied on a series of techniques to change his readers’ attitudes towards some subjects. Isherwood repeatedly relied on unobtrusive narrators who focus on actual people the author liked, seemingly anecdotal situations, and deconstructing and fostering stereotypes. The discussion will eventually unmask the ‘tricks’ of an undercover literary activist who, despite his claims of objectivity, manipulates the Jewish identity in accordance with his own interests. The analysis also reveals that Isherwood distinguished between right and wrong reasons ‘to hate the Jews’ and discusses these reasons.

The corpus of study includes the author’s diaries, memoirs and novels. This corpus has been divided into three periods —before, during and after Berlin— for two reasons. The first reason is that *Goodbye to Berlin* constitutes a watershed in Isherwood’s approach to the subject. As a witness of the emergence of national socialism in Germany, he felt compelled to deal with the Jewish question and, at the same time, re-examine his prejudices. The narratives suggest that Isherwood’s stereotypical preconceptions before Berlin mainly operated at a subconscious level: they were culturally acquired, internalized, hardly meditated. The reader finds a greater concern and a more sympathetic approach to Jews in *Goodbye to Berlin*. However, the author’s attitude is warily distant. The post-Berlin writing is sprinkled

with hostile and sometimes even openly anti-Semitic comments. These remarks, nonetheless, tend to be intellectually more elaborate than in the previous writing. The other reason for the division into these periods is the availability of sources. There are no published diaries before Isherwood migrated to America. The semi-biographical novel *Lions and Shadows* and the volume of memories *Christopher and His Kind* are valuable sources to document these periods, but these publications, unlike diaries, were written to be published. Diaries are expected to be less mediated and more straightforward than novels and memoirs. And although we must not dismiss the idea that Isherwood contemplated the possibility that they would be published in the future, their availability should facilitate, at least in theory, an analysis of the writer's more private opinions. Before 1939, the analysis is thus documented by the author's public writing and indirect sources. Since that year, it is supplemented by his diaries.

2. The Young Writer and the Others

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Isherwood's early references to Jews are scarce and stereotypical. In *All the Conspirators* (1928), the main character visits a "crowded, polymorphous" pawnshop and he shows an interest in an overcoat: "Philip tried it on in the dim gaslight. It was on the large side. The sleeves had to be turned back; but, as the young Jew brightly explained, they could so easily be shortened. And it was worth three times the money" (2012b: 185). This description is so full of clichés that it even borders on parody. Isherwood might have been looking for a humorous effect in this passage, but it is difficult to determine whether he was just trying to be funny or perceived Jews in such a stereotypical way. The comments on Jews in Isherwood's second novel, *The Memorial*, are anecdotal as well. There is a brief allusion to the "[p]ale cultured Jews" (2012c: 25) from Royal College that suggests detachment and lack of interest. The references to Jews are more abundant in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1935). Piet refers to the non-Jewish guests in a luxurious hotel in Switzerland: "Had they no decency at all? Had they no national pride, to mix with a lot of Jews who were ruining their countries?" (1999a: 187). Later, the narrator tells that one of his pupils is "eagerly adjuring me not to believe the stories, 'invented by Jewish emigrants', about the political persecution" (226). The narrator also observes the satisfaction of passers-by with Nazi thugs: "they smiled [...] because the Jews, their business rivals [...] had been satisfactorily found guilty of the defeat and the inflation, and were going to catch it" (223). The attitude of the narrator himself toward the Jews does not seem sympathetic either. He accuses them of manipulating Mr. Norris: "he must have been one of the most eligible young bachelors of his large circle; but it was the Jews, not the ladies, who

got him in the end” (50). He also shows mild contempt for a Jewish lawyer: “[m]y bench was shared by a fat Jewish slum-lawyer” (50). This contempt might be attributed to narrative reasons but significant details in and around *Lions and Shadows* (1938) reveal that the author indeed disliked Jews.

There is only one open reference to ‘the Jewish question’ in the semi-biographical account of the author's education in the 1920s. Christopher intends to fail his Tripos and writes in his final paper: “The Jews are all very well in their way and usury is all very well in *its* way” (2013a: 97, emphasis in original). Due to the context, it is not possible to determine if this statement really reflects the writer's opinion or if it is just sarcasm. However, some lines he wrote about the mother of one of his pupils, Mrs. Lang, in the sketches prior to *Lions and Shadows* are quite revealing: “He [Christopher] supposed, vaguely, that she was a jewess [sic.]. In her voice, in her gestures, in her tastes there was a definitely exotic flavouring” (in Parker 2004: 142). The writer did not include this description in the final volume but, as Parker observes, “one senses Isherwood's British distaste for what he perceived as a sort of oriental exoticism. This is something that persisted throughout his life, and in the 1970s he would recall Mrs. Lang as “vulgar as shit and maybe even a Jewess” (in Parker 2004: 143). What Parker calls a “British distaste” for Jews was deep-rooted in the 1920s. Despite their efforts to fit in, Jews were generally seen as ‘exotic’ people dressed in black with long beards and odd hats (Schama 2017: 315). They were contradictorily criticized by both left- and right-wing militants. Publications such as *The Jewish Peril: Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* which blamed Jews for the Great War and ‘the Bolshevik threat’ not only circulated but also attracted the ambiguous attention of the pro-Establishment newspaper *The Times* (Liebich 2012: 180). Paradoxically, leaders of The Independent Labour Party and the Trade Union Congress blamed the ‘capitalist Jews’ for “the [Boer] war and imperialism in general” (Judd and Surridge 2013: 203-205).

