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14 *James Kelley*

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In late November 1970, upon seeing John Lehmann examine his collection of books on E. M. Forster, Christopher Isherwood commented: "Of course all those books have got to be re-written. Unless you start with the fact that he was homosexual, nothing's any good at all" (Lehmann, 121). Isherwood's insistence on reading the author's sexuality back into his works and using it as the point of departure for textual interpretation—an insistence found again in his assertively queer memoir, *Christopher and His Kind*—runs counter to the actual trend developing in Isherwood studies since 1970.

Isherwood's novels, from early to late, have been praised in most of these studies for their presentation of generational truths about post–World War I England or their treatment of some universal "human condition," even as such representational tasks are seen as ill suited to the homosexual protagonists of an author whose sexuality was becoming more publicly known. While these critics have recognized that Isherwood's later autobiographical writings, *Kathleen and Frank* and *Christopher and His Kind,* discuss the tensions between the author's homosexuality and familial relationships, they have generally failed to note that the author's earliest published novels, especially *The Memorial: Portrait of a Family,* raise these same problems and suggest strategies for developing a homosexual identity within and in relation to one's family of origin.

Of Isherwood's first novel, *All the Conspirators,* Brian Finney observes that by "underplaying scenes and events, . . . Isherwood was able to subtly undermine conventional moral values even while the narrative was ostensibly tracing their triumph over a younger generation's unsuccessful revolt" (70–71). Finney's observation applies equally well to the narrative of *The Memorial,* which "was to be about war: not the War itself, but the effect of the idea of 'War' on my generation" (*Lions,* 296). But underneath that cover story, one might trace a more subversive tale: an account of the formation of a young man's homosexual identity. The character's identity is established in part through his recognition of what Isherwood calls "Anti-Ancestors," other "queer" members of his extended family. This project of revisioning traditional models of kinship is not unique to Isherwood or the characters in his early works. "After coming out to themselves," Kath Weston writes in her 1991 study of the significance of familial bonds to gay men and lesbians, "some people report subjecting blood ties to new scrutiny in a search for gay relations. Great aunts, second cousins once removed, and blood relatives who might otherwise be considered genetically or emotionally distant in an ego-centered accounting of kinship suddenly assume prominence as gay or lesbian forebears" (73–74).

In Book 2 of *The Memorial,* dated 1920 in the novel and therefore chronologically the first of the four sections, Eric Vernon contemplates writing a poem about the tensions he feels when shuttling from his family estate to the house newly occupied by his paternal aunt and back again. Eric briefly considers using the conceit of a magnetized needle in this poem: "Chapel Bridge and Gatesley were like the two poles of a magnet. . . . And if you rode over from Chapel Bridge to Gatesley, from Gatesley back to Chapel Bridge, you were like a pin on a bit of metal filing, being drawn first by one pole, then by the other" (173). Alan Wilde has identified this passage as a key to "the novel as a whole" and writes that the choice for Eric, and for the younger generation he is said to represent, is one "between, on the one hand, an allegiance to the dead forms of the past . . . and, on the other, a liberation from them by means which are never made completely clear and toward a goal which remains tenuous at best, since none of the characters manages to make a complete break with the past" (37–38). The descriptions of the two homes here and throughout the novel support Wilde's conclusion. Chapel Bridge is "clean" and well ordered but also "dead" and "negative," seeming to offer little for Eric. Its owner and Eric's mother, Lily Vernon, quite literally worships the past: she kneels in front of a mirror, with candles burning to either side, as she writes of the house's history in letters to relatives and in her diary, just as she transforms her bedroom into a shrine to an irrecoverable era, one that died with her husband at Ypres (see *Memorial,* 77–78, 68).

By contrast, the "positive" pole of Gatesley—the house of Lily's sister-in-law Mary Scriven and her two children, Maurice and Anne—is chaotic and bustling with life. This is the environment in which Eric feels he can grow: "It seemed to him that, if he could always live with his cousins, he would expand like a flower, breaking out of his own clumsy identity, gaining strength and confidence" (172). Reading *The Memorial* in light of Isherwood's subsequent autobiographical writings clarifies the purpose and method of this liberating alternative to what Wilde has rightly identified as "an allegiance to the dead forms of the past." What emerges is a portrait of the author (the fictional Eric and/or the real Isherwood) revisioning rather than simply repudiating or unconditionally embracing his familial past.

In biographical terms, as critics have noted, Chapel Bridge strongly resembles Marple Hall, the family estate of the Bradshaw-Isherwoods, just as Gatesley is modeled on the home of the Mangeot family, the musical family for whom Isherwood worked in the mid-1920s and whom he treated "as a much preferred alternative" to his own family (Finney, 57). But the novel deviates from the biographical in at least one important way: the alternate family of Mary Scriven and her children is closely related to Eric Vernon, and these family ties make all the difference, for they enable the young Eric, like the young Isherwood on whom he is modeled, to read subversively within his family history in order to create an alternate lineage that fosters—in its emphasis on "queerness"—his emerging homosexual identity.

