Chapter Four

‘Mother’s boy’

While his spiritual world was coming into being in the summer of 1939 he continued to write about people he had known before his emigration to the U.S. One such person was German dramatist, poet and revolutionary Ernst Toller. Although the piece was published much later, we see that Isherwood’s criteria for considering people or subjects interesting remain the same. Hence, Ernst Toller’s beauty is the ‘undeniable beauty of a peacock, or a great lady of the theatre’ (E 125). Isherwood writes later, ‘He wore [his vanity] superbly. It became him, like a brilliant jewel’ (E 128). He holds a flower ‘like a sceptre’ (E 129). At one point we find the leader enjoying ‘the suspense he was dramatically creating’ (E 129). and at another, announcing ‘with mock-conspiratorial gaiety: “I am waiting for the Archbishop!”’(E 130) While the word ‘epic’ is used thrice in the essay - ‘his most epic deeds’ (E 126), ‘this moment was somehow solemn, and epic’ and ‘the epic quality of his presence’ (E 127) - yet we are told that this ‘man of forty was as undaunted as the boy of twenty-five’ (E 126). We are told of his ‘perfect good humour’ and how ‘he made us all laugh’ (E 127). Humour, play-acting, and the child-like are detected by Isherwood in a real life figure as easily as these features are crucial parts of his ostensibly fictional characters.

Although till recently Prater Violet was regarded as the first major piece of creative writing that Isherwood did after his move to the US, the publication of Jacob’s
Hands in 1998 meant slightly rearranging the chronology. Jacob’s Hands was written jointly by him and Aldous Huxley immediately before Prater Violet, in 1944.

Considering that this book is a collaboration, there is much of Isherwood here that one is already familiar with. It is obvious that ghosts dogging his pre-US fiction had by no means been laid to rest yet. There is much in the book that reminds one of a work as early as All the Conspirators.

One, and perhaps the most enduring ghost of them all, that of the Domineering Mother, is very much in evidence here in the figure of Mrs. Medwin. In lines that recall similar figures from the oeuvre of Isherwood, she is described as ‘a fragile-looking little woman, whose petite good looks conceal the soul of a velvet-handed despot...’ (JH 75). Like previous Isherwood mothers she is not happy to see her son making a quick recovery from his state of virtual invalidity to strength, because ‘all her motherly love, on which she prides herself above everything else, is really a will to power. As long as Earl was helpless, he was hers, her own baby, her victim, her possession. Now she feels that he is passing out of her power’ (JH 82). Suffice it to say that as in Isherwood’s fiction of the late-twenties and early thirties, Mrs. Medwin ultimately emerges victorious. Her son being dead she takes possession of her daughter-in-law and grandson. Even the language that is deployed to describe the tension in the Medwin household is rich in mock-heroic overtones. Words such as ‘peace’, ‘armistice’ and ‘the next round’ are used (JH 85).

Mrs. Medwin seems to have directly descended from Mrs. Lindsay in All the Conspirators and Mrs. Lily Vernon in The Memorial.

But this is not the only reason why we are struck by the overwhelming presence of early Isherwood in this book. In keeping with the tradition of Isherwoodian
characterisation the characters we are meant to regard favourably or at least as credible and rounded are given a child-like quality and a sense of humour. The protagonist Jacob Ericson ‘grins mischievously like a naughty child’ (JH 50). At one point he ‘utters a boyish laugh of delight’ (JH 59). When out with Sharon to the zoo, Jacob starts to tell her stories about the different animals, stories that ‘show really shrewd psychological observation and surprising humour’ (JH 56).

Earl Medwin, Jacob’s erstwhile patient and then rival in love, ‘is a young man of twenty-three, still quite a boy in appearance’ (JH 64). ‘He is like a child surrounded by expensive toys’ (JH 65). When Sharon begs Earl not to talk about their affair to Jacob the young Mr. Medwin ‘laughs at her like a teasing little boy’ (JH 96). When Sharon and Earl enjoy private jokes at Jacob’s expense the two ‘are rather like two small children laughing at an elephant’ (JH 102). Even when a drunk and sufficiently encouraged Earl shocks Sharon by kissing her in the car she finds it hard to make too much of it because he is ‘so exactly like a naughty little boy’ (JH 105). Much of this line of characterisation continues in Isherwood’s next work of fiction - *Prater Violet* (1946).

