Visions of Homosexual Arcadia in E. M. Forster’s and Christopher Isherwood’s Writings

BENIAMIN KŁANIECKI

It is September 1931. In one of the shabby Victorian houses at Brunswick Square in Bloomsbury lives E. M. Forster. The apartment, which was rented as a hideaway from motherly concern, becomes the meeting place of Forster and Christopher Isherwood, and the starting point of a lifelong friendship between the famous master and his gifted student. Having recently returned from Berlin, Isherwood becomes an inexhaustible source of stories about the German homosexual demimonde – an embodiment of Forster’s dreams, a world about which Forster listens with untiring attention. Isherwood’s stories about the gay subculture then flourishing in Germany – a place which could almost certainly match the visions of Arcadia cherished by English homosexuals – became a point of reference and confrontation for the Forsterian vision known from Maurice (1971), a still unpublished novel which Forster completed twenty years before, in 1913. The picture which Forster paints in this novel is a truly idyllic setting resembling the Shakespearean Forest of Arden, where all social conventions are suspended and the lovers, irrespective of their gender, may freely indulge in romance. Maurice draws significantly on Greek tradition and the stereotypical representation of Arcadia as a site of purity and virtue. However, this model is challenged by the images depicted in Christopher Isherwood’s writing, in which Arcadia is more sexualized and more public, but still intimate. Most of Isherwood’s stories, including Christopher and His Kind (1976), are set in interwar Berlin, a city known for its vibrant night life.

life and its attitude toward queers, which was more relaxed than in other European cities at that time. Isherwood seems to locate his vision of paradise in the heart of the Weimer Republic, in a metropolis whose grandeur could let homosexuals become invisible, and thus safe from political and social scrutiny.

INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVELS

E.M. Forster’s novel, categorized both as a Bildungsroman and a proto-gay romance, traces the process of growing up of its eponymous character – Maurice Hall, an upper middle class youth who, having experienced all sorts of so far veiled homosexual presences in his life, as well as the normalizing social diktat, is overtly confronted by the Hellenic nature of Cambridge. In this Platonic tradition he meets Clive Durham, with whom he strikes up a friendship, but soon Maurice’s desires begin to step beyond the limits of only spiritual commitment. The novel is characterized by a visibly marked bipolarity of Platonism and sensual love, which stands in opposition to the Whitmanesque tradition. While the first part, constructed on non-sensual love, culminates in Clive’s renouncement of homosexual desires—“[y]ou who loved men, will henceforward love women,”2—and his marriage with Anne Woods, the second part narrates the story of a love affair between Maurice and Alec Scudder, a working-class gamekeeper, a romance which draws on Walt Whitman’s philosophy—a glorification of democratic and above all sexual freedom.3 Those ideas, so evident in the text, probably became more familiar to Forster thanks to his dear friend, Edward Carpenter, who adapted them into English reality.4 However, the idea of sexualized love between two men living in idyllic nature, as envisioned by Forster, seems in

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3 See Walt Whitman’s “Calamus” poem from the collection Leaves of Grass (1855).
all likelihood impossible in Edwardian England. Forster challenges the reality; though he forces his characters to abandon civilization and banishes them to the greenwood, he still lets them live together. Unlike Isherwood, whose story is not only probable, but factual, Forster turns to fantasies which cannot be historically true nor probable.

Christopher Isherwood recorded his youthful memories in the autobiographical novel *Christopher and His Kind*, published in 1976. The book describes the years Isherwood spent travelling, with a particular stress on those passed in Berlin. Disillusioned by his homeland, he decided to leave England for a country which would offer him what he could not find at home: “[t]o Christopher, Berlin meant Boys.” There, he discovers the beauty of the life led by German homosexuals. He also meets Magnus Hirschfeld and starts several love affairs, of which only the last one with Heinz Neddermeyer transforms itself into a long-term relationship. The lovers’ life turns into a nightmare when the political reality changes – the Nazi movement grows in strength, and Hitler wins the general election. Terrorized by governmental repressions and intensifying attacks on homosexuals, they go into exile to save Heinz from being called up by the army. The plan, however, fails as Neddermeyer is arrested for eluding military service and tried for immoral behaviour, while Christopher, as the novel draws to its end, arrives in the United States, alone.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Both of the novels present images of places seen by each of the authors as utopias for homosexuals. They are inherently free from social control and the threat of punishment exacted for a departure from morally sanctioned heteronormativity. Though both visions may seem similar as they are depicted, literary renditions of two homosexual writers’

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personal desires, they differ from each other in several crucial aspects: their placement in
time and space, as well as their attitude towards civilization. To understand these variations,
one needs to examine more attentively the status of the homosexual in early twentieth-
century England and the Weimar Republic of the 1920s.

