

“Dust hides a Mirror”

Intercultural Treatment of Images and Reflections in Christopher Isherwood’s Narrative ¹

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*“Quello che vedo nello specchio sono proprio io.
Ma sono convinto di essere io perché so che quello è uno specchio,
di cui mi fido, o capisco che quello è uno specchio perché trovo
sulla sua superficie qualcosa che senza dubbio sono io?”*

Umberto Eco, “Intorno e al di là dello Specchio” ²

To FELICE and EVA, my parents

1.

The interview took place on a balmy day in January [...]. As I came down the steps from the street I heard typing, and as I looked into the open front door I could see Isherwood at his typewriter facing me across an old-fashioned circular dining room table. When he rose to greet me, I realized that it was his image I had seen, reflected in a wall-size mirror. The impression was rather disconcerting as he materialized opposite his double, but altogether appropriate for a writer who has so often reflected himself in his fiction³.

While at first sight the passage above might seem to have been taken from one of Christopher Isherwood's works, in actual fact it is a comment made by George Wickes in an interview in 1965. Little more than an anecdote, but decidedly appropriate to introduce a theme essential to the writer's art.

Taken as a whole, Isherwood's narrative proves to be a complex and harmonic, literary and psychological tool by means of which the author succeeds, throughout his life, in examining himself, jotting down his experiences, observing the changes, analysing his own choice and meditating on his own personality and individuality.

In this sense, the polisemic image of the mirror, besides being a symbol, plays a major role in the structure of the narrative, because it recurs, practically in almost all his novels, as both an effective and recalled evocative and is subjected to imperceptible yet deep-rooted changes, as are several other aspects in the author's life and work.

The final aim of this autobiographical survey is to discover "Christopher Isherwood the Individual". The internal dynamic of his complexity as well as psychological and spiritual maturity makes use of the journal technique which very often forms the backbone of his narrative but the study of images, as icons of the persona to be examined, is evident right from his early efforts and it is obviously linked to Isherwood's growing fondness for the world of entertainment in general and for the cinema in particular. In fact, Isherwood, since boyhood was fascinated by the cinema and, from an early age, began going to movies, especially during his university years at Cambridge, and later in Berlin, in the period 1929-1933, when the cinema formed a vital part of the contemporary European culture.

The image as a mirror of reality is a theme which underlines the entire western culture and which plays a fundamental role in the 20th century. In fact, it is evident that one of the strongest motivations for the frequent recurrence of this iconographic symbol is the fact that the artist very often questions himself about the dichotomy between appearance and reality: «[...] mirrors have been much used in literary works as a means of raising questions about the objects they reflect, conceal, or unmask, as well as about the universal theme of literature - the disparity between reality and appearance»⁴.

In this sense, it's possible to detect in Isherwood's narrative two precise moments when the literary figure of the mirror and of its reflections are expressed through two different stages of development, which are both linked and consecutive. In Isherwood's so-called "first narrative stage", that stretches from *All the Conspirators* (1928) to *Lions and Shadows* (1938) and *Journey to a War* (1939), the presence of the mirror assumes modalities which are distinct from those belonging to the conversion period to Vedanta, the Hindu-oriented philosophy and religion⁵.

Through the mirror, Isherwood analyses and indeed communicates man's external, superficial aspect, admittedly complex but extremely fragmentary and disharmonious personality and relationship of the individual with his fellow beings. This is reflected in his early writings via his immature outburst against society. An example of this first phase is *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1935), the first of his "Berlin Novels" which gave him his first literary success and which contributed to his fame as an "objective artist", cool and detached observer and reporter of the events taking place in the early '30s.

The narrator and main character, William Bradshaw, goes to a New Year's Eve party with his friend Mr. Norris, the ambiguous and contradictory dissembler, co-protagonist to everything that happens in the narrative. Describing the party William, who introduces us to a world of falsity, ambiguity, corruption and vice, makes a direct reference to the mirror to underline the most immediate symbol, an artificial protuberance: «On New Year's Eve I had supper at home with my landlady and the other lodgers. I must have been already drunk when I arrived at the Troika, because I remember getting a shock when I looked into the cloakroom mirror and found that I was wearing a false nose»⁶. In perfect accord with the symbolic tradition of English literature, the false nose is the perfect "anphitryon" which introduces us to this universe of pretence and which, by being confirmed in the next pages by several descriptions of fragments of human bodies, anticipates many of the betrayals and successive double-face revelations which Mr. Norris is prone to.