Just as humour and play-acting were proving to be important in Isherwood’s reaction and approach to Vedanta, his humour was being noticed and commended in his secular writings as well. On the occasion of the release of *Prater Violet* in England in 1946, there was, for instance, a radio programme in which the speaker picked out for special mention Isherwood’s ‘humour and tolerance and his broad sympathy’ as the characteristics of his work. According to Kathleen’s transcript of the talk, the speaker said, ‘No one can make me laugh as much as Mr. Isherwood, and when I read the book [*Goodbye to Berlin*] again I laugh as much as before. Mr. Norris is perhaps even better....
I think him the best comic writer living today...” Isherwood was the first to acknowledge that a large amount of play-acting went on in his day-to-day life. He told Derek Hart, ‘There’s always a tremendous sense of masquerade in my life’, and then, ‘I’m obviously a frustrated actor, but who wants to act in some silly play where someone else wrote the lines? You can act all on your own, as I’m doing now’ (Hart 449). It is this dramatised persona of Christopher Isherwood that we first get to see occupying centre-stage in *Prater Violet*. With obvious self-consciousness ‘Christopher Isherwood’ describes his body language, mannerisms and overall personality even when that description is undercut by heavy irony. Others present on the scene are made to appear like lesser characters whose only worthwhile contribution to the action is to supply the star with the required cues. Hence when he puts down the phone at the beginning of the story he needs a cue to start his performance centred on the telephone conversation that has just ended. His mother ‘generally knew when [he] needed a cue-line’ (PV 3). In order to make a show of his apparent lack of interest in film work, and to heighten the effect of the answer he pauses after responding, ‘No’ to the cue-line ‘Was that Stephen?’ He blows out a lot of smoke, frowns at the mantelpiece and then says, ‘Only some movie-people.’ The frowning hardens in direct proportion to the interest generated by the answer. It is a performance, the comedy of which is so far accessible to the star performer. The fact that tragic is not the effect being sought is made clear by the comment which shows how wrong his brother Richard is in thinking that ‘Isherwood’ took everything so calmly. Apparently Richard says it with ‘that utter lack of sarcasm which makes his remarks sound like lines from Sophocles’ (PV 4). Here the intellectual disparity between the two siblings is being described in terms of two genres of drama: sarcasm, irony, and by extension, comedy
being representative of ‘Isherwood’ and Sophocles typifying the implied unsophistication of Richard. As usual the mother supplies the cue for the next stage of the action when, watching ‘Isherwood’s’ ‘performance’ of fiddling with the key of the spoon-drawer and blowing his nose she asks him to have another cup of tea (PV 4). He needs another cue to launch into his virtuoso performance of the morning. That cue also comes from the mother when she lets drop a casual bit of information that somebody’s dentist considers Hitler’s invasion of Austria to be inevitable. The irony now turns in on the star himself as he goes on to lecture on the impossibility of such a development. Since the book is written after the end of the Second World War every reader is well aware of the foolishness of ‘Isherwood’s’ ideas about Hitler’s expansionist plans. But the point is that now the performance is enjoyed not only by the performer himself but other players on the scene who have now become the audience. The mother and Richard exchange milk and sugar ‘with smiling pantomime’ and settle ‘back in their chairs, like people in a restaurant when the orchestra strikes up a tune that everybody knows by heart’ (PV 5). This ironical self-regard continues when he wryly reports Chatsworth’s self-adulatory speech. No sooner are we afforded a laugh at Chatsworth’s expense - given the discrepancy between his comments, ‘My wife tells me I’m a bloody Red...Some of these damn snobs will work a man to death’ and ‘I quite admit it. I’m a bloody intellectual snob’ (PV 14, 16) - that we have ‘Isherwood’ admitting: ‘[F]or all my parlour socialism, I was a snob’ (PV 27). Incidentally, for all his supposed ‘Redness’ Chatsworth is referred to by the head cutter of the film, Lawrence Dwight sarcastically as ‘Lorenzo the Magnificent’ (PV 52). Similarly, when Bergmann claims to have put his finger on the English malaise, and in fact says much that is uncomfortable for the quintessentially
English ‘Isherwood’ to hear, the latter makes light of it all, but also inadvertently reveals much about his true self and the nature of his relationship with Bergmann. He jokes, ‘In other words, I’m a Nazi and you’re my father’ (PV 40). Considering that the novel is deeply autobiographical, faithfully based on the writer Christopher Isherwood’s real experiences while working with Bertholt Viertel for Gaumont British and in the light of Isherwood’s obvious antipathy with regard to Indians, added to his ‘parlour socialism’ it becomes difficult not to admit that the supposed joke reveals quite an amount of truth. Besides, as we shall see shortly, ‘Christopher Isherwood’ himself speaks in a manner that could easily be interpreted as being subliminally racist.

Humour is also used as an indicator of the productive patches of ‘Isherwood’s’ script-writing; comedy and comic play-acting appear in the script. Thus, on the good days ‘Toni joked. The Baron made a pun. Toni’s father clowned’ (PV 51).

‘The ventriloquist’s dummy’, as Isherwood calls his namesake in his fiction, may have the same official name as that of its creator but his name is always made different by the way in which it is pronounced by other characters in the story. This mispronunciation becomes a convenient way to further distance the ‘dummy’ from the voice, at even the naming level. Therefore, in the Berlin stories, we hear as much about ‘Christopher Isherwood’ as we do - if not more - about ‘Herr Issyvoo’, as called by Fraulein Schroeder. Later, even when he writes his declared autobiography, he distances himself from his counterpart in the book, making ‘Christopher Isherwood’ into ‘Krees’, as called by Swami Prabhavananda, in My Guru and His Disciple. Here in Prater Violet he becomes ‘Kreestoffer Ischervood’ on the tongue of the Viennese movie director Friedrich Bergmann (PV 6) and then ‘Mr. Usherwood’ to the porter at Cowan’s Hotel who ‘ushers’
him in (PV 8). Still later he becomes ‘Herr Talk-Director’ to Lawrence Dwight, the head cutter of the film (PV 55). While writing about Vivekananda’s speeches Isherwood had once described them as ‘serio-comic’. In his travel-diary book of 1949 *The Condor and the Cows* he says of Swami Vijayananda, head of the Ramakrishna Mission in Buenos Aires, ‘in photographs, he has that serio-comic expression which I have so often seen on the faces of monks of the Ramakrishna Order’ (CC 183). Herr Bermann in the morning, dressed in a ‘gaudy silk dressing gown’ is ‘tragi-comic’ (PV 19). His theory about the film company plotting against him is ‘half-humorous, half-serious’ (PV 67). Earlier, he is ‘like Punch in a show. “A tragic Punch,” I said to myself’ (PV 12). When he is exasperated Bergmann, with his tousled head, looks ‘like an infuriated Punch’ (PV 81).

