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Critical Survey

Transgressive Travels: Homosexuality, Class, Politics and the Lure of Germany in 1930s Writing

RAINER EMIG

'Berlin meant Boys.'¹ Christopher Isherwood's retrospective summary of the appeal of Germany for some of the writers of the 1930s set the tone for the rather limited critical evaluation of a very interesting feature of 1930s writing that was to follow. Almost every critical study of Auden, Isherwood and Spender feels obliged to make at least cursory reference to the fact that Germany represented some kind of libidinous homosexual nirvana. A telling example is Valentine Cunningham's *British Writers of the Thirties*. There he writes: 'Germany was now the place to be: for artistic progressivism, but also because there sunshine and cocaine and sex, especially homosex, were up until Hitler's intervention in 1933 so freely available. Berlin was a mythic sodom, and a sodomites' mythic nirvana. The British homosexuals excitedly went there to 'live'.² I would like to add to this narrow and biased view some important and less simplistic aspects. I will try to show that the lure of Germany also touches on issues of class, politics and nationality. I will try to present the related transgressions that result from this entanglement not so much as biographical achievements or failures, but explore how they feature in the literary production of the writers of the era.

The interest of British 1930s writers in Germany and Germanic culture (which included Austria) is historically an act of, perhaps adolescent, rejection of their parents' views. The First World War had by no means been forgotten by the late 1920s, and for an educated middle- and upper middle-class Briton France would have been the desirable cultural destination and model. Added to this affront was the reputation of Berlin in particular as morally dubious ground – for heterosexuals and homosexuals alike. It was also cheap territory. Although German inflation had been dampened by the introduction of the *Rentenmark* (at its highest point in 1923 \$1 was the equivalent of 4.2 billion Marks), the pound as well as the dollar ruled supreme, the

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pound well until the abandoning of the gold standard and the resulting devaluation in 1931. Legal tolerance in the bigger cities rather than loose morals (neither prostitution nor homosexuality were in fact legal in Germany) and economic depression together with the presence of seemingly affluent foreigners spelled easy commercial sex on a large scale. Contemporary sources mention between ninety and one hundred gay bars in Berlin around 1922, and towards the late 1920s gay parties and dances had taken over even the largest venues in the city.³ Gay life in late 1920s Berlin was hardly a subculture. In this thriving environment a particular kind of class encounter took place. Unemployed heterosexual, working-class boys featured strongly in it and were not averse to same-sex escapades, provided their middle-class customers paid the bill. Isherwood describes his and Auden's favourite gay bar, the 'Cosy Corner' (its actual name was 'Nosters Restaurant zur Hütte'⁴) in the following way:

Nothing could have looked less decadent than the Cosy Corner. It was plain and homely and unpretentious. Its only decoration were a few photographs of boxers and racing cyclists, pinned up above the bar. It was heated by a big old-fashioned iron stove. Partly because of the great heat of the stove, partly because they knew it excited their clients (die Stubben), the boys stripped off their sweaters or leather jackets and sat around with their shirts unbuttoned to the navel and their sleeves rolled up to the armpits.⁵

John Lehmann illustrates the transactions in the Cosy Corner in his biographical account *In the Purely Pagan Sense*. Having been ordered to the lavatory by Isherwood (who features in Lehmann's book as William – as he does in his own *Mr Norris Changes Trains*), he encounters for the first time boys cruising for custom. Later, the shocked Lehmann is urged on by Isherwood:

'Any you fancy?' I shook my head, though I knew that any single one of the boys who had followed me would make me very happy – if only I knew how to handle him. 'Well, there are a couple of boys here I know who are thoroughly reliable. I'll call them over.' The two were summoned, and ordered to sit on either side of me. I felt rather like a recruit being put through his first bayonet drill. 'Don't be shy, but put your hands in their pockets,' William commanded, now rather mischievously. I put one hand into the outer lederhosen pocket of the one on my left, and my other hand into the outer pocket of the one on my right. They were both now snuggling up to me. I had a shock of more than surprise when I found that the pockets had been cut off inside, and my hands went straight through to their sex.⁶

