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Sexuality and Spirituality in Some Works of Christopher Isherwood and Allen Ginsberg

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Abstract

This study will discuss the topics of sexuality and spirituality in some literary works by novelist Christopher Isherwood and poet Allen Ginsberg. The aim of this thesis is to compare the position and the approach of both authors on these questions. The generational gap between Isherwood and Ginsberg illustrates the evolution at play in the literary world. Christopher Isherwood represents in many ways a prolongation of British Modernism, while Ginsberg was a prominent member of the emerging movement of the Beats. Even though these aesthetic trends appear remote from one another, both writers co-existed on the American literary scene more or less at the same time and treated similar topics, notably that of homosexual sex and of spirituality. This thesis will try to show that there is a commonality of intentions between Isherwood and Ginsberg, despite the use of very different literary means.

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Abbreviations

Christopher Isherwood

VMM *Vedanta for Modern Man* (1945)

VWW *Vedanta for the Western World* (1949)

SM *A Single Man* (1964)

MR *A Meeting by the River* (1967)

CK *Christopher and His Kind* (1976)

GD *My Guru and His Disciple* (1980)

Allen Ginsberg

Howl stands for the book *Howl and Other Poems*.

“Howl” is used to refer to the poem itself.

Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to analyze how two very different writers wrote about similar topics, namely homosexuality and spirituality. This analysis will focus primarily on the intersection between these two themes in some of their works.

The disposition of the chapters in this thesis presents first Ginsberg, who despite the fact that he belonged to a younger generation than that of Isherwood, published his famous poem *Howl* (1956) before the novels written by Isherwood that will be analyzed here. The time of publication has indeed a bigger cultural significance, rather than biographical elements, like the age of the authors. This is the reason why the chapter on Ginsberg comes before the chapter devoted to Isherwood.

The introduction will give an account of the main question that will be addressed and which is the intersecting of homosexuality with spirituality in a selection of literary works, put in a historical perspective.

The first part will be devoted to Ginsberg and will mention the importance of The Beats, who paved the way for the sexual revolution of the 1960s through their liberal approach to sex.

The second part focuses on Christopher Isherwood. Not all his literary production will be considered here though. The analysis will focus on two of his late novels, that is *A Single man* and *A Meeting by the River*, which both deal with the two subject matters of sexuality and spirituality. The combination of these two dimensions was crucial to Isherwood and he tried to incorporate them in different ways in his two last novels.

The third part of the thesis will focus on the comparative dimension of the analysis. It will attempt to shed the light on the contrasts that characterize the approaches adopted by Isherwood on the one hand and Ginsberg on the other. A specific attention will be given to the literary features that characterize their works. The aim is to analyze how these two writers managed to convey a reflection regarding spirituality while still embracing their homosexuality. This study will attempt to compare the literary strategies used by Isherwood and Ginsberg to achieve this symbiosis.

In part three, I will also show the challenges linked to the choice of a specific literary genre when it comes to a thing that escapes rational discourse, like mystical experiences. One of the essential questions that will be addressed will be to explain how fiction on the one hand and poetry on the other can achieve that and what are their respective advantages in terms of literary expression.

1 Allen Ginsberg: *Howl and Other Poems* (1956)

1.1 Allen Ginsberg: biographical elements

His family

Allen Ginsberg was born in 1926 in a Jewish family that settled in Paterson, New Jersey. His father worked as a high school teacher but more importantly he was also a poet. This implies that the young Allen Ginsberg grew up in an environment where poetry was valued even though he would end up writing a very different type of poetry than that of his father: “Even as a toddler, he was exposed to poetry. Louis would move about their 163 Quitman street apartment, reciting from memory the poetry of Dickinson, Poe, Shelly, Keats, and Milton as he did his daily chores.”(Schumacher 7) Incidentally, Allen’s older brother, apart from being a lawyer, became a poet as well, going by Eugene Brooks. Yet, it is Naomi, Allen Ginsberg’s mother, who was the family member who left the most profound mark on Allen. Indeed, she suffered from a mental illness that worsened over the years and her life was punctuated with stays in psychiatric institutions. This situation put a serious strain on the household’s finances and as a consequence, Ginsberg grew up in a “family of modest means”(Schumacher 24). Further, his mother’s condition affected deeply the life of the family during Ginsberg’s childhood because “Naomi’s convalescence left Eugene and Allen with an unavoidable feeling of abandonment, despite Louis’s efforts to take care of them and his dutiful visits with the boys to the sanatorium.”(Schumacher 8) Naomi Ginsberg eventually died while being in one of these institutions and Allen wrote the poem *Kaddish* (1961) in her memory.

Moreover, Ginsberg’s family deeply influenced his political views. Indeed, he was imbued with progressive ideas since even his grandparents on his father’s side “were avid socialists. They were both active members of Newark’s Minsker Branch of the Arbeter Ring, a progressive Yiddish labor and cultural organization, more commonly known as the Workmen’s Circle.”(Morgan 10) But leftist thoughts would also emanate

from Naomi who was “growing active in local Communist party politics”(Schumacher 9) and would “tried to raise her children to embrace Communist principles.”(Schumacher 9) The political conceptions that were circulating in Ginsberg’s family contributed therefore to shape his notion of how society should be organized. This fueled his suspicion against capitalism and participated, together with religious reasons, in his rejection of materialism which strongly comes through in his poem *Howl* published in 1956.

From Columbia to San Francisco

Allen Ginsberg left the parental home in 1943, when he was only 17, to go study, thanks to a scholarship, at Columbia University, a choice that would “prove to be one of the most important decisions of his life.”(Schumacher 23) This is indeed the place where his pre-existing interest in poetry and literature got deepened and cultivated through interactions with some of his professors and three of them in particular:

In looking back at his college years, Ginsberg would cite Trilling, Van Doren, and Raymond Weaver, author of the first Melville biography and discoverer of Melville’s *Billy Budd* manuscript, as being especially influential in his early development, even if he occasionally found himself in disagreement with them.(Schumacher 24)

Yet, if a certain degree of intellectual exchange did exist between Ginsberg and some of his professors, he never felt fully understood and accepted by the academic institution, given the fact that “Columbia did not take kindly to budding young homosexuals from left-wing Jewish families. Radicalism was out of fashion with the faculty in the 1940s.”(Raskin 48) Furthermore, the modernity of his poetic conceptions were at odds with the aesthetic values of his teachers and revealed the existence of a generational gap between them:

Even at twenty, Ginsberg was more knowledgeable about modern poetry than Trilling. As odd as it may seem, Trilling hadn’t read Rimbaud – or Enid Starkie’s groundbreaking biography of Rimbaud – until Ginsberg introduced him to his work, and he hadn’t appreciated William Butler Yeats’s work until Ginsberg sang his praises. (Raskin 49)

The antagonism between the conservative academic environment and Ginsberg’s rebellious inclinations encompassed both a political dimension and a cultural opposition. Indeed, Lionel Trilling considered on the one hand that “left-wing politics and literature were antithetical”(Raskin 49) and on the other hand deemed the new

tendencies promoted by Ginsberg and his friends to represent a sort of “adversarial culture”(Raskin 49) that needed to be combated. Nevertheless, the epitome of that counter-culture would be honored by Ginsberg in the first line of *Howl* as he designates them as “the best minds of [his] generation”(Ginsberg 1) celebrating thereby the revolutionary energy of the outcasts and misfits.

Moreover, apart from the purely academic ones, other types of encounters would prove even more decisive with regard to Ginsberg’s development as a poet. His meeting with Lucien Carr, another student who lived in the same building, would soon lead him to be introduced to William S. Burroughs and a bit later to Jack Kerouac. These acquaintances would mature into a deeper friendship and would eventually evolve into the circle forming the core of the Beat Generation. These writers definitely functioned as a group into which there was a productive circulation of ideas that enriched and stimulated its member’s literary output. They spent time together and wrote extensively to each other about their personal lives but also about their ongoing writing projects. In that regard Kerouac is known to have had a great influence on Ginsberg. He did not hesitate to introduce Ginsberg to new ideas and to provide him with comments and assessments about his artistic development. Kerouac’s impact on Ginsberg’s artistic production concerned especially two areas, one formal, the other relating to its content. Indeed, Kerouac put forth the concept of spontaneity in the process of writing and he encouraged Ginsberg to write in that way to the extent that *Howl* was “written with Jack Kerouac’s method of spontaneous composition very much on Ginsberg’s mind”. (Schumacher 200) But Kerouac also promoted new ideas that would deeply affect the content of Ginsberg’s poetry, notably that of Buddhism: “For nearly a year, Allen’s and Jack’s correspondence had been filled with discussions of Buddhism. Jack offered Allen comprehensive reading lists, opinions, and text interpretations. With Allen’s encouragement, Jack had designated himself as Allen’s teacher.”(Schumacher 194)

In 1954, Ginsberg had moved to San Francisco at the invitation of Neal Cassady. After having lived with him and his wife Carolyn for a while, Ginsberg was forced to move out because he and Neal were caught by her while having sex together.(Morgan 179) Having settled in San Francisco and living now on his own, Ginsberg became acquainted with painter Robert LaVigne that introduced him to a young man named