The mock-heroic is underlined. ‘His head [is]...[t]he head of a Roman emperor, with dark old Asiatic eyes’ (PV 13). But aligning the character too close to tragedy or epic would make it less interesting to the author, so the ‘dark old Asiatic eyes’ are redeemed by the qualification that they are those of a ‘slave who ironically obeyed’, thus giving the eyes a look of covert irreverence, the same irreverence that he even discovered in Sri Ramakrishna, a dark Asiatic character himself (PV 13). The humour which redeems the vague racism of the ‘dark old Asiatic eyes’ which have to be those of a ‘slave’ also comes to the rescue later when in another strangely racist moment he describes the working environment at the studio. He writes, ‘The process of wasting time, which hitherto had been *orientally* calm and philosophical, now became guilty and apprehensive’ (PV 50, my emphasis). Herr Bergmann has enough humour to see his situation and the project as an ‘Anglo Saxon comedy’ (PV 19) and kisses a copy of *Mein Kampf*, throws it into a waste-paper-basket, and tells ‘Isherwood’ ‘with a wry, comical face’, ‘I love him!’(PV 20)
When Bergmann realises that ‘Isherwood’ does not seem to be making any progress with the script he tries to conjure up a Vienna street scene for him. ‘His eyes sparkle, his gestures [grow] more exaggerated, he mimick[s], he clown[s].’ ‘Isherwood’ begins to laugh (PV 28). Hardly surprising that soon afterwards Isherwood says the inevitable. Making Bergmann a performer too he says, ‘He needed an audience’ (PV 29). Bergmann’s penchant for impromptu role-playing requires an endless repertoire of roles to dip into. With zest he plays Dimitrov, Dr. Buenger, van der Lubbe, Torgler, Goering, Goebbels, Popov and Stanev (PV 35) just as he plays the Princes in the Tower ‘with theatrical falsetto accents’ during the visit to the Tower of London (PV 42). He clowns around the camera when he is so disposed, making the doorman say, ‘He’s what I call a regular comedian.... This picture will be good if it is half as funny as he is’ (PV 64).

In keeping with his predilection, Isherwood does not forget to give Herr Bergmann an element of the child as well. Hence, on one day of shooting when Bergmann and ‘Isherwood’ walk into the set to start the shooting after a long delay, the comment made is: ‘There is a childish satisfaction in having kept so many people waiting.’(my emphasis) This child-likeness is extended also to the main actress’s appearance, who ‘in her short flowered dress, apron and frilly petticoats’, looks ‘like a rather petulant little girl’ (PV 60).

Play-acting is pervasive in Prater Violet. Not only is there the obvious play-acting of the actors and actresses in the film being made of the same name and the less overt performances of those non-actors in the novel who are in some way or other involved with the film, but play-acting and theatre is a presence even in the conversation. Hence the world of opera, significantly enough without the music, makes its appearance
in the speech of Chatsworth when he declares proudly that his one great ambition is to make *Tosca* with Garbo in the title role (PV 15). The world of opera appears in two other narratives within the larger narrative of the novel. In the film, the heroine Toni is supposed to masquerade herself, in a blond wig, as a famous opera singer (PV 46). In the dream that ‘Isherwood’ has there is the appearance of several youths, who are dressed in bits of bearskin, with belts, helmets and swords, ‘shoddy and theatrical-looking, such as supers might wear, in a performance of *The Ring*’ (PV 44). Ashmeade was the star of the Marlowe Society, a Cambridge club named after the 16th century playwright (PV 16). Even during Bergmann’s tours through London, among the people he starts conversation with are boys hanging around ‘the medallion of W.S. Gilbert on the Embankment’ (PV 42).

Play-acting is also embedded in the story of the film itself. The hero Rudolf ‘comes among the workers under false pretences, and in disguise. He flirts with Toni, the girl of the working class. But it is only a damn lousy act, a heartless masquerade...’ as Bergmann explains to ‘Isherwood’ (PV 39). Later in the film the heroine Toni is supposed to masquerade herself, in a blond wig, as a famous opera singer, as already mentioned (PV 46).

Overarching all these various levels of theatre and play-acting is the sheer theatrical unreality of the prospect of another World War that looms large over the novel. We have seen before in Isherwood’s writing, public (in fiction) and private (in letters), that when he has felt any resistance from within at dealing with a certain aspect of reality he has rendered it unreal by describing it as a dream or - as he does here - by describing the reality itself as theatre, which is only to be expected from the Vedantist that he, the
author Isherwood, had become by then. Hence, to ‘Isherwood’, ‘the coming war was as unreal as death itself... I refused to imagine anything; just as a spectator refuses to imagine what is behind the scenery in a theatre’ (PV 33).

While play-acting and theatre is of a piece in Vedantic theory and thus a strong element of Vedantism can be said to underline the novel, even the practices of Vedantism find some echo in the book, as when the sound-stage of the movie studio is being described. ‘In the corner, amidst these ruins, there is life. A single set is brilliantly illuminated. From the distance, it looks like a shrine, and the figures standing around it might be worshippers’ (PV 57).