Of course, gay working-class prostitution also existed in Britain, as it had in the nineteenth century. What made Berlin different was that it permitted British writers to enter into more than casual sexual relations. A transgression of class barriers in relationships seemed possible, something that was unthinkable in Edwardian Britain, as can be glimpsed from the taboo it presents in the writings of E.M. Forster. Both Auden and Isherwood had relationships with working-class men, and both of them wrote about these relationships in a barely disguised fashion. In *Mr Norris Changes Trains* it is the young Communist Otto who provides the narrator William Bradshaw with an insight into working-class life (Isherwood actually lived with the real Otto's family for some time). For Auden, an affair with the sailor Gerhart Meyer led to the creation of one of the dominant concepts of his early writings, that of 'the truly strong man'. The 'truly strong men' had to represent the exact opposite of the gay British writers of the 1930s: they had to be working class and German. When they were not, such as Isherwood's boyfriend Berthold Szesny, who was Czech, they were turned into fictional ones, i.e. Berthold became 'Bubi'.⁷ Lastly, and most surprisingly, they had to be heterosexual, although they engaged in homosexual activities without hang-ups. Otto is carefully described in *Mr Norris Changes Trains* as having an on-and-off relationship with a girl called Anni, just as his real-life counterpart infuriated Isherwood with heterosexual affairs.⁸ One of the things that excited Auden about Gerhart Meyer was his appeal to both men and women.⁹

Already the basic set-up of the alluring Other relates the transgression back to the normality that is violated, the heterosexual English middle-class model. It is not coincidental that even John Lehmann's seemingly frank depiction of the goings-on in Berlin bars retains an element of almost naive confession when it compares furtive sexual encounters with very English images, the military training in public schools. At the same time images of war and the description of Isherwood ordering, summoning and commanding evoke the First World War. In fact, one of Auden's descriptions of Isherwood was 'A cross between a cavalry major and a rather prim landlady.'¹⁰

The ambivalence that characterises the transgressions also colours the depiction of the politics of the period. In *Mr Norris Changes Trains* the first encounter between the narrator and the embodiment of the working class, Otto, happens during a political meeting at which the speakers include not only two delegates from China who lecture on the suffering of Chinese peasants, but also the shadowy Arthur

Norris, the sinister anti-hero of the novel, who has only just announced his sympathies with Communism and unveiled his strange undercover dealings. It quickly becomes clear that the narrator eyes the meeting with suspicion, scepticism and even ridicule. His first evaluation of his reactions seems quite straightforward and approving, although it already emphasises distance, a gulf that might be impossible to bridge:

I had never been to a communist meeting before, and what struck me most was the fixed attention of the upturned rows of faces; faces of the Berlin working class, pale and prematurely lined, often haggard and ascetic, like the heads of scholars, with thin, fair hair brushed back from their broad foreheads. They had not come here to see each other or to be seen, or even to fulfil a social duty. They were attentive but not passive. They were not spectators. They participated, with a curious, restrained passion, in the speech made by the red-haired man. He spoke for them, he made their thoughts articulate. They were listening to their own collective voice. At intervals they applauded it, with sudden, spontaneous violence. Their passion, their strength of purpose elated me. I stood outside it. One day, perhaps, I should be with it, but never of it. At present I sat just there, a half-hearted renegade from my own class, my feelings muddled by anarchism talked at Cambridge, by slogans from the confirmation service, by the tunes the band played when my father's regiment marched to the railway station, seventeen years ago.¹¹

This surprisingly frank admission shows that the encountered and recognised difference of nationality, class, and politics does not lead to a broadening of the horizon of the exile, but rather ties him back to his own past, one that includes the death of Isherwood's father at Ypres during the First World War.¹² Michel Butor has this potent nostalgia in mind when he writes about the effects of travel: 'my departed home and country will soon become as seductive as the finally visited country of my dreams.'¹³ Only a few paragraphs later Isherwood's novel turns feelings of alienation into those of superiority, when the audience is presented as naively won over by the clichéd ramblings of Arthur Norris – who clearly represents the hateful anti-image of Englishness, its middle-class hypocrisy. Still, even in its hollowest form, this nationalist and classist blue print easily beats the naïve – and potentially violent – enthusiasm of the working class Germans. '*Mensch, der spricht prima, wahr?*' is Otto's reported response, and it is important that it is represented both in German and in its colloquial form to underline once again the difference of nationality and class.¹⁴

