
BOĞAZIÇI ÜNİVERSİTESİ DERGİSİ

Beşeri Bilimler — Humanities

Vol. 7 — 1979

BOOK REVIEW — KİTAP ELEŞTİRİSİ

ISHERWOOD - A CAMERA?

Oya Başak *

"I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking," states Christopher Isherwood at the very beginning of his *Goodbye to Berlin*, clearly putting his readers in the know about his way of approach to his subject matter and preparing them for the ensuing series of impersonal and crisp pictures of his German surroundings, pictures ranging from the pop-eyed astrological-diagram seller at the corner to a pathetically false entertainment world as seen in the *Troika*. These pictures continue extremely successfully throughout the first part, *A Berlin Diary*, detachedly describing the gray sadness of the evening "pierced by the insistent despairingly human" whistling or an almost farcical listening in on a quarrel downstairs by the landlady and her yodeler tenant or even the purely slapstick bathroom-door hammering and fainting sequence.

Yet, going on to read the second part, *Sally Bowles*, the reader starts to wonder whether the passivity of the camera is still as intense. True, Isherwood still holds a certain distance in describing Sally's ugly hands and over-powdered face or relating her unscrupulous conversation or narrating of her wildly varying affairs with men. True, especially in the light of later knowledge we acquire in the novel, his attachment to Sally could never be termed love; but an attachment there is, and his objectivity slowly disappears as he gets interested in Sally as a person. His concern with her near-pregnancy, his annoyance at the too-familiar doctor, his willingness to go off to a different country with Clive Sally, his jealousy of her new friends, the trick he plays on her as a result of this jealousy—these are not mere "recording, not thinking" manifestations of a camera. The end of this section of the book openly states his own contradiction to his initial statement; it becomes a cry, an open appeal to Sally with the words "accept this as a tribute to our friendship" and "and send me another postcard."

a Assoc. Prof. Dr., Dept. of Language and Literature, Boğaziçi University.

After the long concentration on one character, Sally Bowles, Isherwood returns once more to the mere observing and relating of the interesting relationship between two fellow roomers in his Ruegen Island house-at least the readers are led to believe so until suddenly, at the departure of the two, they find Isherwood himself losing complete interest in the place. Even though the petty quarrels between Otto and Peter seem merely to amuse him at first, without them, existence in the summer house becomes unbearable to the so-called "passive" and "unthinking" Christopher.

The same is true of the section **The Nowaks**; here too, still taking down in a series of pictures the life in the tenement district, the sometime gleeful, sometime distasteful relationships in the Nowak family or the "élite" of the Alexander Casiono, Isherwood nevertheless cannot prevent elements of the attachment he has developed for these people from creeping in. The picture of Herr Nowak glaring in front of him and cautiously retreating backwards until he collides with the sideboard, the description of Kurt, whom Isherwood could "understand better than I could understand Piep or Gertadt because he was consciously unhappy" are only two in a series treated with a great deal of sympathy and attachment. His involvement in his narration reaches its peak with the hospital incident at the end of this section of the book, where he cannot keep out the nightmare-like experience he went through on coming into contact with the four life-hungry woman patients.

So with **The Landauers** - first the detached description of the Landauer home, of the overbearing Nutalia, of the quiet, tired-looking Bernhard, then a growing interest in and an involvement with this last character, changing as in **Sally Bowles**, the intended series of camera pictures to almost an even-flowing story of his relationship with one character and leading up to an attemptedly impersonal death report. Yet in this last part, the very avoidance of the revelation of any emotion on the part of Isherwood makes the reader all the more aware of the extremity of his feelings.

The last section of **Goodbye to Berlin, A Berlin Diary**, consists again of a series of pictures, but much much different than those in the first section of the same title. Here we see quick, feverish glimpses of surrender to inflicted sexual perversion for the sake of a morsel of food, of prearranged wrestling or boxing matches, of stale, grey reformatories, of unnatural club houses and of bloody streetfights - pictures, yes; but **not** as seen through the lens of a passive, non-living camera. These pictures, in the very way in which the ugly details are focused upon, reveal a great deal of the author's own state of mind, the author who has changed so much from the merely recording camera as to be the first to reach the prostrate body of a young man kicked and stabbed by the S.A. men.

Somehow, despite himself Christopher Isherwood cannot remain a camera. Perhaps he seems to be saying it is not possible to remain neutral to the issues of the contemporary world-if not necessarily on the political level, then at least on the moral level.