The distaste for Jews was not a British peculiarity, as Isherwood would personally experience in Germany. But even though there are differences between prejudices, there are some commonalities too. Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory holds that prejudice is a natural composite phenomenon determined by several factors. Firstly, the cognitive mechanism of classifying individuals into discrete categories. Secondly, the innate inclinations to highlight intra-category similarities and inter-category differences that lead to stereotyping. Finally, the inborn intergroup attitude to favor in-group members and derogate out-group members (Tajfel 2010). Monroe et al. observe that “thousands of experiments [...] have consistently shown that individuals identify with the in-group, support group norms, and derogate out-group members along stereotypical lines” (2000: 435). Therefore,

according to Tajfel and Turner, the study of these factors is relevant for describing prejudices, and they are discussed below. Isherwood developed an idiosyncratic out-group distinction in the 1920s which he labeled “the Others”. The following passage illustrates this category:

[Christopher] could regard all publishers as *the Others*, mere merchants whose literary judgment was worth nothing [...]. But Jonathan Cape couldn't be thus dismissed. He had shown himself to be a man of rare taste, a non-merchant and other than *the Others*, when he had accepted *All the Conspirators* after two publishers had rejected it. (Isherwood 2012a: 82-83, emphasis added)

Social identity theory predictions are thus fulfilled here. Mr. Cape is identified as a member of the in-group and he is praised. The other publishers are derogated along stereotypical lines. The scarce and stereotypical mentions in the first books suggest that Isherwood considered the Jews members of an alien out-group. The author's sexuality and his social conscience certainly played a decisive role in these distinctions.

Isherwood's in-group definition fluctuated. The writer's reticence to be classified under categorical labels and his refusal to join social organizations might explain why it generally remained undefined. Another thing that hardly changed was his opposition to those who reject same-sex love and to “respectable Society”. The author's reaction to his first meeting with the pioneering homosexual scholar and activist Magnus Hirschfeld is illustrative of his attitude of mind. The young Isherwood “had fallen in love with many boys” (Isherwood 2012a: 3) but “Christopher [...] was embarrassed because, at last, he was being brought face to face with his tribe” (16). The author agrees that Hirschfeld and he belonged to the same ‘tribe’ but he avoids more specific labels such as ‘homosexual’. He probably rejected some labels because they implied being associated with a particular social group. Isherwood's resentment towards what he called the “respectable Society” (180) is noteworthy too. The young writer associated the values he loathed with the middle- and upper-class. This fact is connected to his sexuality: “Christopher was suffering from an inhibition, then not unusual among upper-class homosexuals; he couldn't relax sexually with a member of his own class or nation. He needed a working-class foreigner” (3). Several reasons thus relegated the Jews to the author's out-group. First, many of the Jews he knew were middle- or upper-class—Cambridge students and owners of successful businesses—and therefore ‘respectable society’. Second, he considered Jews too obsessed with their ‘Jewishness’, namely, their social identity. Third, the book of Leviticus condemns homosexuality: “the cruelty of their [Jews’] Book of Leviticus [...] set the world an example in 500 B.C.: punishing homosexual lust by death” (168). Although Leviticus is also part of the ‘Christian bible’ and it could even be inferred that the

writer might be referring to his own 'exodus' from Britain because of the stringent laws against homosexuality, the context of his memoirs makes clear that he is just referring to Leviticus as a Jewish book. Despite everything, Isherwood could not ignore the rise of national socialism.