A similar ambivalence characterises the representations of political struggle. Auden's first poem to deal with history not as an allegory but as a specific contemporary issue, the poem later called '1929', mentions the frequent street fights between Communists, fascists, and the police in Berlin. Yet its narrator finds it hard to side with any of the parties. In fact, he comes across as puzzled and troubled by the superficially so exciting events. 'All this time was anxiety at night,/Shooting and barricade in street', he reports, yet when an acquaintance tells him about the brutal treatment of a girl by the police, he describes his reaction as 'Till I was angry, said I was pleased.'¹⁵ Ostensibly, besides liberal attitudes to homosexuality and the opportunity to establish closer contacts with the working class, Weimar Berlin's third attraction was the proximity to direct political struggle – rather than the inertia that characterised British political life. Stephen Spender comments that 'most of the English were so determinedly asleep that to be awake at all to what was going on made the wakers seem a political movement.'¹⁶ This appeal also explains the excitement that the Spanish Civil War would generate among British intellectuals some years later. Yet when the struggle was actually encountered, there emerged a clear element of shock and even resistance. The critical distance was again generated by a middle-class perspective based on liberal-humanist principles. These could only be offended by political positions that relegated the individual to an inferior position both in their ideologies and in their struggles.

At the end of *Goodbye to Berlin*, the narrator meets 'D', a character who is a known anti-fascist and on the run from the Nazis. The encounter takes place in a public space, a tea-shop, and when 'D' realises the narrator's surprise at seeing him there, he explains 'But the situation nowadays is so interesting ...' Yet when 'D' introduces the narrator to his girlfriend as 'This is Mr Isherwood ... You can speak quite openly to him. He hates the Nazis as much as we do. Oh, yes! Mr Isherwood is a confirmed anti-fascist!', the narrator reports 'I have seldom felt so uncomfortable in my whole life.'¹⁷ His anxiety might arise from the fear of exposure and retribution. There are, after all, other customers in the tea-room. Yet for a foreigner who is already on the verge of leaving Berlin for good, this exaggerated fear must have other causes. Much more likely it results from a feeling that clear-cut commitment is not so much undesirable as it would be dishonest. As in the earlier episode of the political meeting, the hope is to 'be with it' one day, with the simultaneous awareness that he can never be 'of it'.

So far, I have tried to outline the ruptures in the fictional self-images of the gay writers of the 1930s in connection with sexuality, class, and politics. Yet what happens to their ideas of Englishness during their transgressive travels? In Isherwood, there were already glimpses of a notion of superiority, despite the unease that the 'typical' Englishman Arthur Norris provoked. Again in Isherwood, this time in the episode 'On Ruegen Island (Summer 1931)' in *Goodbye to Berlin*, prototypes of Germanness and Englishness clash. The former is again represented by Otto Nowak; the latter is a thinly fictionalised version of Isherwood himself, called Peter. In this construction of binary opposites a strong essentialist streak comes to the fore that has more than just nationalistic undertones; indeed it smacks of Nietzsche and of racism:

Peter is skinny but wiry. In his games with Otto, he holds his own, it seems, only by an immense, furious effort of will. It is Peter's will against Otto's body. Otto is his whole body; Peter is only his head. Otto moves fluidly, effortlessly; his gestures have the savage, unconscious grace of a cruel, elegant animal. Peter drives himself about, lashing his stiff, ungraceful body with the whip of his merciless will.¹⁸

Englishness equals repression, while Germanness means physicality. Yet being English is also to be driven by a relentless will, whereas being German is unconscious grace, but also cruelty. In the sentence that follows, Otto is described as 'outrageously conceited'. The will that characterises the English perspective is not a blind one. In fact there are two Englishnesses in operation. The second one is that of the considerate analytical narrator. We are back in the cloud-cuckoo land of English superiority, a superiority that is so strong that it can live with an acknowledgement of its own weaknesses and hang-ups. This is the darker side of such seemingly balanced concepts as Auden's 'truly strong man' (who must also be a truly weak man and be aware of it) or the equivalent concept in Isherwood, that of 'the test'.¹⁹

What this double superiority does to its Other is reify it – and not merely as a sex object. This would be a minor problem, since the cult of the body is a general trend in the 1920s and 1930s and was practised happily by the Germans themselves. It reifies it as the alter ego of Englishness, middle-class liberalism and heterosexuality. Stylistically this reactionary effect can be detected in strange echoes of D.H. Lawrence in texts otherwise renowned for their attempt at distance and objectivity (Isherwood's statement 'I am a camera' comes to mind and the clinical-mindedness of Auden's early poetry). Stephen