But in Isherwood the mirror soon takes on the characteristics of investigator and becomes a vehicle to study the author's changes of character and personality and his rapport with the world outside. In fact, the other "Berlin Novel", *Goodbye to Berlin* (1938), begins to use the mirror as a "private eye", a "catoptric" figure, in this very direction. "Christopher Isherwood", the namesake narrator, is already a sort of specular reflection of the author, as were both William Bradshaw in *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, and the protagonists in Isherwood's first two novels, *All the Conspirators* (1928) and *The Memorial* (1932). That old-faithful, the "ventriloquist dummy", which turns up in some of his later novel, has just decided to leave Berlin for good: Hitler has taken over power, the acts of intolerance and of repression against political and individual freedom begin to proliferate, Europe begins to feel insecure. During one of his last strolls through the centre of the capital, the narrator stops for a while to look in a shop window. Here, he has the possibility to observe his own image in a mirror:

Today the sun is brilliantly shining; it is quite mild and warm. I go out for my last morning walk [...] The sun shines, and Hitler is master of this city. The sun shines, and dozens of my friends [...] are in prison, possibly dead [...] I catch sight of my face in the mirror of a shop, and am horrified to see that I am smiling. You can't help smi-

ling, in such beautiful weather. The trams are going up and down the Kleistrasse, just as usual. They, and the people on the pavement [...] have an air of curious familiarity, of striking resemblance to something one remembers as normal and pleasant in the past - like a very good photograph. No. Even now I can't altogether believe that any of this has really happened ...⁸

Face to face with the horror of his own grinning image, the protagonist in the final analysis realises that he doesn't know himself at all.

"Christopher Isherwood" is disconcerted by this reaction, because at the same time the tragedy of what Germany and his friends are going through is brought home to him: «*The Mirror has special importance because without it man is doomed not to see the most spiritual and expressive part of himself - his face - and this handicap in turn becomes a metaphor for the human inability to know oneself*»⁹. In fact, in this period of his life Isherwood still doesn't really know his own personality and certainly has a terrible relationship with his own spirituality. A declared atheist, he has cut off all relations with his religion due to an act of rebellion against society and especially against his mother. In fact, after the death of his father in the WWI, Kathleen has reversed all her expectations on him, creating a physical, psychological and sentimental load that he is unable and refuses to sustain.

This fragmentary and inarticulate perception of his own personality and sensibilities and of his relationships with his "neighbour", stems from his puritan "upper middle class" upbringing, to which like it or not, he still belongs notwithstanding his rebellious behaviour. The rigid division between good and evil that exists in this culture makes it impossible for the individual to find an interior serenity without first passing through trauma or tragedy. But, during the period of his *Berlin Novels*, Isherwood has already perceived that this fundamentalistic attitude doesn't lead to any interior development, nor does it help to resolve everyday problems. Even if he has not as yet developed the capacity to individuate and define what in *Prater Violet* he will later call the "narrow road that leads to safety", Isherwood has already begun to outline the possibility that each of us has more of a multi-facet personality than he might first believe.

In fact, Isherwood outlines the complexity of human soul in such characters as Arthur Norris, a strange mixture of con-man and affectionate friend to the narrator William; and Olga, the madam of the Berlin brothel where Norris and other characters meet to indulge in their masochistic pleasures: she also is a strange mixture of drug-pusher and receiver of stolen goods, who from time to time takes in political refugees from the Nazi regime, washes their clothes and produces exquisite crochet work. These characters are not proper mirrors but nonetheless serve as vignettes for the author. Thanks to their specular characteristics, the writer is able to analyse them in depth. In short, Isherwood is telling us, albeit in a simplistic and somewhat confused way, that he has understood that good and evil are necessary bedfellows, which overlap and intertwine

and are never diachronic. Together, they coexist and help us to better define and understand an individual: «For Isherwood, Mr. Norris is a product of both good and evil, of innocence and corruption, and one must come to terms with both elements in order to understand him [...] Olga's divided character defies simple explanation. Isherwood seems to be accepting not only the existence of evil, but its inevitability, as the mirror image of good. One is dependent upon the others»¹⁰.

However, the symbolic and metaphoric image of the mirror as a vehicle for the psychological, spiritual and personal investigation assumes its maximum value as a result of other correlated and consecutive events, which together serve to mature Isherwood the writer: his definitive move to America in January 1939 and his conversion to the philosophic Hindu religion of Vedanta. Above all, it was this religious experience that, all said and done, determined the development of the artistic and human personality of the writer.

The fundamental principle of Vedanta, at least according to Isherwood's declarations, is the complete absence of duality. Through meditation and the deep and personal relationship with the "Swami", a religious person who serves as spiritual guide, the follower is helped to find a direct link with the Godhead. Important to point out here that at the end of the "narrow path that leads to safety", the follower reaches the higher consciousness that he shares both natures, human and divine, which are only apparently separated but which really coexist and are co-eternal. In keeping with the metaphor of the mirror, we could say that we are all reflections of God: the mirror does not exist without its reflection, similarly one does not exist without the other.