But the covert Vedantism of the book becomes overt in the conclusion where the language takes on a spiritual significance which it had been hiding behind all the various layers of play-acting, humour and child-like-ness. Isherwood describes a late hour of the night in terms recognisably Vedantic. It is that hour of the night ‘at which man’s ego almost sleeps. The sense of identity, of possession, of name and address and telephone number, grows very faint.’ Bergmann and ‘Isherwood’ become fellow travellers, each ‘a separate, secret consciousness, locked away within itself’ (PV 98). Gradually, the deepest level of play-acting is revealed, and no longer couched in humour or explained as child-like-ness. We are told that we run away from the only important question in life - what makes one go on living? - by taking refuge in a whole lifetime of self-deception. The society, like a waiter, recommends the various things one needs to do to live this life of ignorance; ignorance which can mean lack of knowledge as well as the capacity to ignore. We are reminded of his essay ‘The Wishing Tree’ when we read:
The waiter came forward with a lot of suggestions. You said: ‘What do you advise?’ And you ate it, and supposed you liked it, because it was expensive, or out of season, or had been the favourite of King Edward the Seventh. The waiter had recommended teddy bears, football, cigarettes, motor-bikes, whisky, Bach, poker, the culture of classical Greece. Above all, he had recommended Love: a very strange dish. (PV 99)

Isherwood wrote in ‘The Wishing Tree’ in an identical vein when saying that the elders had always suggested to the children what one should ask from the Wishing Tree - most importantly, more wealth and more power - and the children need not have bothered to ask questions such as, did they really want what the elders were saying they ought to. We are allowed a tantalising glimpse of the world of Vedantic bliss when ‘Isherwood’ faintly sees ‘the way that leads to safety. To where there is no fear, no loneliness, no need of [a long line of lovers].’ But he is also terrified by the prospect of that peace because that would mean that he would ‘no longer be a person. I should no longer be Christopher Isherwood’ (PV 101). It is as if as a result of the brief glimpse of Vedanta that the character has that he recognises Bergmann for what he is, thereby revealing once and for all, the deep truth in his jocular statement earlier, that he himself was a Nazi and that Bergmann was his father. The final stripping off of the make-up is effected. We are told that consciously or otherwise Bergmann and ‘Isherwood’ have become characters in each other’s plays - the maya in which both have been participating. To ‘Isherwood’ Bergmann is, not entirely without justification, ‘the comic foreigner with the funny accent.’ If we allow ourselves a biographical reading of the book, ‘Isherwood’ is, not
entirely without justification, ‘mother’s boy’ to Bergmann (PV 102). But underneath these roles that each had got inevitably assigned to themselves, there is now a deeper recognition of a relationship. Hints to this subcutaneous, spiritual relationship has been dropped twice before. Once when Bergmann lectures ‘Isherwood’ on the English character, and later when Bergmann clowns about at the party to celebrate the end of the filming: ‘And I felt so happy in his success. The way you feel when your father is a success with your friends’ (PV 97). Now, at the end of the narrative, the relationship is finally proclaimed: ‘He was my father. I was his son.’ The parent-child relationship which one finds frequently invoked in the relationships between various characters in Isherwood’s fiction is predictably invoked here too. This declaration also means acknowledgement of the Vedantic truth that all forms in existence, animate or inanimate, are related to one another because they all contain divinity. The goal of one’s life is to recognise these relations and to thus make the next transition to merging with the larger consciousness of which all of existence is a part. Bergmann, perhaps unconsciously, reassures ‘Isherwood’ when his speaks his final words in the novel to him: ‘Good night, my child’ (PV 102).

With his next non-Vedantic book Isherwood moves back to travel-writing mode that we have already seen in Journey to a War. It is interesting that, whereas in the case of the previous book he does not make any attempt at explaining or apologising for his covert almost-racist superiority that informs the narrative, here, in The Condor and the Cows (1949) he pre-empts any charge of insularity and racism by saying:
A diarist ought to make a fool of himself, sometimes. He aims at being impressionistic and spontaneous, rather than authoritative. That is why I have done no systematic reading on this subject. Increased knowledge could only have induced humility and an inferiority complex. Most likely, it would have stopped me writing, altogether. (CC vii)

So, apparently, a superiority complex can facilitate writing, but an inferiority complex and humility contribute to a ‘writer’s block’. The lack of any real interest in the country to which he is travelling has been noticed not only in *Journey to a War* but also in all that he wrote about Bengal, India in connection with his travels on Vedanta Society work. That same lack of interest is evident here. Here, as before, the only way to overcome this considerable internal obstacle is by using the three-pronged by-now tried-and-tested instrument of humour, play-acting and child-like-ness.

In keeping with his penchant for giving himself variations of his own name from book to book here too we find him undergoing yet another temporary re-naming ceremony. He says that he would be very happy to settle in Curaçao. Tourists will advise other travellers, ‘Oh, there’s a man there you mustn’t miss on any account. Known all over Caribbean. They call him Curaçao Chris....’ (CC 5).

The humour becomes operative early. Describing the journey on the cruise ship Isherwood writes of the late afternoon in a way that betrays his Vedantic frame of mind as well:

This is the hour for meditation, philosophy and emotionally significant platitudes. The mind, which has idled all day long, begins to bestir itself.
… It would not be hard, now, to renounce everything earthly - except, perhaps, the cocktail you are sipping. (CC 3)

His eye for the ridiculous serves him faithfully throughout the travels. For instance, when he attends an All Souls’ festival at a Franciscan convent school he narrates the unintentionally comic putting on and taking off of hats by the native Guambia women when they had to listen, alternately, to a Swiss and a Colombian priest (CC 59).

The humour in a situation is sometimes communicated by merely reproducing as much of a conversation as possible, thereby effecting a happy mingling of both humour and a sense of theatre - even if it be a farce! Isherwood transcribes, for example, the conversation his companion Bill Caskey has with another American at the U.S. Embassy’s Thanksgiving party, Caskey denoted by the letter ‘C’ in the transcript:

He: ‘Hallo, there.’
C: ‘Hi.’
He: ‘Will you drink with me.’
C: ‘Sure.’
He: ‘Let’s drink to the U.S.A.’
C: ‘That depends what you mean by the U.S.A.’
He: ‘Oh...well then...let’s drink to the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics.’
C: ‘That depends what you mean by the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics.’… (CC 96)
Humour has to be found everywhere, even if it be at the expense of the citizens of the country being visited. In Buenos Aires, Argentina, Isherwood finds that their ‘faces - regardless of racial origin - have a placid, somewhat bovine expression. This is hardly surprising, considering the amount of meat they eat. (Last month, over 40,000 tons were consumed by this city alone!’(CC 168-9).