Peter Orlovsky, who was “LaVigne’s current model, roommate and sometimes lover.”(Morgan 187) Ginsberg fell in love with Orlovsky and thanks to the intercession and blessing of LaVigne, they decided to unite their destinies, despite the fact that Peter was basically heterosexual. They affirmed their engagement ceremonially and “[f]or Allen, these vows were the equivalent of marriage vows, and he honored them with a sense of commitment rivaled only, perhaps, by his commitment to his work.”(Schumacher 194)

In 1955, Ginsberg received the opportunity, thanks to fellow poet Michael McClure, to arrange a poetry reading at the Six Gallery in San Francisco. This event would be a great success for Ginsberg personally and would be remembered as an inaugural moment in the history of the Beat writers. Ginsberg asked the well-established poet Kenneth Rexroth to be the master of ceremonies for the evening. The latter introduced at this occasion Gary Snyder to Ginsberg and they would quickly develop a long-lasting friendship. Ginsberg appeared particularly interested in the fact that “[l]ike Kerouac, Gary Snyder meditated, but his understanding of Buddhism went much deeper than Jack’s.”(Schumacher 212) In addition to Ginsberg himself, five other young poets would participate in the reading that evening: Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, Philip Lamantia and Philip Whalen. Ginsberg had also asked Kerouac who, in the meanwhile had returned from Mexico, to be part of it but “[t]o Allen’s disappointment, Jack adamantly refused to read at the Six Gallery”.(Schumacher 213) He would be present in the audience though, as well as Neal Cassady and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. This was the first time that Ginsberg would read *Howl* in front of a large audience but his intense rendition of the poem ended in a triumph so much so that “[t]he audience erupted in appreciation of the work, as if each person in attendance recognized that literary history had been made.”(Schumacher 215) This experience precipitated the publishing process of *Howl* for that is following this evening that Ferlinghetti offered Ginsberg to publish it through City Lights Books. Writing *Howl* had helped Ginsberg just recently to unleash his writing powers and with that newly discovered creative energy he would enjoy a prolific career as a poet thereafter.

Influences

Allen Ginsberg was an avid reader and his literary interests inform us on his intellectual landscape as well as his aesthetic sensibility. Moreover, he finds himself at the intersection of many individual writers and literary movements of the time. First of all, he is often considered as the pivotal element around which revolved the other members of the Beat Generation. This position allowed him to be in contact with many writers of his time and to participate in the development of their works through exchange of ideas. Further, Ginsberg appears to have been quite receptive to advice he received from his friends and fellow writers. One of the most influential was certainly Kerouac. He was instrumental in the making of *Howl* and did not hesitate to provide his guidance to Ginsberg both philosophically and in terms of poetic technique. But Ginsberg was also influenced by other active forces in the poetry making of the time as he “credited poets associated with Black Mountain College in North Carolina, particularly Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, with inspiring this turn toward the immediate.”(Mortenson 82) Yet, it is another poet, a great character of the American literary scene, William Carlos Williams, who played a crucial role in the advent of Ginsberg as an established and successful poet. While Ginsberg was still quite young, Williams accepted to discuss his poetry with him and took him seriously. He also provided a lot of encouragement to Ginsberg and confirmed his support by writing the introduction to *Howl*. Nevertheless, not all interactions were necessarily gratifying. For instance, Ginsberg felt a great admiration for W. H. Auden but this turned out not to be reciprocal and even on the personal plane the two poets did not go along very well, as a chance encounter between them illustrates:

On one of his forays to the Village bars he bumped into W. H. Auden and talked with him about poetry. The two seemed to have little in common, much to Allen’s disappointment. Auden disliked many of Allen’s literary heroes, like Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Saint-John Perse, so they wound up in a silly superficial conversation about subways, the weather, and Mozart. (Morgan 86)

Yet, Ginsberg did not collect influences exclusively from living writers. His readings of poets from the past evidently affected him profoundly. He proclaimed his fascination for Rimbaud early on, while he was still studying at Columbia and was “permanently altered by his reading of Rimbaud.”(Raskin 63) But the biography of the

author of *A Season in Hell* was also a factor of attraction since he led a rebellious life and was an intense poet who also happened to be a homosexual. These aspects were apt to entice an identification with the French poet for Ginsberg. Although, it was not always necessary to look beyond the Atlantic to find inspiring and relatable literary figures. Indeed, Ginsberg shares quite many traits with Walt Whitman. Their respective works show a number of similarities when it comes to some of the themes that are treated, more specifically those of sexuality and spirituality. Together with William Carlos Williams, Walt Whitman constitutes the other important inspiration that helped Ginsberg to write his first major work. (Mortenson 80) Furthermore, Ginsberg had a remarkable experience in 1948 while reading poems by William Blake, notably “Ah! Sunflower”. The importance of this epiphany would soon be remembered as the Blake vision and marks “a personal and poetic turning point.” (Raskin 78) It consisted of auditory hallucinations where Ginsberg that led to a metaphysical realization:

It was a sudden flash of recognition in which the secret of all universal mysteries was unlocked. He could almost say that he saw God at that moment. It was all there if only he observed. The most astonishing aspect of his vision was that the actual location of the guiding intelligence was within the objects of the world themselves, not in some remote corner of the heavens. Others might have said that he saw God here with us on earth. He realized that the world as we see it is complete, there is nothing outside it. His heightened cosmic awareness lasted for a brief time, less than an hour, and then was gone. The important thing for Allen was that the enlightenment remained. (Morgan 103)

An important component of this experience is that it casts a light on the connection between sex and an enhanced spiritual state. Indeed, Ginsberg was masturbating while having his vision and it also was this activity that instigated the vision, as if the recourse to the body was needed to access this different level of consciousness.

1.2 The Beats, Buddhism and Sexuality

The Beats emerged in the 1950s as a group of writers who became one of the most prominent literary movement of the twentieth century in America. The factors unifying the movement are of two types. The unity rests first of all on the personal links that connect the members of the group together. The most prominent among them, writers like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, were friends and shared

some aesthetic conceptions. Moreover, many biographical elements were integrated into their respective literary works. References, explicit or veiled, to members of the Beats are interspersed throughout several major Beat texts, like *Howl* (1956) or *On the Road* (1957) and create a “sense of ‘insideness’”(Belleto 5). This social dimension thus illustrates the existence of a collective dynamic that justifies to apprehend that group of writers as a movement.

If the biographical and social aspects constitute indeed a defining element of the Beats as a movement, it also seems possible to group them on the basis of their writings. This criterion appears even more compelling because it rests on the literary material itself. In other words, there are observable textual qualities that are distinguishable enough to establish a set of formal traits and aesthetic values that can connect these writers together. The possibility to see a commonality in the literary approach of the Beats was even pointed out relatively early on by some scholars, like Gene Baro (qtd. in Belleto) who

tries to put his finger on what is distinctive about the writing itself: “The reaction of these writers has been against academism and formality, stiff prosody, controlled ambiguities, precise cultural references, lyrical suppression, and censored emotions.” This statement is notable for placing the Beats within the framework of literary history, so that their importance lies not in their personal antics but in what they do in their writing (Belleto 11).

Sociologically, the Beats were a reflection of their time, being composed mostly of men. Moreover, the group was almost exclusively white, even though this was later reevaluated by some scholars who tried to show that the anterior academic treatment of the movement had omitted the women who participated in the movement (Belleto 15). Jack Kerouac appeared early as a pivotal figure for the Beats, yet “one must also recognize the crucial role of Allen Ginsberg. *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) preceded indeed *On the Road* (1957), and the subsequent obscenity trial created widespread publicity.”(Lawlor 28) As a result, Allen Ginsberg was also considered as “the ‘social glue’ of the Beat movement” (Lawlor 28) and was therefore instrumental in the advent of the Beats as a prominent cultural manifestation of the time.

The writers of the Beat generation also demonstrated a certain coherence in terms of the principles that they followed. They were indeed concerned with issues such as the “divergence from the mainstream” (Belleto 12) and taking a stance against conformity.

They illustrated themselves by adopting a positioning that went against the – rather conservative – mores of the time in the United States. The beats displayed an interest for questions like spiritual awareness through the study of Eastern philosophies, free sexuality, a liberal approach to drugs and a focus on personal experience rather than theoretical knowledge. Most of the Beat writers and poets also expressed a critique of materialism and consumerism, which were particularly prevalent in the United States of the 1950s.

The Beats and Buddhism

Following a prolific tradition of American writers and thinkers who were concerning themselves with questions pertaining to spirituality, like Walt Whitman or Ralph Waldo Emerson in the previous century, Beat writers and poets explored similar subjects both through their lives and works. Their investigation of religiousness led some of them, including Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, to develop a particular interest for Eastern thought and more predominantly for Zen Buddhism. It is noteworthy that the ideas linked to Zen Buddhism “began to find their way into American writing in the mid-nineteenth century, especially through the Transcendentalist organ *The Dial*.” (Whalen-Bridge 226)

Those of the Beat writers who chose to engage with Buddhism, mainly Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder were then again adopting a nonconformist approach to spirituality. Indeed, this system of thought was foreign to the United States and was perceived at the time as originating from a civilization, namely Japan, that had been an enemy of the nation in the still recent Second World War. The Beats who dealt with Buddhism, then automatically also “worked with cultural strangeness.” (Whalen-Bridge 230)

The Beats and sexuality

The Beat Generation promoted a free sexuality and was liberal on these issues. Several prominent members were homosexual or bisexual. The sexual dimension openly played out in the lives of the Beat members but also notably in their writings. The publicity which was then given to explicit sexual acts in Beat texts was at odds with

the puritanism of the post-war United States. The most spectacular reaction to these literary works was the obscenity trials against Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* and Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*.