The novelty of this message together with the fascinating Hindu terminology and rich pantheon of gods, as well as the "guru-disciple" relationship with Swami Prabhavananda, (the religious leader of the Hollywood community), helped Isherwood to face life and self-inquiry in a more serene way, at the same time allowing him to reconsider those steps already taken and those concepts expressed previously.

Long since aware that his life was devoid of spiritual richness and full of ephemeral delights, Isherwood came to the conclusion that his political choice which for almost ten years had led him to take up with intellectuals of the left and to take a position against the rise of Nazism, Franco's victory in Spain and the Japanese aggression in China, was, all said and done, motivated by juvenile fervour on the spur of the moment. On top of this, he began to understand that his declared need to integrate himself somewhat in society, had no solid basis.

Speaking of this sense of "emptiness" he feels almost immediately after arriving in America, he confides to John Lehmann, one of the most important figures of the so-called Isherwood's "English period" alongside with Edward Upward, E.M. Forster e W.H. Auden: «John, I am so utterly sick of being a person – Christopher Isherwood, or Isherwood, or even Chris. Aren't you too? Don't you feel, more and more, that all your achievements, all your sexual triumphs, are just like cheques, which represent money, but have no real value? Aren't you sick to death of your face in

the glass, and your business-voice, and your love-voice, and your signature on documents? I know I am.»¹¹

The face in the looking-glass, observed by Isherwood since the very beginning of his literary output, is his own: a face that has long since ceased to satisfy him as it is transparently false; “a private face for public places”, a sort of “borrowed robe” to act out a role he thought he had chosen but one which had been thrust upon him by society: that of the “angry young artist”, lacking in certainties and causes to believe in.

This too Isherwood realises: in his narrative, the mirror figure no longer exists as a revelation of the exterior and temporal image of the individual “*per sé*” but, thanks to the important and constructive contribution of Vedanta, it becomes a determinative instrument for an internal and spiritual search.

3.

It is in *Prater Violet* (1945), the first novel written after what critics call “Isherwood’s period of narrative sterility”, that Isherwood first begins to seek a style of life and thought more in tune with his fellow man and able to give him peace and inner stability. In this novel, besides the perception of a possible path towards maturity, complicated and hazardous as only a «*goat-track through the mountains between the clouds*»¹² could be, a “guru” figure appears for the first time in the person of the Viennese director Friedrich Bergmann, directly inspired by the real-life director Bertoldt Viertel, with whom Isherwood had worked in London in 1933. Bergmann represents a father-figure and spiritual guide who, with an hermeneutic function, manages to produce in the “Isherwood-character”, an alter ego for the writer himself, a long stream of consciousness, capable of generating a maturation of both character and spirit.

In Bergmann many of the human and narrative instances converge: besides the quest for a father-figure (a role in which through the course of time several charismatic personalities have interchanged e.g Edward Upward, E. M. Forster, Bertoldt Viertel himself and Swami Prabhavananda), there is also the quest for a “guru”-figure, in other words an advanced illuminated thinker through whom the disciple develops a more acute sense and religious perception and follows the path leading to an understanding of the Godhead. But Bergmann also serves as a “mirror-figure”, giving the narrator protagonist “Christopher Isherwood” a clearer insight of the world and of relationships with others, relationships which hitherto were of a dual nature, “goodies” and “baddies”, friend and “Enemy”.

Since it is primarily focused on the celluloid world, the text of *Prater Violet* is rich with references to the visual sphere. And Isherwood treats us to a feast of fine descriptions of this movie world, viewed above all as a “mirror” of the surrounding reality:

Beneath a firmament of girders and catwalks, out of which the cowed lamps shine coldly down, like planets, stands the inconsequent, half dismantled architecture of the sets; archways, sections of houses, wood and canvas hills, huge photographic backdrops, the frontages of streets; a kind of Pompei, but more desolate, more uncanny, because this is literally, a half-world, a limbo of mirror-images, a town which has lost his third dimension. Only the tangle of heavy power-cables are solid, and apt to trip you as you cross the floor. Your footsteps sound unnaturally loud: you find yourself walking on tiptoe. In one corner, amidst these ruins, there is life. A single set is brilliantly illuminated. From the distance, it looks like a shrine, and the figures standing around it might be worshippers. But it is merely the living-room of Toni's home [... and] the men [...] are] carpenters and electricians.¹³

The images of this celluloid world, by their very definition, are ethereal and therefore form part of an artificial limbo. And in this world Bergmann, the "guru-director", plays both the role of the mirror in which reality, albeit artificial, reflects itself, and that of the divinity which presides over the act of creation:

I watch him, throughout the take. It isn't necessary to look at the set: the whole scene is reflected in his face. He never shifts his eyes from the actors for an instant. He seems to control every gesture, every intonation, by a sheer effort of hypnotic power. His lips move, his face relaxes and contracts, his body is thrust forward or drawn back in its seat, his hands rise and fall to mark the phases of the action. Now he is coaxing Toni from the window, now warning against too much haste, now encouraging her father, now calling for more expression, now afraid the pause will be missed, now delighted with the tempo, now anxious again, now really alarmed, now reassured, now touched, now pleased, now very pleased, now cautious, now disturbed, now amused. Bergmann's concentration is marvellous in its singleness of purpose. It is the act of creation.¹⁴

Therefore, the mirror, whether physically present or just reflected in the eyes of Bergmann, assumes more and more the function of a reading instrument through which Isherwood can gain a deeper perception of the world around him and at the same time analyse his own reactions to it. The revision of certain key concepts fundamental for the author in the late '20s and early '30s – "Enemy", "Test", "Truly Weak Man" and "Truly Strong Man" – can be traced to the early '40s, a very important period indeed, during which he was converted to Vedanta, conceived *Prater Violet* and collaborated with Swami Prabhavananda in translating some sacred Vedas texts¹⁵. These concepts represent an immature juvenile classification of the social sphere based on the author's world of affections and intellectual affinities. Now, as he proceeds along the path to harmony, to a perception of the divinity which «underlies, overlies, and encompasses all true being»¹⁶, to unify the God which is in himself with the God which presides over

Creation,¹⁷ Isherwood begins to lose his belief in the manichean distinction between Good and Evil, “Enemy” and Friend, above all between the “Truly Strong” and the “Truly Weak” and perceives that every single element must be considered as transitory, every single aspect of reality and of those who live it as a step towards inner growth.

4.

This constant quest which engages Isherwood, a driving force underlying his narratives like a Jamesian “cipher in the carpet”, moves one step further with *The World in the Evening* (1954). While generally considered by most critics as a failure, the novel represents the first stage of man’s internal growth, who according to Hinduism seeks the God dwelling inside him. But it is in *Down There on a Visit* (1962), composed of four episodes referring to four moments of his life, that the figure of the mirror makes another appearance as interpreter of an individual’s nature and conscience.

The same narrative technique of the novel revolves around the concept of specularity. In fact, besides the constant recurrence of physical images of mirrors in every section, the narration is rendered through two “Christopher Isherwoods”, one mirroring the other: the young “Christopher Isherwood” belonging to the various temporal planes and living the tale being told, and the more mature “Christopher Isherwood” who, seeing things from a distance, relives these experiences and enjoys himself “recollecting in tranquillity.”

One “Isherwood” mirrors the other continuously, therefore giving a sense of coherence to the experience because if it is true that the “Young C.I.” is too impulsive to fully take in what is really happening to him, the “Old C.I.”, endowed with a deeper capacity for reflection, wouldn’t be able to avail himself of this experience if it had not been through the eyes of “Isherwood past.” It follows that no step of the maturing process should be discarded, as each single step along the “narrow path” is vital to the growth of the writer:

And now before I slip back into the convention of calling this young man ‘I’, let me consider him as a separate being, a stranger almost, setting out on this adventure in a taxi to the docks. For, of course, he is almost a stranger to me.¹⁸

“Of course”, because the narrating voice of 1962 knows that an entire process of maturation and transformation renders the two extremes of the “path” practically indiscernible:

There has been no break in the sequence of daily statements that I am I. But *what* I am has refashioned itself throughout the days and years, until now almost all that remains constant is the mere awareness of being conscious. And that awareness belongs to everybody; it isn’t a particular person.¹⁹

Yet, the “Old C.I.” also knows that he couldn’t ignore altogether the “Young C.I.”, because he was the first link in the evolutionary chain:

The Christopher who sat in that taxi is, practically speaking, dead [...] I can’t revitalize him now. I can only reconstruct him from his remembered acts and words and from the writings he has left us [...] but I will try not to [sneer at him]. I’ll try not to apologize for him either. After all, I owe him some respect. In a sense he is my father, and in another sense my son.²⁰

What Isherwood feels looking back in the mirror of the “Isherwoods past”, is what we all feel, albeit unconsciously, every day, looking at ourselves in the bathroom mirror. This Umberto Eco calls the “constancy of perception”:

La costanza della percezione esiste sia che noi intendiamo il percepire secondo una teoria speculare della conoscenza (la nostra mente è come uno specchio che riflette i dati del mondo esterno esattamente così come sono organizzati di per sé), sia che si accetti una teoria costruttivistica della conoscenza (percepire è costruire i nostri per-cetti, attraverso un’azione della mente, in base a dati di per sé scoordinati). In entrambi i casi, parlare della costanza della percezione significa dire che noi - sia che riflettiamo il mondo o che lo costruiamo - obbediamo a leggi abbastanza costanti, che valgono per tutti gli esseri della nostra specie [...] La costanza della percezione ci permette di riconoscere l’identico [...] Per identici si intendono gli *indiscernibili*, e cioè individui singoli e unici [...] Riconosciamo, in parole povere, nostro padre non perché l’occorrenza percettiva di oggi assomiglia all’occorrenza percettiva di ieri, ma perché l’occorrenza percettiva di oggi presenta le stesse proprietà pertinenti del Tipo conservato nella nostra memoria. In tal senso la somiglianza che presiede al riconoscimento di indiscernibili viene ridotta alla comparazione tra un tipo e una occorrenza.²¹