The sense of theatrical unreality that we have already seen in his narratives of China and India soon makes it appearance here as well when describing the architecture of Curaçao he speaks of ‘an air of mock grandeur, of Negro high spirits, and something of the décor of the Russian ballet’ (CC 4). In La Paz, ‘the officers are dapper and dashing, like musical comedy heroes’ (CC 142). At the fiesta at Copacabana he finds ‘a group of beggars with stringed instruments who wore ponchos of an exquisitely faded rose-pink which would have delighted any theatrical designer’ (CC 152).

Once a character makes an entry into an Isherwood scenario he has to do a certain amount of play-acting. Not even a temporary driver escapes this rule. Isherwood’s reading of the situation at the Barranquila customs, where the driver gets out of the car, talks to the officials, comes back and informs them that the luggage would not be searched if the travellers brought back a bottle of rum for the officials, is that the driver does not tell them about this in advance because ‘he enjoys acting out this little comedy: to give away the plot in advance would spoil the fun’ (CC 16). There are others who act out their little dramas only to entertain the two tourists. Arturo takes Isherwood and Bill Caskey to the Parque Nacional and adds ‘drama to the occasion by telling us that we [were running] a great risk in coming here at such an hour; many people … had been
murdered by thugs...I ... believe he was ... only hospitably anxious to give us an extra thrill’ (CC 37).

The covert or overt child-like-ness that we have seen in the Isherwood cast of characters so far is inverted by the adult-ness of a child. Here play-acting and performance mingle with shocking adulthood in the actions of a child. In a Moorish-style café enters a girl of about four years with her parents. In a shocking inversion of the image of the actress in Prater Violet who is dressed like a little girl, here is a little girl in ‘frilled skirts’ who with ‘her necklace, her ear-rings, her powdered cheeks and her painted lips.... looked more like a grown-up midget.’ Then she starts to dance. ‘These were no mere childish antics; what made them so extraordinary was their quality of professionalism. This was a performance’ (CC 11). More reassuringly, there is also the girl-woman figure that we are familiar with from ‘Sally Bowles’ and ‘Anita Hayden’. In Argentina Isherwood meets Tota, an old friend of Maria Rosa Oliver and Victoria Ocampo. ‘Although she has grown-up children, there is something about her which makes you think of a shy little girl; her pleased but anxious smile seems to be pleading for kindness from her elders’ (CC 171).

One can imagine how easy Isherwood must have found to describe Evita Perón. Given that she was a bad radio actress, like Sally Bowles was a bad cabaret performer, and that yet the Señora had made her life into a performance, like Isherwood’s Berlin heroine, there cannot have been too many difficulties in deducing Evita’s personality and character. Hardly surprising therefore that we find Isherwood’s favourite stage goddess of all time being evoked while writing on the Argentinian dictator’s wife: ‘[I]t is said that Evita had other previous love affairs, many of them. How dreadful! Just like Sarah
Bernhardt’ (CC 185). Isherwood can describe Evita Perón in terms familiar to him, given his love not only of theatre but also of the glamour of Hollywood. While not willing to resist the comic potential of a story about her naming each of her cats after a famous date in Argentinian history - Isherwood thinks ‘of her calling down the passages of her residence: “July 9th, July 9th, July 9th - where are you? Come and get your milk!”’ - he also knows how to analyse her mass appeal. He writes, ‘It is ... the appeal of a star, inviting both self-identification and admiration. She is their Evita ... the projection of their dearest dreams’ (CC 185-186). Isherwood finds it so easy to put his proverbial finger on the character and image of Evita Perón because of the theatricality and unconscious humour, even camp, that is embedded in it. With this same theatricality lacking in the image of her husband Isherwood confesses, ‘President Perón himself is, of course, equally advertised, but somehow I haven’t nearly such a clear picture of his personality’ (CC 186). But that the Peróns’ function seems to have much in common with that of actors and actresses is something Isherwood does not neglect to mention. He concludes, ‘They are expected to amuse and entertain...’ (CC 186).

Ultimately, in *The Condor and the Cows* it is the drama that endures. In the final paragraphs of the book Isherwood lists a striking range of contrasts which can only be described as dramatic, arranged in a manner so as to produce the effect of a backdrop in the theatre and then to shift the focus on the characters in the foreground: ‘Snow mountains towering sheer up out of jungle and tropical plain. Glaciers overhanging banana-plantations...’ before foregrounding the scene with ‘brand new Cadillacs honking at mules ... the descendants of the Conquistadores laboriously restoring an Incaic temple under the direction of an American archeologist’ (CC 194-195). The drama is brought
close to a climax but left there in the final lines of the book. After running through another, shorter list of vivid South American images he says that these are ‘only bubbles on the water of the pot. What is cooking there, with such ominous sounds, nobody now alive will ever know’ (CC 195).