Beyond the mere depiction of sex in their literary works, many Beat writers evoke modalities of sexuality which were not commonly accepted at the time, like interracial sex, as in *The Subterranean* (1958) by Kerouac, or homosexuality. Thereby, an essential feature of Beat sexuality appears to be fluidity, importantly so in the works of Kerouac and Ginsberg:

their works depict sex as a gateway to not just varied forms of holiness but also transcendence. Thus it makes sense that sexuality appears in these authors as fluid, capable of changing shape and purpose as it reacts to and against cultural norms of the time. (Mackay 190)

1.3 “Howl”: a Sexual and Spiritual Scream

“Howl” is assuredly a poem that constitutes a landmark in the history of American literature. There were social elements that contributed to its success, from the trial for obscenity that offered it a large publicity to the fact that this poem is inscribed in a literary movement, that of the Beat Generation. Yet, beyond these social factors that characterize the history of “Howl” and advanced its mythical reputation, the text itself deserves to be analyzed for itself and commented on.

Structure

The overarching structure of “Howl” consists of four main sections named I, II and III, to which needs to be added the last part called “Footnote to Howl”, that is considered an integral part of the text. Part I exposes the actual dire situation of “the best minds of my generation”(Ginsberg 1) and the ordeal to which they are submitted in the society of that time. It establishes a catalog of the dramatic torments experienced by Ginsberg's friends or by all the people who do not fit into society because they got overcome by capitalism, heteronormativity or more generally, by conformism. Part II is devoted to the unmasking of the cause of the issues that were listed in the first part.

Here the poet reveals the nature of “Moloch”(Ginsberg 8) and repudiates it. Part III corresponds to the last piece of what could be called a circular movement, since it comes back to “Carl Solomon”(Ginsberg 10), who was already the subject of the very beginning of the poem through its dedication. The last part or “Footnote” presents the reader with a more positive tone and contains strong religious accents with the mantra-like repetition of the anaphoric word “Holy”(Ginsberg 12). This addendum can be seen as having a conclusive purpose as it redeems some of the elements mentioned earlier in the poem.

Style

Ginsberg wrote “Howl” applying Kerouac’s method of spontaneous composition. He had also discussed the topic of poetics with his mentor William Carlos Williams who promoted the use of short lines in the composition of poetry. If Ginsberg was seduced by that idea at first, he soon realized that that did not serve him very well while he was working on the poem that would later become “Howl”. He discovered that what seemed to work better for him was to adopt the principle of long lines that “could be governed by breath measures, image or thought.”(Schumacher 197) Ginsberg wanted also to free himself from formal features that he considered too rigid and thereby a hindrance to his inspiration, as he analyzed a bit later in his career:

Trouble with conventional form (fixed line count and stanza form) is, it’s too symmetrical, geometrical, numbered and pre-fixed – unlike to my own mind which has no beginning and end, nor fixed measure of thought (or speech – or writing) other than its own cornerless mystery – to transcribe the latter in a form most nearly representing its actual “occurrence” is my “method” – which requires the skill of freedom of composition – and which will lead poetry to the expression of the highest moments of the mindbody – mystical illumination – and its deepest emotion [...](Ginsberg and Schumacher 148)

This approach exemplifies thus the poetics of vision that can prompt his orphic creativity and provide an access to a deeper level of consciousness. Besides, whereas it was indeed one of Kerouac’s suggestions that was at the origin of that long line meter, Ginsberg also received inspiration from “the long saxophone lines he had heard in jazz clubs.”(Schumacher 201) Thanks to that choice, each line corresponds to a breath unit. Yet, if it is certainly true that “Howl” is a radically modern poem, some of its stylistic aspects attach it to some much more venerable types of literary expressions:

It cannot even be said that *Howl* is uniquely modern in form or intention. Most would have to agree with Kenneth Rexroth that this type of poetry is ‘in one of the oldest traditions, that of Hosea or the other angry Minor prophets of the Bible.’ *Howl*, therefore, is not a genesis; it is an amplification. (Merrill 50)

The fact that “Howl” encloses a prophetic tone reinforces the spiritual intention suggested by the text. In other words, this establishes an appropriateness of the form in regards to the main message of the poem.

Moreover, a defining aspect of “howls”’s structure is the creation of a base with the word “who” in Part I. This format allowed Ginsberg to establish a catalog of assertions, a device dear to Walt Whitman, while always coming back to that base word. That composition method provides evident advantages to the poet but implies that the reader understands the implication of that disposition:

To read *Howl* properly, then, is to avoid the impulse to search for a logic or a rational connection of ideas, as Ginsberg would be the first to acknowledge. *Howl* must be read the same way as Whitman’s poetry, but with a twentieth-century consciousness. (Merrill 56)

Ginsberg reuses the same construction in Part II with the word “Moloch”, Part III with the line “I’m with you in Rockland” and with “Holy” in the coda. This suggests that “Howl” is accumulative rather than logical or progressive and that its principle of organization is the line instead of specific articulations between them or throughout the successive stanzas. The repetitive arrangement based of “who” or “Holy” is combined with a particular attention from Ginsberg to “the sound and rhythm of his writing”(Schumacher 201) so that, as a result, “Howl” carries a good deal of intensity.

Themes

The poem starts with an observation that has the value of a proclamation:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,
starving hysterical naked, (Ginsberg 1)

This first line constitutes indeed a programmatic statement that announces the critical slant that will be formulated against the actual functioning of society throughout the whole text. It also defines a specific social perspective which is that of the outcast or of those who are not considered as normal anymore. This is to be linked to one of the many biographical references that are interspersed in “Howl”. Indeed, the introductory

line appears as an echo to the dedication of the poem which is addressed to “Carl Solomon” whom Ginsberg met while he was in a mental health institution. The topic regarding the alienation from society due to madness was “never too far removed from Allen’s mind”(Schumacher 196) because of the situation of his mother but also because he too had suffered from depression and had been on the verge of losing his mind. This is why the persona speaking in “Howl” does not separate itself from the afflictions that affect the “Carl Solomon” of Part III. To the contrary, the persona, that could to a large extent be considered like Ginsberg’s personal voice, due to the compelling biographical dimension of the text, “stated his identification with his poem’s central figure.”(Schumacher 203) Ginsberg adopts thereby a subjective point of view that also implies a participant position. The choice of that perspective reinforces the posture of empathy and understanding towards his friends mentioned in the poem and the archetype they represent.

Moreover, “Howl” is not totally detached from the politics of its time. In this poem, Ginsberg expresses some of his concerns regarding the historical events that were happening then. Mostly, this revolved around the rejection of the idea of war. This was definitely a matter of concern in the 1950s because of the ongoing Cold War and the fear of a nuclear apocalypse. Ginsberg used the symbol of Moloch to incarnate the role of “the destroyer of the human spirit, the black heart behind the collapse of the civilization.”(Schumacher 208) Yet, “Howl” is not as such a poem that delivers a message about politics. Indeed, the political problem appears rather as one of the many consequences of a much deeper concern, which is of a spiritual nature. It is the lack of understanding of that part of our humanity which then leads to specific issues like capitalism, war, injustice and the madness of otherwise great minds.

Besides, two more themes appear to be dominant in “Howl” and they reinforce each other throughout the poem. One of the first, immediate, impressions when reading “Howl”, is the ubiquity of sexually loaded vocabulary. This is the indication that sex is a crucial aspect of this text and it needs to be discussed in detail. Moreover, the question of sex appears connected in “Howl” to a subject matter that is often perceived as antithetical to it, namely that of spirituality. Ginsberg’s most famous poem proposes

therefore an interesting conjunction of these two themes that are intertwined by the poet to beget a compelling philosophical argument.

Sex in “Howl”

One of the most infamous episodes that characterizes the history of *Howl and Other Poems* is the obscenity trial that was brought against it in 1957. This extreme reaction from the authorities suggests that these poems were seen as very provocative and sufficiently explicit in their evocation of profanity to justify a legal action against the book. It constitutes therefore an interesting marker of the moral and political values in the 1950s in the USA. Moreover, the trial raises more theoretical questions like that of the limit between simple pornography and audacious literary expression that serves a higher, aesthetic, purpose. The result of the trial and especially the acquittal decision of the court contributes to establish the fact that sex is a topic worth discussing in literary texts, particularly so when it is treated in a way that manifests its propinquity with metaphysical questions.