Aunt Mary is herself a queer character, if we take "queer" in the early twentieth-century meaning of "odd" as well as "homosexual." The word is used twice in the brief account of Eric's first impression of her (163). More central to her place in Isherwood's revised family network, however, is the "something odd or reprehensible about his Aunt Mary" which he can sense when his mother looks at her (162). Whatever scandal there had been involving Mary's love affair with Desmond Scriven is in the distant past and has been "tea-tabled," or purposefully downplayed, in the narrative and thus rendered easy to overlook and open to speculation. The precise nature of the deeds, however, matters less than the muted but powerful moral outrage evoked in both of Eric's parents. Of the older generation, only Edward Blake—himself an outsider, a family friend rather than family member—is adamant that Mary not be excluded from the family for her actions.

Older than Eric's own mother yet more energetic, rolling her own cigarettes and parodying the late Queen Victoria at every opportunity, Aunt Mary bears "the seal of strangeness" (164) and has passed that mark on to her children; Maurice and Anne are equally "strange" to their cousin

Eric (165) and present him with new opportunities for identification and desire, opportunities now outside of the nuclear family but still within the realm of blood relations. Indeed, in Eric's descriptions of the two, both drives seem to be at work, with identification shifting to desire and then back again as easily as his cousins slip from one conventional gender role to the other. Although daring, athletic, and mechanically adept, Maurice has also a "very feminine side"; he is "soft, like a girl . . . slim, delicate-looking" (169). His sister, Anne, by contrast, is "handsome, though not exactly pretty," and she possesses "a bold forehead, too broad for a girl, and eyes drawn down at the corners, giving her at moments a wise, kindly, rather masculine appearance." She is shown to be equally at ease managing domestic affairs and playing sports and socializing with Maurice and his male friends (171).

In *Kathleen and Frank,* Isherwood describes his real-life Aunt Mary, in terms similar to the ones he uses to describe Anne Scriven: "With her large serious grey eyes and interesting temperamental mouth, she would have made an attractive young man. . . . The heroine of one of her books wishes she had been born a boy and pleases her brothers by taking part in their games" (186). The Aunt Mary in Isherwood's life may not have been homosexual; he is not as certain about her romantic leanings as he is about his Uncle Henry's, of whom he would later assert: "Uncle Henry became my first known adult homosexual" (*October,* 75). But, Isherwood claims of his aunt, "she never showed any inclination to marry," just as he points out that she found in a member of her own sex an "ideal companion" and a caretaker for the rest of her life (*Kathleen,* 187).

The Scrivens in *The Memorial* thus emerge as perhaps the first instance of Isherwood's lifelong project of re-visioning his family lineage and granting new significance to his odd, disowned, insane or even treacherous "Anti-Ancestors." This "anti-ancestry" includes female as well as male figures, his Aunt Mary alongside his Uncle Henry. It also includes such impressive personalities as Elizabeth Brubins, an eighteenth-century ancestor dispossessed of the family estate upon the death of the husband of her childless marriage, as well as the prominent John Bradshaw, who had been branded a traitor for signing the death warrant of King Charles I when all other judges had refused to do so (see *Kathleen,* 310–12, 292–97).

Kathleen and Frank records much of the information on these "Anti-Ancestors" in loving detail, yet Isherwood's careful construction of an entire "anti-ancestry," his act of seeking out queer kin in previous as well as in concurrent generations, is all but ignored in Paul Piazza's 1978 study *Christopher Isherwood: Myth and Anti-Myth.* Piazza offers the most extensive discussion of the role of family in Isherwood's novels, yet the headings of his first two chapters, both dealing with the early works—the first entitled "Mothers and Sons," the second "Fathers and Sons"—indicate Piazza's narrow focus on the nuclear family. His adherence to the Oedipal model of father-mother-son can be seen in his discussion of the dead war hero in *The Memorial,* of whom he writes: "Seen through the admiring eyes of Edward Blake or the love-beclouded eyes of Lily, Richard Vernon (Eric's father) is a cynosure of classical manhood" (56). This traditional but unconvincing division and assignment of identification and desire—Edward admires whereas Lily loves—is undermined by the language of the novel, for "admiration" is used to describe both Edward's attraction to Richard ("a deepening admiration"—130) and Eric's to Maurice ("whom [Eric] so painfully admired"—166), thereby taking on in its usage a meaning inseparable from desire and perhaps becoming a code term for homosexual attraction.