3. Berlin and the Lost

The references to Jewish characters in *Goodbye to Berlin* are much more abundant than in any other Isherwood novel. The circumstances were exceptional enough for him to develop a new category: *the Lost*. During his stay in Berlin, the author intended to write "a huge episodic novel of pre-Hitler Berlin" (2012a: 240) which would focus on

[...] those who have lost their own way' —that mass of Germans who were now being herded blindly into the future by their Nazi shepherds [...] 'the doomed'— those who, like Bernhard Landauer, were already marked down as Hitler's victims. And in a lighter, ironic sense, [...] those whom respectable Society regards as moral outcasts —Sally Bowles the 'lost' girl, Otto Nowak the 'lost' boy, and Mr. Norris, who has committed the unpardonable crime of having been found out. (180)

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The Lost thus included common German people like his landlady at Nollendorfstrasse and a proletarian family in the Hallesches Tor district; Jews such as the affluent Landauers and a suburban tailor; and all kinds of moral outcasts including male prostitutes, a 'sassy' girl and a homosexual couple on vacation on Ruegen island. Isherwood clearly sympathized with *the Lost* but he probably did not strictly identify himself as one of them because he was British and he had not "committed the unpardonable crime of having been found". Nevertheless, the writer felt close enough to *the Lost* and potentially part of them because, among other things, as he remarks in his memoirs, in a concentration camp a homosexual "differed from a Jew only in having to wear a pink triangle on his clothes instead of a yellow star" (2012a: 297). Somehow the Jews had become temporary fellow travelers, a circumstance which required a new approach to them.

Isherwood's projected 'huge' novel eventually became two episodic novels: *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin*, which are just "fragments of what was originally planned" (Isherwood 1999b: 240). The differences between these two novels are, however, notable. *Mr. Norris* describes the arrival in Berlin of 'William Bradshaw' and *Goodbye to Berlin* the departure of 'Christopher Isherwood'. The four years that separate these narratives were decisive for the author. The young writer who arrived in Berlin hid his *private way of life* (i.e. his homosexual preference) and did not dare to give his first and last names to the narrator, so he gave him "his two superfluous middle names, William Bradshaw"

(Isherwood 2012a: 92). Four years later, he had become a much more confident writer who gave not only his first name to the narrator but also, although indirectly, dared to describe his stormy relationship with one of his male lovers: Walter Wolf —Otto Nowak in the novel (Parker 2004: 192). Of course, the author still hid his *private way of life* —he had good personal and legal reasons to do so— but, gradually, it became less ‘private’. During those years, his political awareness evolved too. After all, he had witnessed the rise of national socialism and the escalation of hostility toward Jews, homosexuals and other minorities. He even found himself running away with one of his German lovers, Heinz Neddermeyer, from the Nazi authorities. Neddermeyer was not a Jew, but he was arrested and sentenced to prison after declaring he had been corrupted by a British citizen, Isherwood himself (Isherwood 2012a: 291). The writer was in the middle of all these tribulations when he wrote *Goodbye to Berlin*. These events inevitably affected him and his literary production, including his depiction of Jews.

The second paragraph of *Goodbye to Berlin* begins with Isherwood’s famous phrase: “I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking” (1999b: 243). Given that the author intended to depict Berlin from fall 1930 to winter 1932-1933 in a neutral reportage mode, without interferences or embellishments, in the ‘Neue Sachlichkeit’ style, the description of anti-Semitism was unavoidable. ‘The Jewish question’ permeated German life and any account which had not dealt with this subject would have been not only incomplete but would have betrayed the author’s original intention. Anti-Semitism was so widespread in the Weimar Republic that it is even integrated in the language of the ‘lost girl’ Sally Bowles: “there’s an awful old Jew who takes me out sometimes. He’s always promising to get me a contract; but he only wants to sleep with me, the old swine” (279). Not much later, when the narrator confesses to Frl. Schroeder that Sally intends to abort, she replies: “Don’t you let one of those filthy Jews touch her. They always try to get a job of that kind, the beasts!” (300). Frl. Mayr, Frl. Schroeder’s tenant, states that Berlin “is sick with Jews [...] They’re poisoning the very water we drink! They’re strangling us, they’re robbing us, they’re sucking our life-blood” (490). Such anti-Semitic comments are uttered not only by Nazi followers but also by their non-Jewish victims, i.e. *the Lost*. These everyday occurrences illustrate the extent of popular anti-Semitism. Sally Bowles is an emancipated woman and Frl. Schroeder only becomes a Hitler supporter because the circumstances force her to: “she is adapting herself, as she will adapt herself to every new régime” (489). Sally perceives her comments as innocent. Frl. Schroeder’s anti-Semitic remarks are clichés. On the other hand, Frl. Mayr is a Nazi follower and her discourse is deliberately anti-Semitic. But despite their different intentions, all these observations contribute to foster anti-Semitism.