There were several sexual features of “Howl” that were destined to shock the mid-1950s America. First of all, the directness of the language used to talk about sexual acts was unacceptable socially at the time. Obscene words like “cock”(Ginsberg 1), “fucked in the ass” or “ultimate cunt”(Ginsberg 4) were way too graphic and specific to leave the readers indifferent. It is thus not only the referential value of the language which is seen as contentious but the wording itself and the choice of a crude vocabulary. Besides, it is noteworthy that Ginsberg used mostly slang words to evoke sex in “Howl” as if he was attempting to debase the sexual aspects in his text even more. He adopts thereby a posture which is clearly unapologetic and radically frank. This results in a total unveiling of the language and in a reduction of its mediating function in order to get as close as possible to the essence of things.

Moreover, “Howl” contains another uncompromising factor related to sexuality. Indeed, not only is sex depicted frontally but it also presents deviant – to most people at the time – forms of sexuality, namely male homosexuality: “*Howl* celebrates the ‘cocksman’ – men and their penises, not women and their vaginas.” (Raskin 146) Although the decision to affirm homosexuality in “Howl” was certainly a courageous

artistic gesture, there was also a downside to it because of the treatment which is made of the female gender: “the women in *Howl* are almost all shrews. In the mid-1950s Ginsberg embraced misogyny; he knew it and admitted it. ‘How I hate women,’ he wrote Kerouac in December 1954.”(Raskin 148) Indeed, all the female characters depicted in “Howl” are negative ones. This depreciation of women can be seen in the larger context of the resentment Ginsberg felt against Carolyn, Cassady’s wife and the veneration he felt towards Neal. The latter is mentioned in “Howl” as “N.C.” and the “Adonis of Denver”(Ginsberg 4) and appears as the “sexual hero”(Raskin 146) of the poem.

It remains that gay sex is treated favorably in “Howl”. It is not placed in opposition to the other important theme of the poem which is spirituality. Indeed, gay sex is fully embraced and valued because it is a concrete manifestation of pure life energy that is understood as natural, given the fact that it is placed in contrast to a society misled by “Moloch”. This interpretation can be deduced from the composition of the poem itself which incites the reader to empathize with the “best minds” of the first line. Since the relative pronoun “who” refers back to them throughout the poem, their experiences should be endorsed and considered as valid ones. For example, one of the climactic sexual moments can be seen in the following sequence:

who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists,
and screamed with joy,
who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors,
caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love, [...]
who hiccuped endlessly trying to giggle but wound up with a
sob behind a partition in a Turkish Bath when the blond
& naked angel came to pierce them with a sword,(Ginsberg 4)

The tone of these stanzas is not a negative one. To the contrary, words like “joy” and “caresses” convey a confident mood and draw a picture of men freed from the prejudices usually at play in the real society. Rather than demonizing those queer figures, the poem seems to present them as an occurrence of communion between people. Furthermore, this homoerotic atmosphere also serves the purpose of criticizing the conformism of the society and its arbitrary social norms. But the most compelling aspect that renders gay sex acceptable resides in its frequent association with sacred

elements. Indeed, the religious and the profane coexists harmoniously in “Howl” and even seem to work together. Sexual beatitude becomes a means to reach enlightenment. There are several occurrences in the poem of words that are usually seen as almost antithetical but that are here associated: “Fucked in the ass” and “saintly”; “who blew and were blown” and “seraphim”; “angel” and “sword” (it is appropriate to understand this as a phallic metaphor); “who copulated ecstatic”; “ultimate cunt” and “consciousness”.(Ginsberg 4) Thus, the religious connotations work in pairs with the sexual terms.

Spirituality in “Howl”

“Howl” is also a deeply spiritual poem, a religious text that promotes enlightenment. This becomes more explicit in Part II which presents the fundamental cause of the problems evoked by Ginsberg in Part I. The text puts forth here a reflection about spiritual issues that are easy to link to the Buddhist conceptual system. One line in particular allows such a reading: “Moloch whose name is the Mind!”(Ginsberg 9) Given the pejorative nature attributed to Moloch in the poem – “Filth! Ugliness!”(Ginsberg 8) – it could seem surprising to define it as “the Mind”, which is considered, in Western culture, as a positive quality. Yet, in Buddhism the mind does not enjoy the same status, as it is associated with a person’s lower ego. In “Howl”, the figure of Moloch is associated with materialism and its cold, non-spiritual reason: “Moloch whose mind is pure machinery!”(Ginsberg 8). This conceptual construction engenders a rejection of a mechanistic type of logical reasoning which, when it is not functioning well enough, leads to the “madness” mentioned in Part I.

Still, although the “madness” described in “Howl” is not a desirable situation for someone to experience, it remains that it is the sign of a resistance to the corrupted values promoted by Moloch:

There is a degree of ambivalence in the use of this crucial term *madness* in the first line. Does it reflect merely the ‘madness’ of an officially acceptable level of reality that is uncongenial to the suffering heroes of the poem, or is it not possible that this destructive ‘madness’ also describes the predicament of nonconformists? In other words, are not these martyrs self-destroyed because they refuse to live on the acceptable plane of official reality? In these terms, the ‘angel-headed hipsters’ are embracing ‘madness’ as an alternative to an unbearable sanity. Their madness consists in their refusal to accept a

nonspiritual view of the world, in their 'burning for the ancient heavenly connection' in a civilization that has proclaimed that God is dead.(Merrill 59)

An opposition is thus created between a certain type of madness which is acknowledged as such by the society and which is the result of an intransigence by the victim against the lovelessness embodied by Moloch: "Moloch the loveless!"(Ginsberg 8), "Lacklove and manless in Moloch!"(Ginsberg 9) But this type of madness impacts only those that are resisting the forces of materialism. Most people do not end up in madhouses because they are compliant with the materialistic existence that is proposed to them by the capitalist structure of the society.

"Footnote to Howl" operates a sort of conceptual conclusion about the issues at play in the previous sections of the poem. The perspective which is adopted in this last part is an all-encompassing one. Everything appears equated at this point of the reflection. The word "Holy" cancels the distinctions between the good and the bad things through a repeated conclusion which can be summarized by the assertion "everything is holy". It is worth noting that Ginsberg includes in that litany physical aspects of the body in order to make sure that the reader understands that the dimension of the body should not be excluded from the divine and the sacred: "The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy! / Everything holy!"(Ginsberg 12) In other words, even though sex is realized through bodies and body parts, it is not excluded from the realm of holiness. Sex, and in this poem gay sex essentially, escapes therefore the critique on materialism. In the system of values created in "Howl", sex is an adjuvant force that contributes to the realization of a higher state of consciousness, rather than an obstacle to spirituality.

2 Christopher Isherwood

2.1 Christopher Isherwood

2.1.1 Biographical Background

Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986) appeared to have an intricate relation to the past and that applied to his own personal history as well. Isherwood's many peregrinations, mainly in the first part of his life, illustrate that tendency of his to attempt to put his geographical, cultural and social origin at a distance. This allowed him to establish a critical perspective and to challenge some fundamental aspects of his heritage. Christopher Isherwood was born in England in 1904 in an upper-class family. He lost his father, who was an army officer, during the First World War, in 1915, while he was still quite young. His relationship with Kathleen, his mother, remained a source of conflicting feelings and ambiguity, so that "[a]s a child and young man, Isherwood feared the past because it signified the domain of his mother, Kathleen" (Piazza 4). His mother represented therefore what Isherwood wanted to escape from and would become the inducing element of his rebellion against the values that she incarnated.

While a pupil at Repton, a prestigious public school, Isherwood befriended Edward Upward and W. H. Auden, both of whom would also later become writers. He then went on to study at the university of Cambridge, where Upward had enrolled a year earlier. Christopher Isherwood first studied history before shifting to the English program but he and Edward "became disillusioned with Cambridge social life and, by extension, with the social life of England. The two collaborated on surrealistic fantasies that satirized the hypocrisy of English society, setting the stories in an imaginary location named Mortmere." (Summers 2-3) This period of his life constitutes the subject matter of one of Isherwood's autobiographical novels *Lions and Shadows* (1938) in which he expresses a form of repudiation of that environment, which paved the way for his desire to discover new horizons and led ultimately to his emigration to Germany

later on. Isherwood made the choice not to finish his degree at Cambridge and took a job as a secretary in London. During that period, he deepened his friendship with Auden and published his first novel, *All the Conspirators*, in 1928.