The Edwardian stance on homosexuality was to a great extent formed by events from
the Victorian era – the second half of the nineteenth century. The English law which was in
force at that time had been based on the Buggery Act introduced during Henry VIII’s reign
in 1553, and that law had classified sodomy until 1861 as a crime punishable by hanging.\(^6\)
However, homosexuality has not always been so severely punished by society. As Ben
Griffin\(^7\) demonstrates, a certain leniency used to be granted to the upper classes, especially
to Members of the British Parliament, whose weakness for men would often remain as
public secrets.\(^8\) In 1885 the legal provisions were tightened up with the Criminal Law
Amendment Act, commonly known as the Labourchere Amendment. This act defined
“offences against morality” no longer as the broad term of sodomy, but as an indecent act
between two men committed in public or private, punishable with two years’ imprisonment
or hard labor.\(^9\) By virtue of this particular law, Oscar Wilde was convicted in 1895 along
with several other men involved in the Cleveland Street scandal of 1889, among whom were
several well-known aristocrats. The case was reportedly hushed up because, as the rumor
had it, one of the men involved was the oldest son of the Prince of Wales.\(^10\) Both of these

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\(^6\) "Gay rights movement", Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed May 10, 2015,

\(^7\) Matt Cook, London and the Culture of Homosexuality: 1885-1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University

\(^8\) Ben Griffin, The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for

\(^9\) Cook, London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914, 42-43.

\(^10\) Ibid., 50-51.
events strengthened the Victorian belief, still alive in years to come, that moral degeneration was deeply embedded in the upper classes, who were held responsible for corruption of the classes beneath them.11 In such a reality E. M. Forster, who was born in 1879, was growing up. These convictions undoubtedly shaped his attitude toward his own sexuality, its acceptance, and the way he perceived same-sex desire. The awareness of social pressure and the criminality of homosexual practices contributed to the formation of his idyllic vision, rather different from that presented by Christoper Isherwood.

Isherwood was born in 1904. When he was growing up, social ostracism of homosexuality in England still existed; however, it had had already mellowed, which could be seen in general reactions towards budding Modernism and the ideas proclaimed by the Bloomsbury Group, whose members believed in absolute equality of genders and sexualities. Among these individuals were Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, E. M. Forster, and Lytton Strachey. Their attitude to sexuality significantly deviated from the contemporary social and medical categories, whose development could be placed at the end of the nineteenth century, at the time of the growth of sexology and popularization of hetero- and homosexuality bipolarity.12 However, the Bloomsbury Group’s definitions, rather unprecedented and morally transgressive with a greater resemblance to today’s queer,13 did not find broad interest nor reflection in British law, as homosexual acts remained a crime there until 1967.

With a view on sexuality formed by the above-presented categories, and his disappointment with England’s omnipresent class divisions and restrictive morality,
Christopher Isherwood emigrated to Berlin in 1929. Despite Paragraph 175 of the German penal code, which prohibited men from engaging in homosexual practices, punishable by imprisonment, the Weimar Republic bore witness to the birth of a new self-conscious homosexual identity, until then unseen in Europe. In 1897, the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee* was founded, which “took on the task of educating the public about homosexuality in order to overcome its prejudices.”14 In 1919, the *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* was opened with a view to exploring homosexual culture and promoting Magnus Hirschfeld’s work, whose contribution to sexology was the theory of *sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, which understood sexuality as a continuum between the ideal female and male. At the same time, periodicals for sexual minorities were also published, such as “*Die Freundenschaft*” and “*Die Freundin*.”