In *Down There on a Visit*, therefore, by the author’s own admission and in the narrator’s own voice, the mirror evoked by the meeting of the two “Isherwoods”, by this technique of the “dyachronic double point of view”, serves to heal the “dystonia” already portrayed through a mirror in *Mr Norris Changes Trains*. In fact, whereas in the latter novel the mirror reveals an unrecognisable face to “Isherwood-William”, a face with a false nose, in the former novel the mirror restores the face to its former unity, a character which has changed but which, all said and done, is still the same, a certainty which arises from the “constancy of perception”.

If, on the one hand, it makes reference to the “indiscernibles”, on the other hand it avails itself of the “criteria of pertinence”, of those aspects which are features of the object reflected.

In the first episode of the novel, “Mr. Lancaster”, an episode which deals with events taking place in Spring 1928, the “Old C.I.” communicates to us that he has started to restore this nest of broken images through the mirror, which

serves as a catalyst, making a whole of the various parts that represent all the “Isherwoods”, all his former selves. These images follow each other in quick succession through the course of his life:

Very very occasionally in the course of your life – goodness knows how or why – a mirror will seem to catch your image and hold it like a camera. Years later, you have only to think of that mirror in order to see yourself just as you appeared in it then. You can even recall the feelings you had as you were looking into it. For example, at the age of nine, I shot a wildly lucky goal in a school football game. When I got back from the field, I looked into a mirror in the changing room, feeling that this improbable athletic success must somehow have altered my appearance. It hadn't; but I still know exactly how I looked and felt. And I know how I looked and felt as I stared into that restaurant mirror.²²

Also the figure of the camera is important to Isherwood's symbolic and narrative universe. *Goodbye to Berlin* begins with the observer-narrator speaking to us as if viewing everything through a camera and analysing the exterior reality in order to focus on and portray all the details. What better figure for a writer so closely connected with the celluloid world and the visual sphere? In the second section of *Down There on a Visit*, entitled “Ambrose”, Isherwood tells us about events that took place in May 1933 on an Aegean island, where he fled to avoid Nazi persecution. Here we have another example of how the “criteria of pertinence” and the “indiscernables”, observed in the reflections of the mirror, can help the observer to recognise the “continuity of perception” that lies beyond the appearance.

Life in an homosexual commune devoid of any sort of rule or limitation, in terrible climatic and hygienic conditions, brings the “Christopher Isherwood” of this section in touch with a very squalid side of life, hitherto unknown to him, experiences which have an extremely dehumanising effect upon him. Ambrose, the rich and eccentric organiser of this community, is a real king of the kind of solitude Isherwood was subject to in his youth and during his travels through Europe.

To “Christopher Isherwood”, Ambrose is little more than a reflection of a mirror, which in the narrator's eyes has lost all human characteristics and serves only to reveal the dangers of dehumanisation: «*I seldom thought of Ambrose as a person. Most of the time he was simply a consciousness that was aware of me, a mirror in which I saw my reflection – but dimly, and only if I made big easily recognisable gestures.*»²³.

When things become too unbearable, “Christopher Isherwood”, at the end of his tether, abandons the island. Once back on the mainland, looking at his face in the mirror, the narrator realises the risks he has run: «*When I got a good look at myself in a mirror at the hotel [...] I was quite startled to see what these last few months had done to me. My hair was long and matted, my beard had started to grow, [...] my face*

was puffy with drinking and my eyes were red.» Things time would soon mend, but «there was also a look in my eyes which hadn't been there before. By the time I got back to England, no one could have had any difficulty in recognizing me as my familiar self. Only I caught glimpses of that look now and then while shaving.»²⁴. That haunted look that Kurtz had in *Heart of Darkness*, after descending into Hell and seeing horrors of “heartlessness” and rejection of human kind; but at the same time it was the look of Marlow who at the last minute took one step back before plunging over the precipice, refusing to accept this horror and thereby saving himself.

The period the events referred to is previous to Isherwood's conversion, a period lacking in human values and solidarity, tolerance and universal harmony, those same values which at the time of writing formed the backbone of the author's convictions and style of life. And this time the face in the mirror is not false as in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, but is the true one.