In 1929, Christopher Isherwood left for Berlin, an experience that became “one of the decisive events of [his] life.” (Isherwood, *CK* 3) Indeed, this new context was for Christopher Isherwood the occasion of a deeper acknowledgment of his homosexuality. Even though he already had a sexual experience with a fellow student while he was at Cambridge, he saw this new situation as an opportunity to live this part of himself more intensely, and that intention was already clearly formulated at the time, since he famously wrote that for him “Berlin meant boys” (Isherwood, *CK* 3). Several constitutive aspects of Isherwood’s reflection would become determining during that Berlin phase. His considerations regarding sexuality would be stimulated and encouraged by, for instance, his discovery of the Hirschfeld Institute for Sexual Science. Hirschfeld, that Isherwood described as “a leading expert on homosexuality” (Isherwood, *CK* 17) provided him with a more positive and benevolent view on sexuality. Another, and more concrete, factor was his relationship with a German boy named Heinz Neddermeyer. He was on many accounts the opposite of Isherwood because he was not English, younger and he came from a working-class family. Isherwood also lived for a while with another young proletarian lover, Otto, at his parents. This would be the occasion for Isherwood to see how the life of the working class looked like. This was a radical difference from what he was used to, back in England. These new life experiences contributed to the development, in his way of thinking, of a form of social and political awareness: “The fact was that Christopher, the upper-class boy, was now trying to disown his class. Because he hated it, he despised the middle class for aping its ways. That left him with nothing to admire but the working class” (Isherwood, *CK* 26). Berlin was also the place where Isherwood would be able to witness dramatic political changes with the rise of Nazism. Two of his novels that were collected under the title *The Berlin Novels* (1945) draw on that time spent in Berlin. Eventually, the Second World War would push him to leave Germany.

Christopher Isherwood did not fight as a soldier during the Second World War because of his strong pacifist views. He emigrated to the United States together with his friend W. H. Auden before the war, in 1939:

On the Atlantic crossing, Isherwood had realized that he was a pacifist. His father had been killed at Ypres, in Flanders, in May 1915. The body was never found, and only the passage of time eventually seemed to confirm the death. At the time, Isherwood was ten years old. In adulthood he felt unwilling to fight against an army which might number among its force the German boy he had loved and lived with through most of the 1930s, Heinz Neddermeyer. (Bucknell 18)

After a time spent in New York, he finally settled in Santa Barbara, California, and lived there for the rest of his life. This geographical change also marked an important evolution regarding the subject matter of his literary works: “Most of the central preoccupations of these American novels have influential factors that embrace subjects of minorities, homosexual mores, pacifism, commitment, the experience of bereavement, education, religious experience and many more.”(Wade 17) If Berlin can be associated with the affirmation of his homosexuality, California was the place where emerged the second pillar of Isherwood’s interests, namely spirituality. There, he evolved in a circle of other intellectual British expatriates like Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard. The latter introduced him to Eastern spirituality, and more specifically to Vedanta. Through Gerald Heard, Isherwood got introduced to the Indian monk Swami Prabhavananda in 1939, who would become a crucial spiritual guide for him. He would not renounce his sexuality though and in 1953, he met the young painter-to-be Don Bachardy. Despite a big age difference between them, Bachardy became Isherwood’s lifelong partner. He died in January 1986, with Bachardy at his side.

2.1.2 Isherwood’s conceptual landscape

Christopher Isherwood is mainly known as a novelist. Yet, his fictional works are all characterized by certain theoretical orientations that inform the way the protagonists, the themes and the arguments of his novels are conceived. It appears therefore crucial to understand the conceptual elements that underpin his worldview in order to get a more astute comprehension of his literary works. Fortunately, Isherwood provided his readership with several specific works, often autobiographical in nature,

that explored the theoretical issues that had a greater relevance to his life and work: “The nonfiction books are particularly valuable for the light they cast on the novels. The autobiographical works explain the personal myths Isherwood created for himself and the artistic, intellectual, sexual, and spiritual values that the novels incorporate.” (Summers 136)

Towards the end of his life, Christopher Isherwood indicated thus himself which topics mattered most for him by writing some thematic non-fictional books that clarify his positions on these issues. Two of those books are particularly relevant for the subject of this thesis because they address Isherwood’s relation to homosexuality on the one hand, and to spirituality, on the other.

Homosexuality: *Christopher and His Kind* (1976)

As its title suggests, *Christopher and His Kind* focuses on Isherwood himself, while it places him in a larger category defined as “his kind”, which can be equated with “the homosexuals”. A dissociation is operated already in the title through the use of the name “Christopher”, as if Isherwood were speaking of another person than himself, and not really. This linguistic feature continues throughout the book, and raises questions regarding the autobiographical dimension of this text. By using the third person to refer to himself, Isherwood seems to try to introduce a certain distance between himself and his persona in the book. This stylistic choice reveals the author’s intention to treat these aspects of his life with some degree of objectivity, as he explains regarding another of his works: “he had decided that it must be narrated in the third person, objectively, camera-wise.” (Isherwood, *CK* 189)

Christopher and His Kind narrates Isherwood’s life between 1929 and 1939. With this book, Isherwood intended to rectify what he saw as an important shortcoming of the literature he produced in those times, namely the discretion about his homosexuality: “A revisionist reinterpretation of a legendary era, *Christopher and His Kind* is a sexual and political autobiography” (Summers 151) Homosexuality is not absent from Isherwood’s earlier writings though: “Throughout *Goodbye to Berlin* homosexuality’s latent force affects all of the narrator’s relationships”(Piazza, *Christopher Isherwood* 176). But the main protagonist, who is often a literary double of the real Christopher, is usually not

depicted as gay: “since ‘Isherwood’ is not overtly homosexual, he has to be given another reason for knowing Otto and another motive for going to live with his family.” (Isherwood, *CK* 51) Moreover, beyond this biographical reason, Isherwood also proposes a literary explanation as to why he chose not to create a homosexual main character in these earlier novels:

Christopher wanted to keep the reader’s attention concentrated on Norris; therefore, the Narrator had to be as unobtrusive as possible. The reader had to be encouraged to put himself in the Narrator’s shoes – to see with the Narrator’s eyes, to experience his experiences, to identify with him in all his reactions. (Isherwood, *CK* 190–91)

His purpose was thereby motivated by a narrative imperative in order to facilitate the identification with the protagonist. Nevertheless, this did not entail that Isherwood would fully endorse the portrayal of heteronormativity:

Christopher dared not make the Narrator homosexual. But he scorned to make him heterosexual. That, to Christopher, would have been as shameful as pretending to be heterosexual himself. Therefore, the Narrator could have no explicit sex experiences in the story. (Isherwood, *CK* 191)

It is hard to know though if this convenient narrative indeterminacy was really, at the time of its production, the result of Isherwood’s intention to resist the sexual norms or if it is a form of reinterpretation with hindsight. Still, it remains that the fact that the main protagonist is deprived of sexuality while other characters have one, appears like a quite compelling argument, licensed by the architecture of the text itself.

This book constitutes therefore, in the midst of the Gay Liberation movement, Isherwood’s attempt to come clean about a crucial aspect of his life and personality and to contribute to the political awareness about gay rights. Going beyond the mere unapologetic account of his true nature, Isherwood puts forth a political stance denouncing the detrimental supremacy of heterosexuality, that oppresses minorities. *Christopher and His Kind* presents thus an interest at three different levels: biographical, political and in terms of his artistic project, with a liberated language that promotes a form of blatant sincerity.

Christopher and His Kind provides another interesting perspective in that it evokes Isherwood’s relationship with other contemporary writers and intellectuals. The gallery of people belonging to the literary world of the time, which appears in this book indicates to which artists Isherwood felt affiliated: “It *was* tremendous for Christopher.

Forster was the only living writer whom he would have described as his master. In other people's books he found examples of style which he wanted to imitate and learn from. In Forster he found a key to the whole art of writing." (Isherwood, *CK* 108) The case of writer E. M. Forster (1879-1970) is enlightening on at least two accounts. First, Forster was himself homosexual and represents a previous generation of authors, who had to adopt a cautious approach in their writings regarding homosexuality. For instance, Forster's most explicit novel, *Maurice* (1971), was published posthumously. If Isherwood avoided being explicit about the topic of homosexuality in his first novels, he would later on consider it safe enough to be mentioned in a straightforward way. This constitutes a radical evolution compared to Forster. Yet, Christopher Isherwood appeared conscious of the historical changes that were necessary to occur in order to make it possible for people of his generation to write about this subject, which was extremely important to him and essential to the meaning of his work. The question of the intellectual and anthropological context in which a literary work is produced is discussed in relation to *Maurice*:

It was at this time that Forster showed Christopher the typescript of *Maurice*. Christopher felt greatly honored, of course, by being allowed to read it. Its antique locutions bothered him, here and there. When Alec speaks of sex with Maurice as 'sharing', he grimaced and wriggled his toes with embarrassment. And yet the wonder of the novel was that it had been written; the wonder was Forster himself, imprisoned within the jungle of pre-war prejudice, putting these unthinkable thoughts into words. (Isherwood, *CK* 130)

The second aspect that renders Forster particularly relevant for a better comprehension of Isherwood's works is the transmission of a certain literary tradition. This is evident in terms of the homosexual question that has been explored by both of them. But Forster, who was a prominent member of the Bloomsbury group, constitutes also a link, regarding the aesthetic dimension of writing, between British modernism and Christopher Isherwood:

Isherwood fostered close ties to other members of the British modernist community. He collaborated with W. H. Auden on several works throughout the 1930s; was a cousin of Graham Greene; and nurtured close friendships with Stephen Spender and fellow expatriate Aldous Huxley. In 1932 he began a correspondence with with E. M. Forster that would last until Forster's death in 1970. Isherwood's relationship with Forster, Auden and Spender place him within the queer line of British modernism. (Todd 113)

This suggests a prolongation through Isherwood's works of the modernist aesthetics and of its liberal approach to sexuality but also of some of its political concerns, like the

criticism about the bourgeoisie. Indeed, Isherwood transposed this social denunciation to the context of the American middle class in a particularly direct way in his novel *A Single Man*.