This sense of relative acceptance, which adopted a form of social indifference, ended with the arrival of the Nazi movement and the times of persecution.15

**LET US DREAM, LET US LIVE: PROTRAYALS OF UTOPIAS IN MAURICE AND CHRISTOPHER AND HIS KIND**

Through their writing both the authors manifest disappointment with the England they know and try to map out utopias which would liberate their inner selves from the shackles of morality and class. Forster’s search is marked by his desperate need for safety and ubiquitous equality, which would entail the entire disappearance of moral, social and gender divisions as well as traditional identities. This paradise is constructed by him in opposition to civilization – the city – and is defined through nature. While Forster maintains the façade of purity and gentility, Isherwood opts for the metropolis, tainted with some sense of menace and violence, which could spice its already oversexualized ambiance.

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15 Ibid., 168-176.
“They could get away. England wasn’t all built over and policed. Men of my sort could take to the greenwood.” With these words, Maurice decides on a plan to escape his home country, which “… has always been disinclined to accept human nature.” The destination the protagonist chooses is not only supposed to be a paradise, but also a shelter from judgment and condemnation by his compatriots. As David Leavitt writes in the introduction to the novel, “the greenwood” which Maurice mentions refers both to the Greek idea of Arcadia and to the legend of Robin Hood. In this way, the Forsterian woods now become Sherwood Forest, a place where safe haven can be found by those rejected by authority and society. The retreat, which to a certain extent is also caused by homophobia, is an attempt at transgressing the fossilized class system: “[i]t strikes me” – Maurice thinks – “there may have been more about the Greeks – Theban Band – and the rest of it. Well, this wasn’t unlike. I don’t see how they could have kept together otherwise – especially when they came from such different classes.” The class system, and in particular the middle class, according to the Forsterian line of thinking, is an enslaving factor, which does not allow for self-determination. Elizabeth Wood Ellem notes that in fact Maurice does not reject his class, but rather his class expels him on moral grounds. Interestingly enough, the rejection, as Forster writes in the “Terminal Note,” is “… the only penalty society exacts, […] an exile they gladly embrace.” Therefore, as a result of their defiance of the middle class, exile is for them almost a reward, not necessarily a punishment. Though Maurice wants to reconcile his background with homosexuality, his social position determinedly impedes it, as to belong to

16 Forster, Maurice, 188.
17 Ibid., 188.
19 Forster, Maurice, 188.
21 Forster, Maurice, 220.
the middle class means to renounce one’s sexuality, freedom and the right to individual
existence.\textsuperscript{22} Also, when Maurice and Alec decide to abandon society, they seem to perform
an act of overt subversion of heteronormativity – they choose each other. By embracing their
homosexuality, they ignore the roles of husbands and fathers which have been assigned to
them by tradition.\textsuperscript{23} But even for that there is a penalty, namely childlessness: “[t]hey had
won past the conventions, but Nature still faced them, saying with even voice, ‘Very well,
you are thus; I blame none of my children. But you must go the way of sterility’.”\textsuperscript{24} This
defiance of norms and an acceptance of life as outcasts deprive them, too, of their identity,
which otherwise had been guaranteed by the fixed social order. The identity of degenerates,
which they have had attached to them, encourages Maurice and Alec to create their own,
unique (anti)identities. Jon Harned notes that the decision to form a relationship between
two men is an act of neither ultimate self-acceptance, nor taking on a new homosexual
identity, but in fact this moment means a breakaway from all kinds of definitions.\textsuperscript{25} The
novelty and utopian idealism of the greenwood are clearly inscribed into the nature of that
place – a complete absence of any compulsory categorization of human behaviour, which
manifests itself in that there is born an exceptional relationship which is monogamous, and
hence almost ideally acceptable within the frames of heteronormativity. But surprisingly,
two men living in accordance with the model heterosexual marriage, which should be read
as either an act of conformism or utter subversion, appears as absolutely uncontroversial,
not shocking, because of the lack of norms. This arcadia, however despite its revolutionary