However, it is an unrecognisable dehumanised face rendered so by the lack of connection with one's fellow being, a hinge theme in *Down There on a Visit* and of the whole of Isherwood's post-conversion narrative. The “Christopher Isherwood” of 1933 doesn't recognise himself because he doesn't recognise the gleam in his eye, an indication of a radical change for the worst, which is leading him towards the brink of alienation towards his fellow beings: «*Lo specchio spesso proietta un'immagine modificata dal modo in cui crediamo di apparire, e ciò vale non soltanto per l'aspetto fisico, i lineamenti e la postura dell'osservatore, ma anche per i suoi atteggiamenti e le sue emozioni. L'idea che ognuno ha del proprio corpo appare notevolmente variabile.*»²⁵.

Also the last section of *Down There on a Visit*, which recounts events of autumn 1940, after the author's move to America and his introduction to Vedanta, presents us with the mirror figure: «*Another look into a mirror – my own face dimly reflected through the fashionable twilight of a Beverly Hills restaurant, confronting three people on a banquette with their backs to the glass. This is the autumn of 1940. We are just getting ready to start lunch.*»²⁶.

This time the 1962 “Isherwood” recognises himself without any difficulty, because this mirrored “I” from the past is very similar to the one telling the facts: an Isherwood who, having gone through a period of meditation and having lived in close contact (almost every day) with his guru Swami Prabhavananda, has assessed and understood the importance of the connection with “others” in the search for interior perfection, leading to the final goal of Brahman, the transcendent Godhead. Even though his relationship with Paul (another “outcast” trying to reach the same truth but altogether along the “wrong path”) after a short time falls through, the “Christopher Isherwood” of this temporal plane is on the “right path”, even if he has still a long way to go.

Isherwood takes another important step along this path in his next novel, *A Single Man* (1964). George, the protagonist, is an English university professor, living in America. A homosexual, he lives a solitary isolated life because he has just lost his lover Jim in a road accident. Apart from this event, which is important for the development of the story, George's character directly reflects that of Isherwood, and is yet another step along the meditative path that the author follows on the way to his inner self.

When George wakes up, naturally there is a mirror at hand and, obviously enough, he gazes at himself in it: «*Staring and staring into the mirror, it sees many faces within its face – the face of the child, the boy, the young man, the not-so-young man – all present still, preserved like fossils on superimposed layers, and, like fossils, dead. Their message to this live dying creature is: look at us – we have died – what is there to be afraid of?*»²⁷.

For the first time, therefore, Isherwood's narrative presents us with a mirror that neither shows a false aspect of the observer nor limits itself to reflect his true face. In this mirror which puts us directly in touch with the soul of the character, we see the coexistence of all the various "I"s which have followed each other one by one. These "indiscernible I's", while distinct one from the other, are in reality an inevitable consequence of each other, given that it is inevitable that, each one in its time, must give way to the other: «*Arnese fondamentale della magia e della divinazione, lo specchio (magico) capta e rivela qualcosa che non c'è: che non c'è più, come l'immagine evocata di un trapassato, o che non c'è ancora, come gli eventi del futuro, o che comunque non è presente o visibile.*»²⁸.

The successive "I-reflections" of the past, in Isherwood's narrative and Vedanta lens, is nothing more than the acceptance of life as a continual sequence of temporary stages and necessary transformations. In this image, thinly veiled, is the presence of Vedanta's theory of "Life after life after life": what dies is only appearance, "Maya"; the Atman continues to exist.

Reincarnation is therefore seen as logical, natural and harmonious successive moments of experience and vital stages of development, rather than just a new possibility to live life, (a common view of Western culture). These stages are fundamental in the search for cosmic and spiritual harmony, in keeping with Vedanta and Hinduism. Some sort of harmony seems possible to poor George who, if only for a brief moment in his life, is able to share his hopes and feelings with Jim. And it is the bathroom mirror in their little house which serves as witness to these fleeting moments of happiness:

Think of two people, living together day after day, year after year, in this small space, standing elbow to elbow cooking at the same small stove, squeezing past each other on the narrow stairs, shaving in front of the same small bathroom mirror, constantly jogging, jostling, bumping against each other's bodies by mistake or on purpose, sen-

sually, aggressively, awkwardly, impatiently, in rage or in love – think what deep though invisible tracks they must leave, everywhere, behind them! The doorway into the kitchen has been built too narrow. Two people in a hurry, with plates of food in their hands, are apt to keep colliding here.²⁹

In short, the mirror is a faithful companion, a silent partner, but not for that any less reliable, witness to the weaning process of spiritual and psychological maturation that Isherwood must face throughout his literary career.

Just as in the super-abundance of pseudonyms, alter egos and nicknames which accompany his narrative³⁰, and which recall another concept pertaining to Hindu religions (that of the “mantra”, a ritual name used repetitively during prayer in order to help concentration and meditation), so in the presence of the mirror and reflected images it is possible to note a well defined, logical, and well thought out plan, that of meditating and studying – above all himself – and his relationship with the world and with his fellow travellers along the road to harmony and spiritual peace.