Nevertheless, Christopher Isherwood's stance against the materialism and the apparent vacuity of the middle class emanates, at that point of his life, from spiritual considerations rather than from a political affiliation. If it is true that he was attracted to communism at the beginning of his adult life, he justifies his rupture with that movement in terms of sexual politics: "Indeed, his sexuality is finally revealed as the basic source of his eventual disaffection from the leftist political causes that he had endorsed in the 1930s. He made their treatment of the homosexual the supreme test by which to judge every political group" (Summers 152). More and more, spirituality would become the dominant interpretative paradigm that would guide his actions as well as his intellectual endeavors: "The author's [Isherwood] interest in Vedanta grew from his attempts to discover positive values to replace his lost political faith" (Summers 156).

Spirituality: *My Guru and His Disciple* (1980)

My Guru and His Disciple (1980), which is Isherwood's last book, constitutes a clear affirmation of the importance of spirituality in his life. The guru mentioned in the title was Swami Prabhavananda, a Hindu monk, that Isherwood met in California through his friend Gerald Heard in 1939. Since the text of *My Guru and His Disciple* narrates events that happened several decades before the moment of its production, Isherwood relied heavily on material taken from his diaries. Extracts from these are interspersed throughout the book and contribute to bringing back the past and to actualize the subject matter. The frequent interweaving of these two texts constitutes also an effective authentication strategy which gives more credit to the text as a whole.

The status of this book is therefore to present its author's spiritual development. The autobiographical tone used by Isherwood contributes to render the subject mostly personal and individual:

My Guru and His Disciple is not intended as a work of proselytism, although it sometimes reads like one. Isherwood was not out to convince his readers of the truth of Vedanta *per se*, but he did want to convince people that Vedanta was true for *him*, that for once he was not

posing or play-acting. He wanted to emphasize his own scepticism, his own worries that Vedanta and Prabhavananda were 'too Indian' for his sophisticated, Westernized tastes. This was, he kept emphasizing, a personal story, the story of a relationship between two people, one of whom happened to be some sort of a saint. (Parker 815)

The figure of Swami Prabhavananda is crucial and his voice comes through quite a lot in *My Guru and His Disciple* thanks to the dialectical discussion which is recreated by Isherwood. However, this last book has endured a complicated reception. An examination of the reviews of *My Guru and His Disciple* made by the scholar Victor Marsh indicates that it is the religious content of the work that was the source of the problem:

Tracking the reception of this new biography as it was reviewed across the world, it becomes clear that many of the surviving prejudices about Isherwood, which cannot be explained as due simply to lingering resentment over the writer's wartime pacifism, are in need of some serious re-examination." (Marsh 98)

The spiritual dimension of the text seems to have been downplayed by some critics who wanted to put forth the gay content instead: "a relentless focus on the sexuality continues to occlude the spirituality" (Marsh 98). This particular element touches upon an essential question in the context of this thesis in particular because the articulation of the sexual and the spiritual in Isherwood's works is the pivotal point of this analysis. Marsh is particularly critical of Peter Parker's treatment of the religious dimension with regard to *My Guru and His Disciple*:

It is significant that all of these slights (and there are many other examples) came in the reviews of the Parker biography, which has its own shortcomings. The only time Parker departs from the self-effacing stance of the objectivist biographer is to "bring charges" against Swami Prabhavananda – his language slips into that of the courtroom. Whatever he thought of the Swami, and the sincerity of Isherwood's religious life, the portrait Parker has drawn is provocative in this regard. (Marsh 100)

While sexuality is something tangible, whose existence can hardly be denied, spirituality on the other hand rests on faith and needs therefore to be experienced subjectively in order to be acknowledged. It is thus possible to understand why some critics manifested a certain suspicion towards Isherwood's enthusiasm for Vedanta. Yet, it remains that Isherwood should have been given the benefit of the doubt, mainly given the fact that spirituality constitutes a central aspect of his later writings and thereby a necessary exegetic tool:

My Guru and His Disciple is helpful in illuminating the religious points of view that inform Isherwood's later novels. The novel themselves are not discussed in details, but the spiritual autobiography neatly encapsulate in personal terms the values they incorporate. Central to understanding the novels, for instance, is an appreciation of some key differences between Vedanta and Christianity, differences that help explain Isherwood's spiritual conversion after a long history of rebellion against conventional religiosity. (Summers 159)

This implies that devaluing the importance of spirituality inevitably leads to a partial and incomplete reading of some Isherwood's works and in particular of *A Single Man* and *A Meeting by the River*.

The Guru and homosexuality

Homosexuality is an element that is usually complicated to integrate harmoniously into any religious practice. These two dimensions appear often, whatever the religion considered, in conflict with one another. Coming from a Christian tradition, Christopher Isherwood was conscious of that potential difficulty and decided to pose the question of the compatibility of his sexual orientation with the practice of Vedanta to his Guru:

I also asked the Swami about sex. He said that all sex – no matter what the relationship – is a form of attachment and must ultimately be given up. This will happen naturally as you make progress in the spiritual life. 'The more you travel toward the north, the farther you are from the south.' But he added that force is no good. (Isherwood, *GD* 63)

What is particularly interesting in Swami's answer is the fact that he disapproved sexuality in general because it represents a tie to the material world, which his religious belief makes him consider an illusion altogether. His answer shows therefore a concern about a metaphysical question rather than a moral one. The crucial point is thus that he does not seem to denounce homosexuality in itself. Moreover, Isherwood's Guru does not enjoin him to give up sex at any cost. To the contrary, he shows a certain degree of tolerance and seems conscious of the fact that this is a domain of the human experience in which people cannot be pressed to change too quickly. The position of Swami on this matter is important because he is a reference to assess the compatibility of his school of thoughts with homosexuality.

Yet, some commentators of Isherwood's life did not seem to see in Swami's answer an unconditional embrace of Christopher's homosexuality:

The serious charge against *My Guru and His Disciple* concerns the central question of Prabhavananda's attitude towards homosexuality. [...] This is less than candid. In attempting to persuade his readers – and perhaps himself – of Prabhavananda's winning combination of saintliness and worldliness, Isherwood is capable of withholding facts and fudging the evidence. (Parker 817)

Peter Parker's interpretation of Isherwood's sincerity regarding the acceptance of his homosexuality by Swami Prabhavananda seems at odds with David Izzo's perception of the situation:

The book [*My Guru and His Disciple*] is also his last affirmation of how much the Guru-influenced changes in his life had given him such happiness, especially after meeting Don Bachardy, who provided the secular stability to augment Isherwood's spiritual world. Just as the Swami had passed the test in 1939 by accepting Isherwood's homosexuality, Prabhavananda also accepted Bachardy wholeheartedly. So much so that Bachardy became another disciple. In its own way this was a love triangle of great satisfaction to all three. Love is exactly the right word. (Izzo 258–59)

This appears to be the dominant view among most of Isherwood's scholars, while Parker's analysis seems biased by his overly suspicious interpretation of Swami's capacity of tolerance.

2.2 A Single Man (1964)

A Single Man is a relatively short novel, but this does not diminish its significance inside Christopher Isherwood's literary oeuvre. If the story is in itself quite simple, the multitude of topics that are treated through it, more or less frontally, make this novel deep and complex. The narrative focuses on one single day – a modernist trait – of the life of an English college professor named George, in California. The novel is built upon a strategic dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual. The former theme is fairly obvious from the very beginning of the text, while the latter is a little bit more subtle but still, it has been identified by most scholars who analyzed this novel: "The foundation for the novel's double vision is to be found, of course, in Isherwood's religious beliefs, and it is easy to credit Isherwood's admission that George is himself as he might have been, had he not discovered Vedanta." (Wilde 127) The novel reveals then by contrast what remains of a person like George, when the metaphysical dimension is withdrawn from his existence.

The body: The physical dimension

The theme of the physicality of the body is strongly represented throughout the novel. The most compelling example is the beginning of the book where George seems to be reduced exclusively to his body and is nothing else. This theme plays a strategic role and serves the philosophical demonstration that Isherwood tries to put forth. *A Single Man* starts with a spectacular stance about George's physical nature. Rather than being presented as a person with an identity, the protagonist appears reduced to its mechanical nature. This is manifested in a dramatic way by the use of the pronoun "it" to refer to George:

It stares and stares. Its lips part. It starts to breathe through its mouth. Until the cortex orders it impatiently to wash, to shave, to brush its hair. Its nakedness has to be covered. It must be dressed up in clothes because it is going outside, into the world of the other people; and these others must be able to identify it. Its behaviour must be acceptable to them. Obediently, it washes, shaves, brushes its hair; for it accepts its responsibilities to the others. It is even glad that it has its place among them. It knows what is expected of it. It knows its name. It is called George. (Isherwood, *SM* 2–3)

The use on the pronoun "it" is actually linguistically logical in this case because it refers to the noun previously mentioned: "the creature" and before that "the body". The internal coherence and the grammar are thus respected. Nonetheless, this strong emphasis on "it" yields a specific effect that suggests that there are some implications made by the author.