\textsuperscript{22} Ellem, “E. M. Forster’s Greenwood,” 457
\textsuperscript{23} Vybarr Cregan-Reid, “Modes of Silence in E. M. Forster’s “Inferior” Fiction,” \textit{English Literature in
\textsuperscript{24} Forster, \textit{Maurice}, 83.
\textsuperscript{25} Jon Harned, “Becoming Gay in E. M. Forster’s \textit{Maurice},” \textit{Papers on Language & Literature} 29 (1) (1993),
65-66.
nature and its separation from English society cannot exist outside the borders of England: “[t]hey must live outside class, without relations or money; they must work and stick to each other till death. But England belonged to them. That, besides companionship, was their reward. Her air and sky were theirs, not the timorous millions’ who own stuffy little boxes, but never their own souls.” These words allow for the assumption that the forest, in all its idyllic charm, is not necessarily the one taken from Greek culture, but possibly the home of Robin Hood. The vision of this land is revolutionary inasmuch as it is placed in a visible contrast to what used to be considered the traditional locus of homosexuals – the metropolis. The city as the purest embodiment of civilization, for Forster, is a place of oppression and supervision imposed by moral norms. It is a prison, and the only place to which the protagonists can escape is the virgin nature of Sherwood.

In opposition to it stands the city, stereotypically perceived as a relatively safe place for homosexuals, and as such, Berlin becomes Isherwood’s realization of his Arcadian vision. “Christopher was quite willing to admit that his life in England was basically untruthful, since it conformed outwardly to standards of respectability which he inwardly rejected and despised. But Lane had also said, ‘Every disease is a cure, if we know how to take it,’ and Christopher was now sure that he knew how to make his life truthful again.” Just like Forsterian Maurice, Christopher is not able to live with false morality, which at that time prevailed among his compatriots, and so he decides to go to a place regarded then as the capital of night life, usually associated with the working class: “Paris had long since cornered the straight girl-market, so what was left for Berlin to offer its visitors but a

26 Forster, Maurice, 212.
28 Isherwood, Christopher and His Kind, 7.
masquerade of perversions?" The idea of the city understood as the primary source of sin and perversion goes back to the time of the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah, yet the first attempt at subjecting the matter to academic examination was done by Richard von Krafft-Ebing. In *Psychopathia Sexualis*, published in 1886, he indicates that the locus of depravity and sexual abnormalities, obviously connected with homosexuality, is precisely the city. In a more recent study of the links between the city and non-heteronormative sexualities—*When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity*—Henning Bech describes the characteristics of the metropolis which make it the only inhabitable place for a homosexual. There, “his peculiarity can vanish in the blanket anonymity,” and the loneliness shared with others becomes shared in the public; to him belongs to “railway stations, urinals, parks and bath houses.” Such a place was found by Christopher in the Cosy Corner bar, where “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.” As shown, intimacy there attained the status of intimacy commonly shared, which required some sense of sociality, as opposed to the private image presented in Forster’s fiction. However, this was not the only factor involved in the atmosphere found in the homosexual demimonde; but there was also hidden violence: “[w]hat excited Christopher most, a struggle which turned gradually into a sex act, seemed perfectly natural to these German boys; indeed it excited them too.” The sense of menace and the hegemony of physical power, so symptomatic of big cities, as Bech

30 Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 30.
31 Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914*, 78.
33 Ibid., 98.
34 Ibid., 98.
36 Ibid., 31
comments, are indispensable elements of male homosexual contacts as these are based on interactions inscribed into the “phantasmatic male strength.” In conclusion, the whole vision of the urban arcadia is a form of transposition; the elements with which the arcadia is traditionally associated are translated directly into the urban tissue, and so are its original virtues; they are transformed into their urbanized equivalents, however, with a sustained imperative absence of prohibitions and civilizational norms.

**REPRESENTATION OF THE BEAUX IDEALS**

The common feature of both arcadias, Forster’s and Isherwood’s, is that they break conventions and fossilized class systems. Such a rupture from the traditional, well-known order requires a redefinition of the partners involved and their physical representation. Since Forster neglects to overtly indicate who is the object of his true fantasies, critics suggest that it is possible to read Maurice as such; in his uncanny resemblance to the writer one may sense, apart from sympathy, a dose of sexual attraction, whereas the description of Isherwood’s ideal partner is given by himself and is fuelled by his disillusion with the class system and its inherently middle-class morality. This is given vent through Isherwood’s attraction to foreign lower-class boys. He expresses his quandary in the following words: “[t]his was because Christopher was suffering from an inhibition, then not unusual among upper-class homosexuals; he couldn’t relax sexually with a member of his own class or nation. He needed a working-class foreigner. He had become clearly aware of this when he went to Germany in May 1928.” Maintaining sexual contacts with lower-class boys allowed Christopher to voice his objection; he successfully subverted the morality imposed on him.