The next non-Vedantic book that Isherwood wrote was *The World in the Evening* (1954). Play-acting and humour start to make their combined presence felt early in the narrative where the first-person narrator Stephen Monk speaks of his sartorial style at a Hollywood party. No one, he complains, sees the joke of his turning up in a white tuxedo jacket, a crimson bow tie and a carnation to go with his moiré cummerbund. His intention is to ‘masquerade as a musical-comedy-Hollywood character...’ (WE 12). Soon added to this is the idea of the child-within, as becomes obvious when he analyses himself in the act of catching his wife Jane being unfaithful to him with another actor. He acknowledges that at a subcutaneous level his boarding-school self never really went away:

> At my first boarding-school in England, on winter evenings, we had played hide-and-seek sometimes, turning out the lights and hiding all over the big house. When you were He, you tip-toed around holding your breath listening, until your ears grew so keen it seemed you could hear every sound within mile. … A funny thought flashed through my head: I’ve been He for nearly four years. What a long game … (WE 18).
The fact the marriage of Stephen and Jane Monk was a sham is underlined by Isherwood by accentuating the Hollywood in the marriage. First there was the masquerade at the party that even Jane fails to appreciate. Now, before leaving their ‘hate-nest’ for good Stephen looks back at the house and realises that the house has ‘considerable comic possibilities.’ His comment on the balcony, ‘draped with an Indian blanket’ is ‘Romeo and Juliet’, thereby underlining further the theatricality of it all (WE 20).

Stephen Monk’s Quaker aunt Sarah has to be presented in a sympathetic light. She therefore is ‘eager and girlish’ (WE 31, my emphasis). She has to know how to perform as well. When she explains the name ‘Tawelfan’ and its history she assumes ‘the consciously informal attitude in which she would have addressed a Friends’ Meeting for business; leaning forward a little in her chair with her hands resting on the table, loosely clasped’ (WE 40). Her performing in front of Gerda Mannheim, with the grudging support of Stephen, is ‘merely part of a would-be-cute family act’ (WE 41). Resentment against this kind of performance results in Stephen warming to the audience, that is Gerda. Their friendship is marked by a mutual recognition of humour. At the Meeting, therefore, they shake hands with each other ‘with a kind of mock-formality.’ That they are not really a part of the Meeting is shown by Stephen by making their presence at the meeting take on the function of an audience at a theatre, participating and yet sufficiently distanced. “Well?” I asked. “What did you think of it all?” But she merely smiled and said politely, “Very interesting,” as though we were in a theatre, at the end of a play which I’d written’ (WE 55). Even Gerda’s absent husband is given a sense of humour that essentially makes him a Truly Strong Man, very much in the mould of Col. Frank
Isherwood. Her husband’s pictures reveal him to be ‘cheerful and gentle and amiably simple. (A peculiarly modern type of hero, I thought, who could jolly you through a battle by making danger seem funny...’)’ (WE 111). But however much there may be a willingness to consider Gerda and her husband as real people, the voyeur in Stephen still predominates: ‘In my maudlin mood, I gloated over their love like a movie fan, with tears in my eyes,’ thus pushing them back into the realm of the unreal, the theatrical (WE 137).

Having thus invested both humour and some capacity for casual play-acting in Gerda she is now in a position to be a credible commentator on Stephen’s personality and character. It takes her very little time to find out that ‘some part of you - [Stephen] - is still a kid. You know this, but you do not like to be remembered of it. Am I right?’ (WE 64) Even later the reader is reminded of Gerda’s diagnosis of Stephen when she says, ‘People will always be kind to you, Stephen. You can make them feel sorry for you, with your look like a little boy’ (WE 136). The confirmation of her correct diagnosis comes not only from Stephen himself, but also we are informed later, from the Director of the Museum of Sexual Science. He decides that Stephen Monk’s is a case of ‘infantilism’ (WE 89). It is only to be expected therefore that when Elizabeth Rydal describes Stephen to her friend taking care to disguise him as a character in her new book she finds Stephen at his infantile best at the Zoo: ‘And suddenly, he’s a little boy. He jumps about, he shouts, he pulls faces at the monkeys. It’s incredible!’ (WE 92) But the strong bond that is created between Elizabeth and Stephen is not only due to Elizabeth’s recognition of the child in Stephen, but also due to her own revealing of the child in herself. As Stephen apostrophises, ‘Only, it was you who started making faces at the monkeys. You were always the one who got us into the mood. Your silliness was much more spontaneous
than mine’ (WE 98). It must be mentioned here that even after they get married the initial stage is marked by this child-like-ness. Stephen regards the marriage ‘as a kind of game. I thoroughly enjoyed my part of it, the role of husband’ (WE 144). It is inevitable therefore that sooner or later would appear that phrase which marks the founding of a relationship - ‘we both laughed a lot’ (WE 97). This bond of humour is also evident in Elizabeth’s words when she and Stephen are surprised in the darkness by the sound of Sarah’s footsteps soon after he had proposed to Elizabeth. Combining a reference to theatre with humour she remarks, getting ready to tidy her hair in the mirror: ‘This is worse than Lady Windermere’s Fan.’ ‘We were both giggling’ (WE 107). The author of the play mentioned is himself referred to by name, this time too by Elizabeth, when she and Stephen stay at a hotel on the Quai Voltaire in Paris. Although unknown to herself, she is essentially describing the ‘campness’ of the hotel when she speaks of it in one of her letters as ‘an authentic shrine to the Nineties...I expect they still have unpaid bills of Oscar Wilde’s.’ With Wildean irony she continues, ‘And now - us! What a comedown! Not one drop of absynthe have we ordered, not one puff of opium have we smoked. … What have the English writers sunk to?’ In some other letters there are ‘mock-formal announcements such as ‘E.Rydal, female authoress, begs to declare her marriage with S. Monk, gent’ (WE 141). So, the combination of artifice informed by humour which overlays a deep seriousness that Dr. Kennedy proclaims as marking ‘camp’ is something we are shown Elizabeth was well capable of. Since Dr. Kennedy’s expatiation of ‘camp’ comes sixteen pages before the recollection of the marriage, we are given to understand that it is not at all surprising that Stephen understood the idea of ‘camp’ so quickly; he has already seen an element of ‘camp’ in Elizabeth’s letters. But the realisation and its
acknowledgement comes soon afterwards that there was ‘camp’ even in the ‘game’ of husband-and-wife that Stephen imagined himself and Elizabeth playing, rather than being truly married. He admits, ‘It was as if the Monsieur-Madame front … were just a protective device (perhaps what Charles Kennedy would call “a camp”) to prevent anyone from suspecting that we two had discovered a new, unnamed kind of relationship’ (WE 144).