Homosexuality

Homosexuality constitutes a prolongation and a deepening of the theme of the corporeality. Sexuality resides indeed in the body and is performed through it. In George's case, his sexuality also contributes to making him, if not a single man, at least a singular person:

On the surface, it appears that George's loneliness results from his homosexuality, and some reviewers seized this aspect of the novel as the primary element to judge by it. Most readers, however, have perceived George's homosexuality as Isherwood intended it - representative of a minority (Schwerdt 167)

Not only political was the fact of choosing a homosexual protagonist, but also because, on the narrative plane, this was adding even more alienation to the character. The

homosexual condition reinforces the idea of separateness from society and from the world:

Even if we lay Isherwood's personal life aside, we must see that heterosexuality would have fatally cramped the anti-myth. Had Isherwood's alienated heroes not been homosexuals, they could not have been completely different from, and absolutely "other" than, the Enemy, or the Others. They would not have been irreparably damned. But because anti-sex and anti-sexuality were before the sixties subterranean and unacceptable. Isherwood's heroes are beyond redemption: never between the homosexual and the Others could there have been reconciliation. Thus, like many of Byron's cursed brooders, the homosexual hero is doomed for eternity to be an outsider, if not by choice, then by his very nature. (Piazza, *Christopher Isherwood* 172)

Homosexuality is also defended anthropologically in this novel through the demonstration that homosexuality does not prevent true love. In other words, homosexuality cannot be reduced to sex and physicality; it also creates an emotional connection which is meaningful:

The hunger had resulted from the experience of sex without commitment and love. George, however, is more mature; he and Jim have shared commitment and George understands that it is the state of sharing with Jim that was important, not Jim by himself, and that it was their love that heightened experience and made life worthwhile. The greatest tribute George can pay to Jim is to release him and to find love again in his life. (Schwerdt 171)

Family values and heteronormativity: A reflection about the minorities

The adjective contained in the title *A Single Man* is also indicative of the theme of loneliness and isolation. This solitude is at play at several levels in the novel and can refer to a psychological lonesomeness, a sociological one or even point at a more metaphysical isolation. There is a straightforward discussion of the situation of minorities in *A Single Man*. This is directly formulated when George animates a discussion on the matter in his college class. It allows Isherwood to put forth his own conception: "a minority is only thought of as a minority when it constitutes some kind of threat to the majority, real or imaginary." (Isherwood, *SM* 53) The whole discussion about the role of minorities, and especially of sexual minorities like gays, in the novel is relevant precisely because it is the existence of a certain type of sexuality that determines the establishment of different groups of people in the society. This phenomenon which is the result of a form of sexual politics will thereby reinforce the concept of queerness, that is to say of diverging from the dominant social norm. This reflection needs to be inserted in the larger argument made by George. Indeed, he

criticizes the common liberal dichotomy that opposes the bad majority to the supposedly good minority. He opposes this idea because it would then force a behavioral imperative on the minority that would have to conform to the ideal image of goodness in order to get the privilege to be protected from the oppression of the majority. Thus, this system of representation creates a limitation for the minority which will feel obliged to comply with the image that has been made of it. In other words, George argues that it should not be made a prerequisite that a member of a minority should be a “saint” (Isherwood, *SM* 54) to not be persecuted. This last point is crucial because it uses the figure of the saint which is essential in the system of thoughts established by Isherwood. It also illustrates the articulation that exists in relation to his works between a character determined by his queer sexuality and the special position – that of the saint – which has a privileged status regarding spirituality. Further, the evocation of minorities reappears a bit later in the novel when George goes to the gym. It is the occasion for him to draw a parallel between the gay minority and “The Living.” (Isherwood, *SM* 82) In this passage, George is presented as belonging to that minority group, which is defined in terms of bodily aspects: “*I am alive*, he says to himself, *I am alive!* And life-energy surges hotly through him, and delight, and appetite. How good to be in a body – even this old beat-up carcass – that still has warm blood and live semen and rich marrow and wholesome flesh!” (Isherwood, *SM* 82) The biological dimension is dominant in this comment. Physical life and “life-energy” are connected to terms that carry a sexual connotation: “semen”, “flesh”. It is thus particularly noteworthy that George’s association with the gay community is made through the body or the physical dimension.

Furthermore, George is not isolated from society only because he belongs to a sexual minority but also because his homosexuality prevents him to have descendants and a larger family circle: “Denied procreativity, the homosexual seems compelled to resolve the tension between generativity and stagnation by opting for productivity and/or creativity.” (Schwerdt, *Isherwood’s Fiction* 168)

Death

Death is a crucial component of *A Single Man*. It permeates the whole story because of the death of Jim which is evoked throughout the narrative and also because

of the assumed death of George at the very end of the novel. Death is used as a contrastive device in the novel. First of all, Jim's death exposes the romantic love that George felt for him. This establishes a temperament to the construction of George as a character because the latter is presented in the whole novel, apart from its very end, as a mechanistic being, as a biological body. That is why death serves the purpose of revealing a deeper dimension of the character. Secondly, death plays a determining role to underline the argument of the novel. This happens at the moment of George's death. That last section is, in contrast to how the character was presented until then, saturated with religious allusions that indicate that a metaphysical interpretation of the text is valid. Indeed, just after having insisted again that the main character is a biological entity: "here we have this body known as George's body, asleep on this bed and snoring quite loud." (Isherwood, *SM* 149) The physiological details reassert the physical perspective. Yet, some lines further, a pivotal moment occurs, which is announced by the word "But" which introduces an essential nuance with regards to the materialistic perspective that dominated until then. Indeed, what follows after that is a typical metaphor used in Eastern metaphysics, namely that of the ocean of consciousness. The narrator explains, in quite a didactic tone, that each character in the novel can be seen as its own "pool" (Isherwood, *SM* 149) that will ultimately rejoin the universal pool of consciousness:

But that long day ends at last; yields to the night-time of the flood. And, just as the waters of the ocean come flooding, darkening over the pools, so over George and the others in sleep come the waters of that other ocean; that consciousness which is no one in particular but which contains everyone and everything, past, present and future, and extends unbroken beyond the uttermost stars. (Isherwood, *SM* 150)

Death – or sleep, which is another occurrence of death in this context – was needed as a narrative tool to finally breach the materialist discourse that surrounded George since the very beginning of the novel to, at the end, suggest a spiritual resolution.

2.3 *A Meeting by the River* (1967)

A Meeting by the River is Isherwood's last novel. It is also the most explicit one regarding spiritual awakening. Moreover, the construction of the novel rests explicitly on a series of dichotomies, in terms of both form and ideas. The text is constructed around the symmetry that emerges from the confrontation of the two main characters: Oliver and Patrick, who are brothers. An important technical feature of this novel resides in the fact that *A Meeting by the River* belongs to the epistolary genre. This entails that there is no overarching narrator that would unify the two main voices present in the novel through the letters of the two brothers. That technical feature has some repercussions on the style of the text. Indeed, the quality of the letters is supposed to reflect the writing ability of the characters, and not, as in *A Single Man*, the literary mastery of the author of the novel. In terms of narrative structure, Isherwood chose a different configuration than what he had done in *A Single Man*: "In contrast to the circular structure of *A Single Man*, *A Meeting by the River* is composed of two lines which merge, intersect snarl, and finally separate and shoot off in parallel paths." (Piazza, *Christopher Isherwood* 161)

The articulation between these two expressive poles, that is to say between Oliver and Patrick, needs to be done by the reader herself, a situation which imparts a greater interpretative role to the addressee of this text:

Oliver and Patrick are readily seen as symbolic of the two competing strains within Isherwood since his acceptance of Vedanta – the flesh and the spirit. Patrick inhabits the world of the body as a successful publisher jetting around the globe, a boy in every port, while Oliver devotes his time to the spirit, first working with the Quakers, then serving the swami who becomes his mentor. (Schwerdt, *Isherwood's Fiction* 182)

This particular construction presents the risk of generating different readings of the message conveyed by the story, since it tends to prompt the reader to favor the voice of the brother whose views most resonate with the reader's: "without a specified narrator, we tend to look for narrative authority in either one brother or the other, whichever brother we as readers seemed most in tune with." (Schwerdt 181) This apparent optionality allows the reader to attribute more relevance to the character that mirrors her own values. This is important to note because Isherwood's demonstration rests precisely

on the dialectical opposition between the values – simply put, sexuality and spirituality – incarnated by the two brothers: “we might suspect that the creation of Patrick and Oliver allowed him to examine the dichotomy of sexuality and spirituality within himself.”(Schwerdt 181)

Yet, the novel becomes more complex as it proceeds because Patrick, although unwillingly, will also undergo a spiritual transformation. There is therefore a form of displacement of the center of gravity of the novel, that lied between the two characters at the beginning, to evolve towards an internal debate inside Patrick. In other words, it is possible to see an overarching dialectical structure which is organized on the opposition between Patrick and Oliver, but they too, are traversed by different degrees of doubt as to their life choices. Thus, each character becomes also the site of an internal contradiction that tries to be resolved and “[t]heir two paths, therefore, represent complementary roads to holiness, the religious and the worldly.”(Piazza, *Christopher Isherwood* 163) This situation brings the reflection on different discursive levels: “Here both brothers seek religious experience, Oliver deliberately and Patrick unwittingly.” (Piazza, *Christopher Isherwood* 151)