Even though *Goodbye to Berlin* is a novel about *the Lost*, the flatness of the Nazi characters is remarkable. Like Frl. Mayr, all of them are little more than parodic sketches. For instance, the 'little Berlin doctor' on Ruegen Island who enthusiastically praises the *real* Nordic type is short and the tone of his skin is not Caucasian: "[t]he other day I was over at Hiddensee. Nothing but Jews! It's a pleasure to get back here and see real Nordic types!" (1999b: 334). All his comments are indeed ridiculous. He affirms that he can recognize homosexuals just by seeing their tonsils because they are poisoned (349). He also holds that communism is not an ideology but "an [sic] hallucination. A mental disease. People only imagine that they're communists. They aren't really" (334). Lothar, the older son of the Nowaks, is a Nazi supporter and, significantly, he is the only member of the family who is described indirectly. There is no psychological depth, although it is suggested that young men like him join Nazi organizations because their only alternatives are crime and political radicalism (478). Nazi thugs assault Jews and communists, but Christopher never relates to them. The narrator reproduces brief comments of Nazi followers in different locations but he does not interact with them either. Isherwood writes in his memoirs that he did not find Nazis interesting:

[...] it would have been possible for him [Isherwood] to meet them personally. Goebbels, the party propagandist, was obliged to make himself available to the foreign press. And it wasn't too difficult to arrange interviews with Goering or even Hitler [...]. What inhibited him? His principles? His inertia? Neither is an excuse. He missed what would surely have been one of the most memorable experiences of his Berlin life. (2012a: 124)

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The writer also comments that "Christopher was accustomed to say that he never wrote about people he didn't like —because, when he disliked someone, he simply didn't find him interesting" (2012a: 71). The author might not have been particularly interested in Jews but the fact that he focused more on them than on the Nazis in *Goodbye to Berlin* is significant.

The approach to Jewish characters in the second Berlin novel thus differs from the previous ones in both extension and psychological depth. There is a whole chapter devoted to the Landauers, a wealthy Jewish family who runs a department store in Berlin. The Landauers were modeled on two real families —the Soloweitschik and the Israel (Isherwood 2012a: 67)— and their depiction contradicts the anti-Semitic comments of the non-Jewish characters. The Landauers are affluent but they are not 'dirty', lustful or greedy as popular anti-Semitism claims. Natalia Landauer and her parents live in a large and cheerful house (410). Bernhard Landauer owns an apartment in a stylish Berlin district and a summer house in the countryside. Christopher observes that the bathrooms are "gleaming with polished silver, and hung with fleecy white towels" (1999b: 442). The clothes of the

Landauers are elegant and spotless as well. The contrast with the dwellings and clothes of the non-Jewish characters is obvious. The Nowaks live in an unsanitary tenement and Frau Nowak is seriously ill. Christopher temporarily lives with the Nowaks and falls ill because of the appalling conditions. The narrator returns to Frl. Schroeder's apartment where the situation is better but far from ideal. The residence is falling apart and the tenants are often on the brink of destitution. These 'dirtiness' and 'illness' associations can be read literally and metaphorically. The fact that the non-Jewish characters live in unhealthy conditions and are often ill reflects their reality but it can also be read as a metaphor of the late Weimar Republic's decadence. Nevertheless, nothing in the descriptions suggests that the Jewish characters are actually or figuratively 'dirty'.

Another association contradicted by the narrative itself is the assumption that Jews are lustful. The contrast between Jewish and non-Jewish characters is notable. Natalia is presented as "sexually frigid and prudish" (Isherwood 2012a: 65) and Bernhard as a discreet 'gentleman'. On the other hand, Sally calls herself a 'whore' and boasts about her sexual life; Frl. Kost is a prostitute and Fritz enjoys frequenting the Berlin homosexual 'dives'. On the contrary, one of Christopher's pupils refers to a non-Jewish butcher who "had a peculiar sexual perversion. His greatest erotic pleasure was to pinch and slap the cheeks of a sensitive, well-bred girl or woman" (1999b: 468). The Jewish characters thus are 'puritans' in comparison to the non-Jewish characters. The means of earning a living of Jewish and non-Jewish characters differ too. Jews are accused by popular anti-Semitism of being opportunistic and dishonest but the 'not-so-honest' characters in the novel are non-Jewish. 'The boys' from the slums commit petty crimes such as pickpocketing or shoplifting. Prostitution is practiced at different levels by non-Jewish characters. Sally and Otto have sex in exchange for gifts and the boys at the Alexander Casino 'sell' their bodies while their girlfriends are "out working the Friedrichstrasse and the Linden" (384-385). By contrast, the Jewish characters are trustworthy professionals. In an illustrative passage, Frau Nowak says that Hitler is probably right regarding Jews, but Christopher observes that Hitler would remove all Jews, including a humble local tailor appreciated by the non-Jewish community. Frau Nowak reflects and adds: "I shouldn't like that to happen. After all, he makes very good clothes. Besides, a Jew will always let you have time if you're in difficulties. You wouldn't catch a Christian giving credit like he does" (382). These differences can be attributed to the circumstances of the characters: the Jewish characters are affluent and most of the non-Jewish characters live in poverty. But the recurrence of these associations could reflect some intentionality on the part of the author.