Among the various reasons why Elizabeth and Stephen seem to be so well-suited to each other is because Elizabeth has just as keen an instinct in theatre as does Stephen. We have earlier seen her invoking Oscar Wilde. When they, and the villagers of Schwarzsee, are afforded the voyeuristic pleasure of a public spectacle thinly disguised as a private dinner party on a raft thrown by a rich Bavarian family, Elizabeth exclaims, ‘What a marvellous first act for a play! Only, you know, I have unpleasant feeling that this isn’t a comedy. Not even a satirical one. … I’m afraid it isn’t by Shaw. It might even be Ibsen’ (WE 169). This soon leads to a section where all the three elements that have so far been suggested form a typically Isherwoodian combination of characteristics built into a credible character. These elements come together to give us a picture of how happy the Rydal-Monk marriage is. In the wake of the publication and favourable reception of Elizabeth’s new book As Birds Do, Mother they embark on an orgy of entertaining. The presence of so many people around them brings them together. According to Stephen:

Especially at night … we would lie discussing them and laughing about them in bed. Elizabeth was an extraordinary mimic. She could imitate
Tarr to the life, saying, ‘Picasso’s a ruffian’… While we were having fun like this, we might as well have been children in a nursery. (WE 184)

Elizabeth is not only ‘an extraordinary mimic’ - which means that she has both humour and a capacity for play-acting, but when they are having fun like this, they might as well have been ‘children in a nursery’ - thereby adding to their marriage that crucial element which Isherwood found not only in those who he liked in real life, but also in those who were the enunciators of his new faith - Vedantism. This evocation of childhood in their marriage is something that continues. For example, writing to Mary Scriven from Las Palmas, Elizabeth takes delight in describing the dangerous manta rays in the sea, before adding, in parenthesis, ‘You know, I’ve just realized that I’ve mentioned them for the same reason that one used, as a child to wish wolves would howl around the house at Christmas-time - to add to the snugness of being indoors!’ (WE 193-194)

_The World in the Evening_ is an important novel in the oeuvre of Isherwood because this is the first novel in which he attempts to introduce a homosexual character which is different from those who appear in his previous books. For the first time the homosexual is shown not to be suffering from any kind of psychological problem and is as much a balanced individual as any Isherwood could ever create. It is important therefore that the character of Dr. Charles Kennedy should have all attributes that a favourable Isherwood character is required to have. As always a sense of humour is the most important prerequisite. Hence the doctor focuses intently on his patient’s face ‘with a delighted amusement, as though [Stephen’s] broken thigh in its clumsy cast were a
private joke between the two of [them]' (WE 66). On hearing that Stephen has waived all
claims to damages ‘Kennedy’s expression of horror, part genuine, part clowning, [is] so
funny that’ Stephen starts to laugh. Hardly surprising that the doctor also has a Gerda-
like psychological insight into the patient. When Stephen tells Dr. Kennedy that he does
not know much about how he caused his own accident, the doctor says, ‘You refuse to
know, you mean’ (WE 68). Not only is Isherwood going to show a totally well-adjusted
homosexual for the first time in his work but also a successful homosexual relationship.
Bob Wood is Dr. Kennedy’s lover - ‘such a fine, clean boy. So thoroughly wholesome’,
in the words of Sarah. It is obvious that he should consider a shared sense of humour the
best adhesive to hold such a relationship together. About Dr. Charles Kennedy and Bob,
Sarah comments, ‘Those two boys! They’re so comical, when they’re together, I could
laugh myself into a fit’ (WE 71). Although Bob comes across in the beginning as a
difficult person to get to know he is soon presented in a favourable light. As always in
Isherwood, the improvement of Stephen’s communication-level with Bob is signaled by
the phrase ‘We both laughed’ when Bob first asks Stephen if he believes in God, gets
affirmative in reply, says that he himself cannot stand people who do, to which Stephen
responds with gentle sarcasm, ‘Thanks’ (WE 117). Before Bob leaves Stephen for the
day he responds to Stephen’s parting greeting to take it easy with ‘a quick smile that [is]
both humorous and unhappy’ (WE 122). Bob’s inevitable boyishness is spoken of soon
afterwards when Stephen observes that on some days, ‘especially after he had been
playing tennis or getting a work-out at the College gym - he would be as noisy and silly as
a teen-age boy’ (WE 130). More proof of the homosexual couple’s playful nature come
when once Stephen wakes up and realises that the two men have left leaving a note on his bedside:

‘So sad we had to lose our favourite patient. Here’s the latest X-ray photograph of you. Things don’t seem to be working out too well.

Frankly, I’m alarmed. Suggest you see a specialist.’