Moreover, there is another layer that is to be taken into account with regards to the story. Indeed, sexuality is also quite complex and sometimes ambiguous in *A Meeting by the River*. On the one hand, there is Patrick who is bisexual. He still has a wife but he seems more interested by the passion that he is experiencing at that time with his lover, who happens to be a younger man. On the other hand, Oliver is not described as being promiscuous and from what the story tells, he is chaste and thereby in accordance to his vows. Yet, some episodes bring a nuance to his religious commitment. The first occurrence happens when he, by chance, sees his brother naked in his room while he does some gymnastic exercises. It happens a great deal of ambiguity at that moment because Patrick seems aware that Oliver admires his manly body and intends almost to seduce him by exposing himself totally naked. The narrator even suggests, adopting Oliver’s supposed point of view, that he notices his brother impressive penis. This scene introduces some ambiguity regarding the sexual desire of the future monk. Further, it is insinuated that Oliver had romantic feelings for his sister-in-law, who is then still married to Patrick. The romance seems to date back to many years but it is implied that

Oliver would have been able to love her better than Patrick does. Oliver is also shocked because of his brother's contemptuous behavior towards her. These elements, pertaining to the sexual dynamics between these four characters, create an entanglement which leaves none of them totally disengaged from the sexual matters. This will be used as an argumentative tool to try attract Oliver and make him change his mind. The tension revolves then around the choice of the flesh or that of the spirituality.

3 Queerness, Sex and Spirituality

Religious literature, be it fiction or poetry, takes different forms. What makes it potentially more complex is the fact that it can be associated with a theme that appears at first sight antithetical to it, for example sex. That is this particular construction that renders possible and relevant the comparison between two writers like Allen Ginsberg and Christopher Isherwood. It is noteworthy that despite their differences, they both share a series of similarities. First of all, for the works considered in this thesis, Ginsberg and Isherwood evolve in the same time and space. This is an important aspect because that implies that, as open gay men and writers, they are exposed to the same political and social framework, namely that of the USA. Besides, the era while these works were written and published spans a relatively short time period, which corresponds to two decades, that of the 1950s and 1960s.

Moreover, the topics treated by both Isherwood and Ginsberg, appear similar, mainly when the combination of these themes is concerned. It is indeed remarkable that both of them associated sex and spirituality in these works. The parallel becomes even deeper when it is established that both focused on a specific type of intimacy, namely homosexuality. Another important common trait was that they were both absolutely unapologetic in the way they treated the question of gay sex, during an era that was, compared to today's standards, very conservative. They chose to talk about it in a very frontal and frank way, instead of adopting the typical covered approach that was more common then for the writers who wanted to deal with the subject matter of homosexuality and especially about the sexual aspects of it, as opposed to the less contentious romantic or sociopolitical dimensions of homosexuality.

Nevertheless, the texts produced by Isherwood and Ginsberg are very different from each other. There is first of all the question of the genre that was chosen by each of them. Isherwood chose the literary form of novels whereas Ginsberg opted for poetry. Further, it is legitimate to consider that Allen Ginsberg wrote a much more cutting edge type of literature than Isherwood. Indeed, Christopher Isherwood inscribed himself in the prolongation of English Modernism, mainly when considering *A Single Man*. This seems natural since he admired and knew E.M. Forster and had met Virginia Woolf. *A*

Meeting by the River resists a bit more to that classification though. It should be noted of course that this was his last novel and that it was written later in his life. Isherwood had had by that time the occasion to let his writing style evolve and to foray into new aesthetic territories. It still seems paradoxical that *Howl and Other Poems* was written and has been published before Isherwood's novels, given the fact that *Howl* appears much more modern and radical. That difference in writing styles illustrates the generational gap that existed between the two. Even though the novels analyzed here were published almost a decade after *Howl*, they were written by an Isherwood who was much older than Ginsberg and who had had quite a different artistic journey.

Some differences should be noted also regarding the depiction of sex in their respective works. If it is true that none of them did shy away from expressing blatantly the reality of gay sex, they did so in different linguistic ways. Indeed, Ginsberg used a crude and profane language as a stylistic means. In the chapter called "The Pornographic Imagination", Susan Sontag provides an explanation and also a justification of the recourse to extreme forms of language by artists:

Being a freelance explorer of spiritual dangers, the artist gains a certain license to behave differently from other people; matching the singularity of his vocation, he may be decked out with a suitable eccentric life style, or he may not. His job is inventing trophies of his experiences – objects and gestures that fascinate and enthrall, not merely (as prescribed by older notions of the artist) edify or entertain. His principal means of fascinating is to advance one step further in the dialectic of outrage. He seeks to make his work repulsive, obscure, inaccessible; in short, to give what is, or seem to be, *not* wanted. But however fierce may be the outrages the artist perpetrates upon his audience, his credentials and spiritual authority ultimately depend on the audience's sense (whether something known or inferred) of the outrages he commits upon himself. The exemplary modern artist is a broker in madness. (Sontag 45)

Sontag's analysis describes fittingly Ginsberg's attempt with *Howl*, with his research of a higher consciousness and his exposure to the dangers of insanity that are clearly evoked at the beginning of the poem. The provocation of the mainstream, politically correct, audience of the time was done with a greater sincerity of language than what is achieved by Isherwood. The author of *A Single Man* and even more so of *A Meeting by the River* does not dissimulate gay acts and the diversity of homosexual activities, but the presence of a narrator that serves as intermediary between the content of the fiction and its formulation serves as a linguistic buffer that prevents a too obscene language to come through. There is no such restriction in *Howl* though, although one needs to

acknowledge that stylistic features and the work on the language play a much essential role in poetry than it does in fiction.

Moreover, a compelling aspect of both Isherwood and Ginsberg's works, is that they chose to address the political dimension surrounding the question of homosexuality. There is a similarity of approach when it comes to this dimension because in both case, the social alienation imposed on gay men at the time serves as a strategy of isolation which casts a special light on these exceptional characters. Be it the persona speaking in *Howl* or the characters in Isherwood's novels, they are all experiencing an ordeal which places them aside, if not above, the common people. They become the subjects of a mystical venture that is imposed onto them precisely because of their queerness.

The most important message though concerns the articulation of the sacred and queer forms of sex. Isherwood and Ginsberg do not formulate a dichotomy between these two notions but rather demonstrate the link between the two. Although, they do so in different manners. Ginsberg shows in *Howl* that sex in a means to reach enlightenment and a form of metaphysical ecstasy. In other words, the resources of the body and more specifically those of the sexual in humans, can serve as a bridge toward higher forms of consciousness. Sex, in that context, is a type of experience that has the potential to serve as an effective tool toward spirituality. This problem is presented in a more dialectic form in Isherwood. This is very apparent in *A Meeting by the River*, given the polarized architecture of the novel. There is a binary logic at play but it is eventually overcome through the complexity that the characters encounter. Indeed, the progression in *A Meeting by the River* evolves from a clear opposition between the materialist and the spiritual poles, incarnated by Oliver and Patrick, towards a merging of these two dimensions in each of the two brothers, as if the dialectical tension was finally solved.

Conclusion

To compare artists and their works is rarely an easy task. This process often leads to certain forms of simplifications and implies a degree of reduction of the works studied to solely some aspects of them, contemplated in isolation from the totality and completeness of the works from which they derive. Yet, it remains that in this case, the contrasts that have been illuminated by this intellectual operation did permit to see some important traits of both works under a refreshing perspective. Allen Ginsberg's revolutionary poem and Isherwood's later novels share indeed several features that were worth being confronted and measured against one another.

The elements that allowed that comparison were numerous and sometimes so similar that it seemed obvious and natural to attempt that analysis. First of all, the fact that both writers were openly gay at a time where that was all but an easy posture, was worth investigating, even though their backgrounds and personalities were quite different. Indeed, Isherwood belonged to an older generation of writers and came from England. Although he consciously decided to adopt the American citizenship and lived in California, he might have retained some of his European artistic conceptions. As a matter of fact, Ginsberg and Isherwood met once, due to their common sphere of interests. But it is telling that no friendship ensued and that they did not really get along.

The most compelling element of this thesis is the fact that both Isherwood and Ginsberg addressed the same issues and associated those themes in their works, namely homosexuality and spirituality. That parallelism invited the confrontation of their methods and of the literary means that they used to achieve their goal. The result of this investigation showed that the textual features are very different between the two. But maybe more importantly, their respective conclusions regarding the articulation of homosexuality and spirituality was productive and positive.

An encouraging factor to consider finally, is the development of a specific interest in the academic field for the articulation of queerness and spirituality, like studies about queer theology. This is an element that can potentially open new perspectives on the subject of this thesis but to do so it will need first to detach itself from Western religions and embrace also what the Eastern cultures can offer.

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