Some readers may even feel that the author is trying to conceal the 'Jewishness' of the Landauers but it is difficult, if not impossible, to conclude whether this is

actually the case. The Landauers are enthusiastic Anglophiles and pro-Europeans; more interested in Lord Byron and Oscar Wilde than in their Jewish heritage (1999b: 422). They do not express any interest in Judaism and they do not follow Jewish traditions such as the kashrut dietary laws: “[t]here were plates of ham and cold cut wurst and a bowl of those thin wet slippery sausages which squirt you with hot water when their skins are punctured by a fork; as well as cheese” (410-411). Their Jewish friends do not seem interested in their Jewish heritage either. This lack of ‘exoticism’ can be attributed to the fact that the Landauers and their friends embody a wealthy European elite which had aspired to be fully accepted and integrated into Western society for more than a century: “The Jews had done what they were bidden as the condition of their citizenship, abandoning some of the old ways, even in their synagogues” (Schama 2017: 536). The Landauers’ internationalism might even have shocked the writer but his ‘I am a Camera’ technique compelled him to describe what he observed. Nevertheless, there are hints that support the theory that Isherwood deliberately conceals the ‘Jewishness’ of the characters. Bernhard’s mother develops an interest in the Jewish tradition when one of her sons dies at the Great War:

she began to study Hebrew and to concentrate her whole mind upon ancient Jewish history and literature. I suppose that this is really *symptomatic* of a modern phase of Jewish development —this turning away from European culture. (1999b: 445, emphasis added)

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The use of the adjective ‘symptomatic’ may be ironic but it could reflect the author’s genuine disdain for the ‘exoticism’ he did not like.

4. The American Isherwood

After *Goodbye to Berlin*, the references to Jewish characters and ‘the Jewish question’ become less frequent. However, the allusions are still abundant in *Prater Violet* (1945). Isherwood’s first ‘American’ narrative was written during the Second World War and its main character is a Jewish film director, called Friedrich Bergmann, modeled on the Jewish Austrian film director Berthold Viertel, who was a close friend of the author (Isherwood 2012a: 185). In this semi-autobiographical novella, Bergmann is shooting a film in pre-War London and the narrator, Christopher, is his assistant. The filmmaker is deeply concerned about the dramatic situation in continental Europe and his family in Austria. Bergmann has a premonitory dream in which a Jew’s hands have been shot off, but he must hide his injuries because he fears to be recognized as a Jew and killed. The witness, Bergmann himself, tries to find help in the British Embassy but the civil servant there seems more interested in modern art than in the tragic episode. Significantly,

the Jew who has been shot is being pursued by a blind old lady who wears a French “horizon blue” uniform (2012d: 52). This is a committed Isherwood who denounces fascism and the indifference of the British and other European nations before the War. Richards remarks that *Goodbye to Berlin* and *Prater Violet* are full of passages which show that “[f]ew artists of this period had such a truthful ethical voice both about the incubation of monsters in Germany and one more prophetic, because more based on experience, of the havoc these monsters would wreck on European and indeed world civilization” (2016: 84). Of course, the adoption of this ‘ethical voice’ does not imply that the author supported Jewish politics or felt sympathy for the Jewish people. The subsequent narratives and his diaries point in the opposite direction.

The two following novels —*The World in the Evening* (1954) and *Down There on a Visit* (1962)— briefly return to Germany. *The World in the Evening* narrates Stephen Monk’s visit to his aunt Sarah, an old Quaker lady who takes in war refugees. There are references to Jews who are sent to concentration camps and/or killed; but the most interesting passage for our analysis is the one in which Charles, the homosexual doctor who treats Stephen after a traffic accident, confesses: “I’m sick of belonging to these whining militant minorities. Everybody hates them, and pretends not to. And they hate themselves like poison. You know something funny? My father’s name was Klatnik. He changed it” (2012e: 128). The plural ‘minorities’ suggests that Charles is probably referring to more than one minority. There are no explicit references to a hypothetical Jewish ancestry in the novel and the author does not provide more information about this allusion in his memoirs or diaries. We only know that Charles’ father changed his surname to Kennedy to disguise his ‘whining militant’ ethnicity. Given that Klatnik was not an unusual surname among Jews from Central Europe and that Isherwood considered Jews to be a whining militant minority, the possibility cannot be fully dismissed that Charles might be referring to the Jewish minority. The following semi-autobiographical novel, *Down There on a Visit*, depicts Mr. Lancaster, a character based on Basil Fry, a ‘queer’ cousin of Isherwood, who invites the narrator, Christopher, to visit him in pre-Hitler Germany. Mr. Lancaster and his friends are openly anti-Semitic and their comments are full of clichés, such as that Jews’ hearts are dirty (2012f: 34). Like in *Goodbye to Berlin*, their remarks are ridiculous and the facts often contradict them.