When Piazza does address the shared homosexual element in the relationship of Eric and Edward, the focus he has adopted leads him to proceed by means of a series of substitutions and displacements that, ultimately, replicates the conventional and heterosexual family unit (minus the mother) rather than explores alternative ways of viewing familial bonds and kinship. "Having lost a father in the war," Piazza explains, "Eric is in love with [Edward] Blake, a surrogate father . . . and though Eric and Blake do not yield to their mutual attraction, their truncated relationship satisfies a need in both: Blake assumes for Eric the role of Richard Vernon, Eric's father; and Eric, in turn, becomes Blake's son and idealized lover, a substitute also for Richard Vernon" (174). Viewing the relationship of Edward and Eric in terms other than a series of substitutions and a redirection of paternal-filial affection makes possible, however, a rereading of Richard Vernon himself, as it grants us two perspectives from which to view the absent father—through Edward Blake and through Eric. In one of the many flashbacks that further complicate the already disrupted chronology of *The Memorial,* Edward recalls the intimacy he shared with Richard Vernon before the latter's marriage to Lily: their friendship at school, Edward's frequent stays at the Vernon estate, an extended visit at the front, and a recurring suggestion—presented as "a standard joke of Richard's" (133)—that Edward should marry Richard's sister, Mary. Unable or unwilling to enter into a marriage that would cement the homosocial bond between these two men, Edward must content himself with being the best man at Richard and Lily's wedding, and he plays the role admirably even as he all but transforms the event into a farce. Lily's jealousy upon seeing Edward, Richard Vernon's "great friend" (99–100), at the memorial dedication likewise hints at a bond between the two men that was stronger than social conventions would suggest.

Even when there is no reference to the lost father and friend, Eric and

Edward continue to develop an increasingly close relationship in *The Memorial*, although this development is obscured by the rearranged chronology of the printed text; to see it requires both a chronological reordering of the narrative and speculation regarding critical but "tea-tabled" developments in their friendship. In the section bearing the earliest date (1920), they observe one another from a distance and without particular affection. At the dedication of the war memorial from which the book takes its title, Edward sees Eric as "the gawky boy getting into the carriage," and when we first see Edward through Eric's perspective, the portrait is even less flattering: "Quite apart from the jealousy" Eric feels when seeing Maurice enthused by Edward's presence, he "disliked him. Mistrusted him. . . . Eric couldn't imagine how his father could have been such friends with Edward Blake" (141, 158).

The conflict that soon develops between them over their attraction to Maurice, however, allows them to recognize their shared sexual desires and strengthens the bond between them. Eric confronts Edward about the gifts of money with which the latter has gained Maurice's attentions, points to a fear of scandal, and finally comes to realize in solitary reflection the extent of his own attraction toward his cousin. This rapprochement is drawn out through the 1925 and 1928 sections of the novel and more than likely culminates in some offstage confession of their similarities. Certainly, some sort of reconciliation is indicated in their mutual abandonment of Maurice and in the improved and regular communication between Eric and Edward in the later sections of the novel. By 1929, the date of the novel's last section, the two are in contact regularly: "Edward's the only one who sees him," Mary observes of Eric during a conversation with family and friends (244). The closeness of their relationship is underscored in the final scene of the novel, where Eric reveals in a letter to Edward his private plans to convert to Catholicism: "Perhaps this will surprise you. It would have very much more than surprised me a year ago. I don't know exactly when I shall make my first Communion, but it will be soon. Until that is over I shall say nothing to Mary or to my Mother, but I wanted you to know" (290–91).

Like the importance of Aunt Mary and Uncle Henry to the development of Isherwood's sense of self, the younger protagonist's conversion deserves a second look, for it, too, takes on new meanings and associations when read through Isherwood's autobiographical writings. A quick survey of critical pronouncements reveals that Eric's turning to Catholicism has been read again and again as a mark of failure:

> Eric is in full flight back to authority, to exactly the force, now in intensified form, from which he has been fleeing and against which he has been revolting. (Wilde, 48)

> Eric substitutes one mother figure for another—Mother Church, with her infallible authority, her cult of the Virgin, her celibate clergy. Having escaped from one mother, he is now tragically immured with another more tyrannical one. (Piazza, 41)

> His social and political commitments are the products of his neurosis and it is therefore no surprise that he . . . ends up in the arms of the Roman Catholic Church, a mere substitute for his mother who was the source of most of his neurosis. (Finney, 97)

> His flight to the Roman Catholic Church at the end of the novel is analogous to Philip Lindsay's reversion to childhood in *All the Conspirators*, a retreat into the arms of maternal authority. (Summers, 61)

> Eric refuses any attempt to face himself and finds escape and solace first in left-wing politics and then in the Catholic Church, . . . an authoritarian institution. (Schwerdt, 44)

In these passages, Eric's conversion is read as an abandonment of the struggle for independence and as a return to the "maternal," "tyrannical," and even "infallible" authority of the Catholic Church. This critical position is unsatisfactory, oversimplifying the meaning of conversion and ignoring the personal associations that Roman Catholicism had for Isherwood.