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39 Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 3.
since childhood. What is also of importance, apart from the working class origin, is that those boys had to be German and of foreign beauty: “[t]hat Bubi was a blond was also very important – and not merely because blondness is a characteristic feature of the German Boy. The Blond – no matter of what nationality – had been a magical figure for Christopher from his childhood and would continue to be so for many years.”\(^{40}\) He identified himself with “a black-haired British ancestor and to see the Blond as the invader who comes from another land to conquer and rape him. Thus the Blond becomes the masculine foreign \(yang\) mating with Christopher’s feminine native \(yin\)…..”\(^{41}\) According to his desires, the relations between Isherwood and his lover would be based on complementarity, where one partner is more masculine and the other more feminine. Such a division is difficult to discern between Maurice and Alec. Their relationship seems rather a quintessence of democratic equality.

Although Isherwood offers to the reader an explicit and detailed description of his ideal lover, this cannot be observed in the case of E.M. Forster. Alec is certainly Maurice’s beaux ideal, but he cannot be offhandedly identified with the writer’s desires. According to David Leavitt’s suggestion,\(^{42}\) it is Maurice who is Forster’s dream, yet he is also its reversal at the same time. They both come from the English middle class, and both have graduated from Cambridge. Yet “Maurice is not what Forster wanted to be; he is what Forster \(wanted\).”\(^{43}\) Maurice is characterized in contrast to Isherwood’s beau ideal. He has dark hair standing for manliness, which is frequently referred to by the author in descriptions of Maurice’s athletic stature and other qualities: “Maurice would have been a good lover. He could have given and taken serious pleasure.”\(^{44}\) Unlike Isherwood, who positions himself

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 4.  
\(^{41}\) Ibid., 4-5.  
\(^{42}\) Leavitt, “Introduction,” xiv-xv.  
\(^{43}\) Ibid., xvi.  
\(^{44}\) Forster, \textit{Maurice}, 194.
next to his ideal, thereby making him even more real, just as he does with his Arcadian
Berlin, E. M. Forster eliminates such a possibility. Maurice is his dream, and so is Alec – a
counterpart of his own lover, yet from the working class. Forster’s existence in that reality is
disqualified by himself; he creates an ideal couple consisting of two men, and does not leave
any room for himself. Equally unrealistically Forster presents the woods because he seems
to fear that his vision will remain forever a mere idea, or a dream which is never to come
true.

CONCLUSION

The novels Maurice and Christopher and His Kind depict homosexual arcadias from
essentially different times, yet the task they are both assigned is the same, namely to achieve
freedom of conscience and acts as well as liberation from heteronormative, social control.
Nevertheless, these arcadias differ in their setting. In Maurice it is an English forest,
strikingly similar to Sherwood, whereas in Isherwood’s narrative, it is a metropolis, and
more precisely interwar Berlin. The structure of those places determines their overtones; on
the one hand, the forest is purely idyllic and innocent with a strong rejection of middle-class
morality, yet with no complete liberalization of sexuality there because of its apparent
negligibility. The city, on the other hand, defines its transgression through licentiousness,
public intimacy, and violence, definitely too shocking for English morality. The lover of each
writer is also a reversal of the other’s; Forster glorifies the masculinity of a dark-haired,
middle-class man, while Isherwood worships a blond, working-class foreigner. Given the
close relations between the authors, their friendship and shared dreams, it is surprising how
much the presented images differ. However, as far as the veracity or probability of these

visions is concerned, they both, as history shows it have come true. Isherwood’s Arcadian Berlin, as an autobiographical and factual description of the 1920s reality, threatened the legitimacy of Forster’s vision, which was a work of pure fantasy. This apparently worried Forster since he dedicated the novel to a “Happier year,” doubtful of the possibility of its materializing one day. Yet, how astonished Foster would be to know that in the 21st century, his England accepts men like Maurice and Alec as they are, and finally allows them to live in the Forsterian arcadia, where neither class nor gender should interfere with two men’s right to love. Thus, today it is possible to answer the question that once bothered Forster: “Does it date?”46 Yes, it does.

46 Moffat, E. M. Forster, 16.