6.

In Isherwood’s last novel, *A Meeting by the River* (1966), the mirror figure does not appear “per sé”, but the structure and narration of the events are as specular as any produced by the writer. The parallel bilinear technique makes use of the pages of diaries and letters written by the two protagonists, two brothers who equally share the role of the narrator. Two completely diametric positions at the beginning, which eventually manage to come to terms with each other, realising that, at the end of the day, they are but reflections of each other. Isherwood ends his cycle of novels, going out “with a bang and not with a whimper”: in *A Meeting by the River* he succeeds in making the mirror image coincide with its original, in unifying the reflection beheld with the person who beholds it.

The human experience as a continuous growth towards a better understanding of oneself and one’s spiritual relationship with the absolute is the key to the “American” Isherwood, long overlooked by critics: it is the “cipher in the carpet”, the “inner rhythm” of the writer’s works, after *Prater Violet*. His collaboration with Swami Prabhavananda, introduced Isherwood to one of the most important Hindu texts, the *Bhagavad Gita*, an epic in prose and verse, forming part of the more famous *Mahabarata*. “Translating” this text, or rather collaborating with his Swami to make the English more fluent and comprehensible to Anglo-Saxon readers, Isherwood begins to realise he was mistaken seeing the world and his fellow beings as one and the same, hostile and obstructive to his artistic career and to his homosexuality.

Just as Western culture teaches us that sin is against God, Hinduism teaches that sin is against ourselves because it prevents us from reaching a perception

of divinity, our ultimate goal. Furthermore, Hinduism teaches that the only obstacles that exist are those we put in our own way, and which in the final analysis boil down to two precise categories: rage against one's fellow being, and lust, intended as thoughtless attachment to material things and passing pleasures, the sphere of the ephemeral, the "Maya":

Rage and lust: the ravenous, the deadly:
Recognize these: they are your enemies.
Smoke hides fire,
Dust hides a mirror,
The womb hides the embryo:
By lust the Atman is hidden.³¹

Beneath the appearance lies the reality, beneath the dust of deceit lies the mirror of truth, a mirror which permits us to analyse and know ourselves in order to uncover our real nature. This is the message we see in Isherwood's mirror. This is the lesson we need to learn in order to live in harmony with the rest of creation.

- 1 The present paper on the treatment of mirrors and mirror-images in Christopher Isherwood's literary production is a lengthier and more extensive study on the same issue already dealt with in a previous essay, published in 1999 by Bulzoni, Roma. I take advantage of the present publication to thank Bhavaprana, nun of the Hollywood Vedanta Convent, for her unvaluable help with Vedanta connected terms and issues; and Allan Caister, for his help in editing the English text of my paper.
- 2 Umberto Eco, "Intorno e aldilà dello Specchio", in *Lo Specchio e il Doppio: Dallo Stagno di Narciso allo Schermo Televisivo*. Catalogo della mostra tenuta a Torino nel 1987. (Milano: Fabbri, 1987): «What I see in the mirror is exactly myself. But am I convinced it's me because I know it to be a mirror, which I trust, or rather I understand it to be a mirror because on its surface I find something which doubtless is me?» (Umberto Eco, "About and Beyond the Mirror", in *The Mirror and the Double: From Narcissus' Pond to the Television Set*, Catalogue of the exhibition held in Turin in 1987; My translation).
- 3 George Wickes, "An Interview with Christopher Isherwood", *Shenandoah*, XVI: III: 1965: 24.
- 4 Manfred Weidhorn, "Mirror", 50 in Jean-Charles Seigneuret, (ed.), *Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs* (New York and London: Greenwood Press, 1988).
- 5 For a more exhaustive critical analysis of Christopher Isherwood's narrative, see Mario Faraone, *Un uomo solo: autobiografia e rinnovamento nella narrativa di Christopher Isherwood* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1998).
- 6 Christopher Isherwood, *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (London: Methuen, 1987), 27.
- 7 Isherwood himself adopts this definition. Cfr. Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin* (London: Methuen, 1987), "Forward".
- 8 Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin*, cit., 256-257.
- 9 Manfred Weidhorn, Op. cit., 851.
- 10 Richard Johnstone, *The Will to Believe: Novelists of the Nineteen-thirties* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1982), 112.
- 11 Letter of July 1939 to John Lehmann. Cfr. John Lehmann, *Christopher Isherwood: A Personal Memoir* (London: Weidenfield & Nicholson, 1987), 53.
- 12 Christopher Isherwood, *Prater Violet* (London: Methuen, 1984), 101.
- 13 Christopher Isherwood, *Prater Violet*, cit. 57.
- 14 Christopher Isherwood, *Prater Violet*, cit. 63.
15. About the importance of the conversion to Vedanta for Christopher Isherwood's writings, see Mario Faraone, "The Path that leads to Safety: Autobiographical Narrative as Spiritual Renewal in the Narrative of Christopher Isherwood", 427-447, in James Berg and Christopher Freeman (eds.), *The Isherwood Century* (Michigan: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).
- 16 Interestingly enough, this very same concept is contained in the works of Mary Baker Eddy, discoverer and founder of "Christian Science". The full text reads as follows: «Hold perpetually this thought – that it is the spiritual idea, the Holy Ghost and Christ, which enables you to demonstrate, with scientific certainty, the rule of healing, based upon its divine Principle, Love, underlying, overlying, and encompassing all true being». (Lines 15-19) Cfr. Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (1890; Boston, MA: The First

Church of Christ, Scientist, 1971), 496.