A particularly significant passage in Isherwood’s following novel, *A Single Man* (1964), distinguishes between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ anti-Semitism. One of George’s students asks him if Aldous Huxley was an anti-Semite. George refuses to talk about the subject adding that

a minority is only thought of as a minority when it constitutes some kind of a threat to the majority, real or imaginary [...]. A minority has its own kind of aggression. It absolutely dares the majority to attack it. It hates the majority—not without a cause, I grant you. It even hates the other minorities— because all minorities are in competition; each one proclaims that its sufferings are the worst and its wrongs are the blackest. And the more they all hate, and the more they're all persecuted, the nastier they become! (2010a: 53-54)

George, a homosexual, is part of a minority and he feels mistreated by the majority. The professor also implies that he hates the 'majority' and that there is no hate without a cause—real or imaginary. George does not deny the right to exist of any 'tribe' but he criticizes the politics of victimization and aggression of minorities in general. Therefore, bearing in mind that this is the answer to a particular question, George seems to suggest that he does not dislike Jews because they are Jews but because they are a 'militant whining minority'. Charles and George thus illustrate a new discursive approach to the subject. Early characters, including the different 'Christophers', did not like Jews because of their 'exoticism'. George does not like them because of their politics. The writer's 'conversion' to an oriental religion in the 1940s probably contributed to this turn. Vedanta made him review his old prejudices against what he used to call 'Oriental races' and their 'exoticism'. Nevertheless, his personal writing reveals that some deeper anti-Semitic feelings persisted.

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Isherwood's diaries offer a good glimpse of his most intimate opinions and feelings. As White remarks, he repeatedly associates bad behavior with Jewishness (2013: vii): "The other driver, with the worst kind of Jewishness, began by accusing Don of being 'inebriated'" (2013b: 629). Sometimes, a quasi-obsession with 'blood' and the degree of Jewishness of some people is felt:

He [John Van Druten], himself, is half Jewish. I never realized this—always thought it was a quarter, at most. He is *far* less Jewish than Stephen or John Lehmann, not to mention the Reinhardts. Has he anything Jewish about him? Yes—a certain *gemütlichkeit* and a certain furtiveness. (2011: 649, emphasis in original)

The author thus seems to believe that Jews constitute a different 'race': "[...] happiness is our nature—except, one sometimes suspects, in the case of Jews" (2013b: 575). Isherwood also expresses his distaste for a series of Jewish writers:

I refuse to read most of the best-loved authors of our day, such as Wouk, Bellow, Malamud, etc. (Last night, Gavin had an outburst against the Jews—their utter thick-skinned indifference—to other minorities [...]) I sat there thinking smugly, well, I didn't say it, *this time!*) (2010b: 366-367, emphasis in original)

Nevertheless, he praises Paul Goodman who was a homosexual too: "Am reading Paul Goodman's *Making Do* with delight. It is a real human marvellous modern

serious fun novel. He redeems singlehanded the drivel of the other Jews” (2010b: 371). There are also references to anti-Semitic outbursts in the diaries: “Last night, The Downer declared that Los Angeles would be a dull dreary place if it wasn’t for the big Jewish population. At which I spoke out” (2013d: 593). But Isherwood often regrets the anti-Semitic comments: “I am happy to say that Howard seems ready to forget and forgive the fuss we had about the Jews” (2013d: 530). These contradictions reveal internalized prejudices tinged with doubts.

5. *Literary Activism: A Political Reading*

The following words addressed to Gore Vidal offer more indications of Isherwood’s stance on the subject:

There are certain subjects—including Jewish, Negro and homosexual questions—which involve social and political issues. [...] There are laws which could be changed. There are public prejudices which could be removed. Anything an author writes on these subjects is bound, therefore, to have a certain propaganda value, whether he likes or not. (in Parker 2004: 572)

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This extract is interesting for two reasons. First, the author does not only equate the Jewish to the ‘Negro and homosexual questions’ but he also remarks that there are prejudices which must be removed. Second, he attributes political value to all literature which approaches the Jewish question. The logical conclusion is that the author attributed political value to his publications and he suggests that he somehow operated as a sort of *undercover literary activist*. This affirmation agrees with the writer’s instinctual rejection of politics and institutions (Wade 2001: 3; Parker 2004: 418). The adoption of this role thus seems not only probable but even fated for an author who never felt at ease with political affiliations and generally avoided public political statements. Like Patrick in *A Meeting by the River*, Isherwood felt compelled to be ‘cunning’ in order to influence the largest readership possible: “we must never forget, when we go against the majority, that we’re forced to be like guerrillas, our chief weapon is cunning” (2012g: 78). This need entailed the adoption of a series of narrative-discursive strategies which, despite fluctuations, remain quite constant throughout his career; specifically, the use of unobtrusive narrators, the description of anecdotal episodes, the delimitation of the psychological focus and the deconstruction of stereotypes.

