Christopher Isherwood’s Psychological Makeup

Perhaps the last thing we might expect to find in Isherwood’s novels is an expression of hunger for the comforts of a defined position in an ordered society, and yet at times it seems as if his work is imbued with that very sentiment. His main characters give the impression of standing outside society less in the postures of contemptuous rejection or heroic defiance than in those of woeful acceptance that some quirk of personality in themselves makes them isolate and outcast. Yet that impression quickly fades. The wistful desire to belong to an ordered and hierarchical society never becomes more than a vague dream. So troubled are they with the problems of their own inescapable individuality that at times any relief seems appealing. Close though he comes at times to endorsing society, Isherwood’s own temperament and trust in individual experience and self-discovery make him forgo the temptation to believe in the status quo. Instead, we find at the centre of his work, not Society, but a proliferation of dramatic metaphor. What might at first seem to be a question about the necessity of belonging to a group turns out to be a question of art.

My purpose is to study closely one of Isherwood’s recent novels, A Single Man, with reference to the meaning in it of dramatic metaphors. A focus on drama is most useful in the investigation in fiction of the dualism of body and spirit (or mind), and the dualism of self and other which centres on the meaning of personal relationships. Briefly, however, I would like to indicate that the subject of drama and the theatre is one that has occurred many times in Isherwood’s other writings and in his life. In the recent autobiographical work Kathleen and Frank, Isherwood is ostensibly writing the lives of his father and mother,
and yet the book, as he says, turns out to be about himself. The book proves to be about the fascinating turns taken by the mind of the child and young man as he tries to build for himself a world that flouts the official version given to him by his parents, but that long and complex story is not of immediate concern here. One thing we learn, between the lines about his parents as it were, is that the theatre had a powerful influence on the young Christopher. We learn from an entry in his mother’s diary for 9 May, 1911 that drama is an obsession of the young Isherwood, in fact, ‘anything to do with plays he is wild about’. On 27 June she repeats the claim: ‘Anything to do with the stage or theatre seems to interest him more than anything in the world.’ In recounting his early days in the family seat of Marple Hall, Isherwood describes the privileged theatrical position he sometimes found himself in as a child:

As long as he was trotting around after them or doing play-jobs which Cook invented for him in the kitchen, he was like a stage-hand behind the scenes in a theatrical production, he was part of the show. But when the curtain finally went up, and some of the maids put on starched aprons and became actresses who served lunch in the Dining-Room, then Christopher was excluded. He had to sit still at the table and be waited on. He was just a member of the audience.1

The passage reveals an early prejudice in favour of acting and against mere spectating. The child’s passion for drama led finally to his being given a toy theatre which was used for staging plays with Christopher not only as the central actor, but also as a ‘deadly serious director’. The adult Isherwood unassumingly says of the young Christopher, ‘He wanted to be an actor, like Frank.’ There is a sting in the tail of that comment, however. Frank (his father) was not famous for being an actor, but was in fact a somewhat reluctant career soldier who used on occasion to take dramatic parts, and once came near to giving up soldiering to become an art student. Kathleen and Frank records the situation that led the young Christopher to reject the ‘hero father’, and the biography of his parents is really his own autobiography because it reveals how he has replaced the myth of the hero father with another myth, that of the sensitive, artistic father who was an ‘actor’ as well as a soldier. The need to have a