17 It's fascinating to quote Isherwood's own words in one of his religious essays. Cfr. Christopher Isherwood, "What is Vedanta?", in *The Wishing Tree*: Christopher Isherwood on Mystical Religion San Francisco: Harper & Row for The Vedanta Press, 1987: 42: «The Atman, in Christian terminology, is God Immanent; Brahman is God Transcendent. But Atman and Brahman are one».

18 Christopher Isherwood, *Down There on a Visit* (London: Methuen, 1985), 7.

19 Christopher Isherwood, *Down There on a Visit*, *ibidem*.

20 Christopher Isherwood, *Down There on a Visit*, cit., 7-8.

21 Umberto Eco, "Intorno e aldilà dello Specchio", in *Lo Specchio e il Doppio*, cit., 20 e 22: «The "constancy of perception" exists whether we intend the act of perceiving as a specular theory of knowledge (our mind is just like a mirror which reflects the data coming from the external world exactly as they are organised), or we accept a constructive theory of knowledge (to perceive means to construct our perceptions, through an action of the mind, starting from uncoordinated data). In both cases, to speak of the "constancy of perception" means to say that – whether we reflect the world or we construct it – we obey to laws which are constant enough, and whose value is the same for any being of our species [...] The "constancy of perception" enables us to acknowledge the identical [...] With the word 'identical' I mean the indiscernibles, that is to say individuals which are single and unique [...] in plain language, we manage to acknowledge our father not because the perceptive occurrence of today looks like that of yesterday, but because the perceptive occurrence of today shows the same pertinent proper-

ties of the Type preserved in our memory. In this sense, the likeness which presides over the acknowledgement of the indiscernibles is reduced to a comparison between a type and an occurrence». (Umberto Eco, "About and Beyond the Mirror", in *The Mirror and the Double*, cit.; My translation).

22 Christopher Isherwood, *Down There on a Visit*, cit., 19.

23 Christopher Isherwood, *Down There on a Visit*, cit., 109.

24 Christopher Isherwood, *Down There on a Visit*, cit., 113.

25 B. Goldberg, *Lo Specchio e l'Uomo* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1989), 264: «The mirror often projects a modified image of what one thinks one really looks like, and this doesn't only apply to physical appearance, the features and posture of the observer, but also to his attitude and emotions. The idea one has of one's body varies considerably from time to time». (B. Goldberg, *Mirror and Man*; My translation).

26 Christopher Isherwood, *Down There on a Visit*, cit., 158.

27 Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (London: Mandarin, 1991), 8. It is worth confronting this passage with what Krishna states to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Cfr. *Bhagavad-Gita: The Song of God*, Trad. Swamy Prabhavananda e Christopher Isherwood, Int. di Aldous Huxley; (New York: Mentor & Nal Penguin Inc., 1972), 38: «Before birth, beings are not manifest to our human senses. In the interim between birth and death, they are manifest. At death, they return to the unmanifest again? What is there in all this to grieve over?».

28 Maurizio Calvesi, "Lo Specchio, Simbolo del Simbolo" in *Lo Specchio e il Doppio*, cit., 33: «Fundamental implement of magic and divination, the (magic) mirror captures and reveals something which is not: which is no longer there, just like an image evoked by a medium, or that isn't there yet, just

like events to come, or something which is not present or visible». (Maurizio Calvesi, "Mirror, the Symbol's Symbol", in *The Mirror and the Double*, cit.; My translation).

29 Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man*, cit., 9.

30 Cfr. J.C.H. Thompson, "From Conspiracy to Confession", *Time Literary Supplement*, 7 Dec 1984: 1408: «No writer has ever confronted his reader with so many near-likeness: Chris, Christoph, Christopher, [Y Hsiao Wu, Curaçao Chris, Christophilos] Christopher Isherwood, Kristopher Ischerwood, Herr Hissyvoo, William Bradshaw, even (once) C.W.B. Isherwood. They are all, blushing, stammering, swaggering, calculating, grinny, private faces in public places, and we are wiser and nicer to be complicit in their crimes».

31 *Bhagavad-Gita: The Song of God*, cit., 48-49.