Isherwood explains in *Christopher and His Kind* that while writing *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* he concluded that “the Narrator had to be as unobtrusive as possible. The reader had to be encouraged to put himself in the Narrator’s shoes—to see with the Narrator’s eyes, to experience his experiences, to identify with

him in all his reactions” (2012a: 190-191). Otherwise, “[the reader] will always remain aware that the Narrator is an individual who is very different from himself” (2012a: 191). The author was afraid that many potential readers would have felt repelled and, consequently, rejected his books, if the narrator had revealed himself as a homosexual. This was the fear of a minority writer writing for the majority who did not want to miss the chance of influencing as many readers as possible (Wade 1991: 37). Isherwood could not openly *tell* because, in the best case, if he had done so, he would have become a minority writer writing for a minority. Stating or just suggesting publicly that he was a homosexual would have brought him not only social but also legal problems and maybe his books would never have been published. But the fact that he could not tell does not imply that he could not *guide* his readers. The presence of an unobtrusive narrator who guides the reader indeed became one of his literary hallmarks. The word ‘guide’ is in italics because, as Monnickendam remarks, “[t]he idea that the narrator is passive is [...] difficult to uphold” (2008: 126). Isherwood’s *camera* is selective and it only shows readers what the author wants them to see; also, as discussed below, the Jews he wants them to see.

The focus on anecdotal situations is also characteristic. In *The World in the Evening*, Gerda criticizes Elizabeth’s novels because their characters drink tea but “they seem not to care for what happens in the world outside” (2012c: 133). Stephen, Elizabeth’s widowed husband, remarks that “[s]he never dealt directly with world-situations or big-scale tragedies [...] she tried to reproduce them in miniature, the essence of them [...] numbers and size actually make tragedy less real to us” (2012c: 134-135). Although this is a literary passage, Isherwood seems to be ‘talking’ through one of his characters again. Like Elizabeth, the author himself was criticized after leaving Britain: “they [Isherwood and Auden] 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” (Monnickendam 2008: 131). This passage can be read just as a veiled response to certain accusations, but there is a series of cognitive theories which indeed support this ‘metaphoric’ approach. Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual metaphor theory holds that all thought is in fact metaphorical and basic metaphors are essential to understand complex realities. In other words, we understand through metaphors (1980). Stephen uses an example to illustrate this: “[her] reaction to the news that a million people had been massacred might be to tell a story about two children stoning a cat to death for fun. And she’d put into it all the pain and disgust and horror she felt about the things the Nazis do” (2012c: 135). Whether Isherwood is simply describing one of his narrative techniques or is replying to some personal criticism, this seems a ‘cunning’ approach for an *undercover literary activist* who aims to influence a large readership.

The delimitation of the psychological focus plays an essential role as well. We have seen that the young writer used to say that he only wrote about people he liked. This affirmation has interesting implications. Empathy is related to understanding. But in order to *understand* someone, it is necessary to get to know them and share their experiences and feelings. There is no empathy without psychological proximity. Indeed, national socialism isolated the Jews to avoid empathy. Psychological proximity can be established directly or indirectly and, of course, manipulated. Propaganda films and news bulletins illustrate this statement. For instance, people who have never been in a refugee camp donate money after watching a poignant report on television. ‘Seeing’, ‘listening’, ‘reading’, in short, perceiving is essential. When people observe other people, their mirror neurons are activated, ‘mirroring’ emotions. The donors in the example do not actually starve or shiver with cold but they can somehow feel the pain of the refugees in the news report. Something similar happens when people feel transported by fictional narratives and characters. *Real* and *unreal* are just perceptions and characters can be as ‘real’ as actual people. The simple act of bringing readers closer to some characters and distancing them from others is significant. The presence of Jews and the psychological depth in *Goodbye to Berlin* and *Prater Violet* show that the writer did empathize or, at least, he tried to do so, with those temporary ‘fellow travelers’ and he wanted his readers to do the same.