For Isherwood, as for a number of other late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors, an embrace of Catholicism could in fact be part of an escape from rigid codes of behavior and thought, particularly part of an escape from what he was fond of calling the "heterosexual dictatorship." In a diary entry of October 27, 1979, perhaps the single most interesting section of *October*, Isherwood recalls: "When I was young, I liked the rich ritualistic Catholic smell of incense, because it represented religion of a forbidden and therefore attractive kind, frowned on by the Protestant members of our Family. My Catholic Uncle Henry used to burn incense in the fireplace of his sitting-room. He did this out of sensual pleasure in the smell, not as an adjunct to devotion, I am sure. . . . Because of Henry, incense became associated in my mind with homosexuality as well as with Catholicism—the two areas of intriguing mystery in his life" (75–76). This connection between Catholicism and homosexuality in Isherwood's private mythology can be traced back much further. In 1971, he records that his mother had held strong prejudices against Roman Catholics, thinking of them as "unscrupulous liars and agents of a foreign power. Worst of all, in her opinion, were Catholic converts; she called them 'perverts'" (*Kathleen*, 122) and thereby semantically linked the Catholic convert to the homosexual. Isherwood's Uncle Henry was both. And so, perhaps, was Aunt Mary; at any rate, she, too, converted to Catholicism in the early 1920s and thus provided the young Isherwood with yet another

living "Anti-Ancestor" within his overwhelmingly Protestant family. And in an earlier diary entry, one dated July 12, 1940, Isherwood learns by cable from his mother that his uncle has been buried and writes that Henry "belonged to a ninetyish world of smart Catholicism—in which scandal was sniggered over at the end of dinner, and one's confessor was like a rich man's lawyer—paid to get you out of awkward spiritual jams" (*Diaries* 1:103). Scandal is thus reduced to the stuff of casual conversation, and the act of confession to the granting of permission and the allowance of all sorts of indulgences. The associations Catholicism had for Isherwood hardly seem to involve any renunciation at all.

A more recent critical statement on Eric's conversion likewise interprets it as a sign of failure, but here the critic faults the act for the secrecy in which it is shrouded: "In the ultimate histrionic gesture, at the conclusion where Eric writes to Edward about [Eric's] conversion to Catholicism, it is stressed that it is to be kept a secret from the family. Everywhere in society and the relationships of the novel there is duplicity, deceit and reserve, where people's lives are a trail of wreckage after the war" (Wade, 29). If one reads Eric's conversion as an analogue to his developing homosexual identity (and Isherwood's personal associations between the two warrant as much), Eric's plans for a "first Communion" take on sexual as well as spiritual meanings, and the desire to keep his conversion a secret between the two of them becomes more understandable. Insofar as the family of *The Memorial* is plagued by secrets (and Wade's claim seems overstated), perhaps the biggest secret of the novel—the homosexuality of Edward and Eric—is an open one. At the novel's end, Edward's friend Margaret relates a conversation she had with Mary in which things were said by being left unsaid: "I could think of no 'subtle' reason, so finally ended by telling Mary all, without disguise. It worked much better than I expected. In fact, I don't think she was at all seriously aggrieved. I remarked: You know what Edward is, and she agreed that we all knew what you were" (289). Today's reader, more accustomed to direct treatments of homosexuality, may view the "open secret" as yet another manifestation of the policing of desire, but indirect communication of this sort allows for knowledge to be conveyed that might otherwise not be transmitted at all. The young Isherwood himself might have benefited from this sort of veiled transmission. He writes much later, in 1979, that the "many half-disapproving, half-humorous hints dropped by my relatives" prepared him for the final discovery of Uncle Henry's homosexuality—a discovery, Isherwood hilariously recounts, that he made when happening upon his uncle and a younger male friend chasing one another around the gooseberry bushes in the garden at Marple Hall (*October*, 75–76).

In addition to demonstrating a degree of continuity in Isherwood's concerns regarding his family and sexuality, this reading of Isherwood's *The Memorial* as a queer "family portrait" highlights both the presence of homosexual bonds within extended family structures and the usefulness of queer "Anti-Ancestors" in strengthening both individual identities and family ties. Reading to understand how Isherwood went about revising his own lineage and uncovering new patterns of affiliation is itself an act of "re-vision," as Adrienne Rich has called it: "an act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (35). This sort of reading opens up interpretive possibilities, allowing new studies to be written to take their place alongside those already on the shelves.

Additonal Works Cited

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