Spender's early novel *The Temple* provides a wealth of evidence. Here is an episode that describes the English narrator Paul's impression of the prototype of Germanness in the book, Heinrich, and concludes with the German photographer Joachim's verdict:

Paul watched the surface of rippling muscle which sprang upwards from the thighs, across the body, to the roots of his arms. The direction, the impulse of his body was simple yet complex – a single gesture of a statue's eloquent extended hand. 'He looks so pleased with himself', said Joachim, 'he is strutting like a bird, like a peacock.'²⁰

Heinrich later becomes a successful Nazi, and it is interesting that the narrator complains that his changes of personality are merely questions of outfit – as if the essential Germanness constructed in the novel contained both Rousseau's child of nature and the Nazi storm-trooper.²¹

The conflict of transgressions in the male homosexual middle-class English writers of the 1930s is neatly summarised in the contrast between two of Spender's early poems. The first one, called 'Us', enthusiastically but unconvincingly addresses 'young men oh young comrades' and urges them to leave the paths of their capitalist fathers, whose lifestyle it summarises as that of a ghost 'entombed in his hall'. It urges them:

Count rather those fabulous possessions
which begin with your body and your burning soul
the hairs on your skin the muscles extending
in ranges with lakes across your limbs.²²

That the 'Us' of the poem's title ought to be 'Them' is shown in the poem that is reprinted immediately after it in Spender's *Collected Poems*. It summarises poetically my argument concerning the ways in which transgressions leads to affirmation of positions rather than their transformation. When Spender defends the ruptures of 1930s writing as a 'middle-class *crise de conscience*', he also implicitly admits that the crisis stabilises rather than overcomes established positions.²³ That stabilisation through the reification of the Other can lead to dangerous political ambivalence, however, is shown in the construction of Germanness in Spender's poem 'Helmut':

Alas, when he laughs, it is not he
But a shopkeeper, who scrapes his hands, and bows,
Seller of ties and shirts who shows his teeth

Even out of hours. If he could laugh that laugh
 Matching his glinting naked hair
 And the jungle crouched beneath his eyelashes
 I think the barrier
 That shuts out all his sky and grows
 Between us and the dark pools of his will,
 Would fall; the rocks
 Burst with German streams again.²⁴

Notes

1. Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind* (London: Methuen, 1977), 10.
2. Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 347.
3. Wolfgang Theis and Andreas Sternweiler, 'Alltag im Kaiserreich und in der Weimarer Republik', in: *Eldorado: Homosexuelle Frauen und Männer in Berlin 1850-1950 – Geschichte und Kultur*, ed., Michael Boll (Berlin: Frölich & Kaufmann, 1984), 63.
4. Theis and Sternweiler, 'Alltag im Kaiserreich', 64.
5. Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 30.
6. John Lehmann, *In the Purely Pagan Sense*, Gay Modern Classic (London: GMP, 1985), 44-45.
7. Brian Finney, *Christopher Isherwood: A Critical Biography* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1979), 77.
8. Finney, *Isherwood*, 84.
9. Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden* (London: Minerva, 1996), 98.
10. Unpublished poem reproduced opposite the title page in Finney, *Isherwood*.
11. Christopher Isherwood, *Mr Norris Changes Trains* (London: Triad/Panther, 1977), 53-54.
12. Finney, *Isherwood*, 32.
13. Michel Butor, 'Travel and Writing', trans. John Powers and K. Lisker, in: Michael Kowalewski, ed., *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on Modern Literature and Travel* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 53-70.
14. Isherwood, *Mr Norris*, 56.
15. W.H. Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1966), 36.
16. Stephen Spender, *The Thirties and After: Poetry, Politics, People (1933-75)* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978), 27.
17. Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin* (London: Triad/Panther, 1978), 204.
18. Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin*, 84-85.
19. Finney, *Isherwood*, 31.
20. Stephen Spender, *The Temple* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1988), 123-124.
21. Spender, *The Temple*, 160.
22. Stephen Spender, *Collected Poems 1928-1985* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1985), 32.
23. Spender, *Thirties and After*, 24.
24. Spender, *Collected Poems*, 33.