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The deconstruction of stereotypes is another valuable technique for a minority writer writing for the majority. Christopher does something more effective than openly reply to the anti-Semitic comments of the non-Jewish characters in *Goodbye to Berlin*. The narrative contradicts discourses with facts. When Christopher visits the Landauers, the reader *enters* their homes but does not *see* menacing people as the non-Jewish characters assert. The Landauers are just nice citizens in agreeable settings. Of course, readers *enter* and *see* metaphorically, but this fact does not necessarily make their perceptions less real. Isherwood’s deconstruction of stereotypes is nevertheless peculiar. The writer intended to deconstruct Nazi anti-Semitic beliefs but without being pro-Semitic. The Landauers allowed him to deconstruct the associations of dirtiness, sexual lust and dishonesty while reinforcing other associations such as those of orientalism and philistinism. In *Christopher and His Kind*, Isherwood confesses his old prejudices against both culture devotees (2012a: 71) and the “Oriental races” (71-72). The writer admits that he underestimated Wilfrid Israel and Gisa Soloweitschik and regrets having depicted them as culture devotees with an ‘Oriental’ side. Wilfrid/Bernhard is described as “tired, apathetic” (68), a characteristic that the young writer associated to the ‘Oriental races’. Bernhard receives threatening bloodthirsty letters, but he does nothing and calls them just “tragi-comic diversions” (Isherwood 1999b: 454-455). The passage of the party at the Landauers’ summer residence strengthens

this idea. The fate of the German government and, consequently, the Jews, is at stake but the Landauers and their friends are celebrating a lively party. They hardly talk about politics and when they do, they do so with detachment. Isherwood acknowledges in his memoirs that he deliberately stressed “the ‘Oriental’ aspect of Bernhard” (2012a: 71).

The approach to Isherwood as an *undercover literary activist* leads to some hypotheses. The apparently unobtrusive narrators might be describing what the author *really* saw, but their perspectives are carefully selected. The fact that the *Goodbye to Berlin* narrator does not describe Jews in the ghetto or a more orthodox family can be attributed to pure chance: Isherwood simply did not meet them. But, given the writer's affirmation that he only described people he liked, there are reasons to presume that he purposely chose the Soloweitschiks and the Israels as models because they were better suited to his preferences. Just as he had come into contact with the Wolfs/Nowaks and even lived with them in the slums, he could easily have met a different type of Jew. But Isherwood was not interested in describing the Jews as *Jews* but as victims of national socialism, and the Soloweitschiks and the Israels offered him the chance to depict Jews who did not seem too Jewish for his taste. The apparently anecdotal episodes in the novel are not so casual, either. Not only does Isherwood admit in his memoirs that Wilfrid was courageous but also that he helped other Jews to escape from Nazi Germany (2012a: 70). The author could have described more ‘heroic’ acts, but he preferred to describe the Landauers in more light-hearted situations. In Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory terms, he simply could not champion the Jews as *Jews* because he considered them an out-group, but he could support them as members of a different category: Nazi victims. Indeed, the author admits in his memoirs that he had communication problems: “I can understand [now] why Wilfrid chose to discuss his problems as a Jew with Stephen rather than with Christopher [...]; there was a great deal of hostility between them” (70-71). He also reveals that he manipulated facts for dramatic purposes:

The story of Bernhard Landauer ends with the news of Bernhard's death. ‘Isherwood’ overhears two men talking about it at a restaurant. [...] One of them has read in a newspaper that Bernhard has died of heart failure and both take it for granted that he has really been killed by the Nazis. (70-71)

As a matter of fact, Wilfrid died years later in an air raid (74).

Summing up, three stages are observed in Isherwood's life and his literary production regarding Jews. The lack of focus on them before *Goodbye to Berlin* suggests that Jews and ‘the Jewish question’ did not interest him. The scarce references in the first books also reflect internalized biases. The young writer associated Jews with oriental passiveness, concealed arrogance, philistinism and the

homophobia of Leviticus. National socialism, however, forced him to approach the Jewish question from the perspective of the victims. Nevertheless, he did so with reticence. The temporary alliance with those ‘fellow travelers’ led to cognitive conflicts. The ‘American’ writer distinguished between *right* and *wrong* anti-Semitism. He considered it wrong to deny the existence and rights of Jews as a ‘tribe’ but he thought it right to dislike them because he perceived their politics as whining and belligerent and their ‘Oriental’ heritage as irritating. The writer’s personal diaries show that many of his internalized prejudices persisted. Isherwood often attributed the negative qualities and/or bad conduct of people he did not like to their ‘Jewishness’ but he also had good Jewish friends like Berthold Viertel and Paul Goodman who could ‘redeem the drivel of the other Jews’. Stephen Spender, one of his closest friends, also had Jewish ancestry. But he did not see them as Jews but mainly as fellow artists and, in the case of Goodman and Spender, as homosexuals too. Therefore, they had identities he could relate to. White observes that most of us consider Isherwood almost a saint but he “had faults that we’d say were unforgivable” (2013: vii). It is precisely his human contradictions and his blunt honesty that make him such an engaging author.

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