This puzzled me, until I looked down at the cast. Bob had drawn all over it in charcoal, continuing the lines of my body and turning them into a kind of hermaphroditic mermaid, with fantastic sexual organs. (WE 131)

In the novel the relationship between Dr. Kennedy and Bob Wood is not the only homosexual one that is portrayed. There is also the brief encounter of Stephen Monk with the athletic blond Michael Drummond. In this case also the relationship begins to take shape with conversations where sooner or later appears the tell-tale phrase ‘...we both began to laugh’ (WE 170). Also, inevitably we have Michael saying, ‘But I won’t talk like this any more. It’s childish’ (WE 172). The fact that, like most of Isherwood’s important characters, Michael is also a child alive and well in the body of an adult, does not escape the novelist Elizabeth. Her advice to Stephen is, ‘...Promise you’ll be very gentle with him. … He’s still learning about life in the most painful way - like a baby who thinks the fire in the grate is a beautiful new kind of flower, and tries to pluck it...’ (WE 200). It is this child-like quality of Michael that makes it so easy for Stephen to treat him as disgracefully as he does. After summarily rejecting Michael’s love on their first night alone together, he tries to cheer the crest-fallen young man by saying that they were supposed to be there to enjoy themselves. ‘Let’s try to, shall we?’ Michael’s face
lights up ‘into a charming smile that was its best feature. It had always reminded me of a child being tickled under the chin’ (WE 213).

Another way in which Stephen maintains his emotional distance from love-sick Michael is by taking recourse to the Isherwoodian method of rendering the reality unreal by turning it either into a dream or an artifice, in this case, a film. When Michael tries to extract some encouragement for his love of Stephen by getting the latter to admit that he was really worried for Michael, spread-eagled earlier on a dangerous part of a huge rock, Stephen crushes his hopes by saying, ‘That was just empathy. I was putting myself in your place, like the audience does in the movies’ (WE 215). But it is ultimately by taking refuge in the world of childhood, or at the most adolescence, that he tries to avoid taking any responsibility when he and Michael finally make love. He does this by remembering, ‘the adolescent, half-angry pleasure of wrestling with the boys at school’ (WE 216).

When Stephen reaches out to Michael at the end of a fight in a gesture of reconciliation he is careful not to give the gesture any romantic significance. He holds out his hand to Michael ‘as you do to a child or a dog. ‘I’m sorry,” I said.’ Michael’s burying his head in Stephen’s lap is similarly denuded of any romantic colour by it being described as ‘a childlike movement.’ Because it is rendered totally safe as ‘a childlike movement’ Stephen does not ‘pull away or feel embarrassed’ (WE 224). This line of perception continues even when Michael asks Stephen, ‘Why can’t I make you love me?’ As far as Stephen is concerned Michael says this with a smile of ‘childlike sadness’ (WE 225).

Towards the end of the expedition, after another night of lovemaking, this time initiated by Stephen himself, they visit a dormant volcano. On the way down from the volcano Michael starts to shout and laugh ‘like a schoolboy’ and Stephen feels the noise is
violating the silent morning, admitting finally, ‘Or so I felt as I watched him, in my guilt’ (WE 228).

*The World in the Evening* is perhaps the least satisfactory novel he ever wrote and he himself never stops finding faults with it. As is only natural Isherwood puts down the totally ineffective last line of the novel to a lack of humour. Writing about the book in 1971 he puts down the falseness in Stephen Monk’s tone, when he says he forgives himself from the bottom of his heart, to the following lack:

The words were actually Christopher’s; he had once said them to Iris Tree, but in a quite different, campy, playacting tone, with a deep comic sigh…:

‘God knows, Iris, I forgive myself – from the bottom of my heart.’ After which they had both roared with laughter. When Stephen speaks the line one doesn’t laugh. One is embarrassed. (LY 227)

A year after the publication of *The World in the Evening*, Isherwood embarked on his next novel. The novel, on which work began on 28 May 1955 and which underwent three name changes in the course of the next five years before becoming *Down There on a Visit* on 5 December 1960, is in more senses than one a recapitulation of his pre-Vedantic past. One of the most interesting aspects of its making is the influence the work of a certain artist friend had on Isherwood. Given his deep awareness of the artistic abilities of his parents Isherwood was in a very good position to appreciate art. In the course of his life he had been close to artists such as Keith Vaughan, John Minton and David Hockney to name only three. But one artist friend who had tremendous effect on Isherwood was Francis Bacon. Just as Frank Isherwood had taught his son Christopher
how to look and develop the visual perception of an artist, Francis Bacon had unwittingly augmented it by saying something that Isherwood remembered whenever he practiced his own art of writing fiction. Although he had evidently met Bacon earlier, the first time that he mentions the artist in his diary is on 10 February 1956 when in London with Don Bachardy. He writes: ‘We went to look at some Francis Bacon paintings at the Hanover Gallery. I remember Francis saying to me that he always tries to “get down to the nerve”’ (D 580). Struggling with his new novel he mentions the Bacon remark again on 26 November when he decides, ‘My present plan is to write the second draft in the same mood as that in which I wrote the first - good-humoured patient fumbling - to “get down to the nerve”’ (D 665). Twenty one years later he still remembers the quote and mentions it in an interview with Paul Bailey broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 28 March 1977. Speaking about what he feels to be the defects of *The World in the Evening* he says, ‘Now what I feel is - it was put awfully well by a great friend of mine, Francis Bacon, the great artist, when he said, and how he does [sic] it – “I always try to get down to the nerve.” And I feel that’s the thing’ (Bailey). The influence of Francis Bacon, the way for which was made by the influence of Frank Isherwood, is more relevant in the case of *Down There on a Visit* which shares with Bacon’s paintings images and situations or even just ambiances which are essentially horrible, hellish and therefore viscerally painful.

This is, however, not obvious from the outset. The book starts quite innocuously like any other Isherwood novel. Familiar elements like humour and play-acting come into operation by the seventh page, when ‘Isherwood’ starts to play, in his mind, ‘the lead in an epic drama, adapted freely from Conrad, Kipling and Browning’s “What’s become of the Waring?”’ (DV 7) The need to dramatize his current situation is later explained
thus: ‘His life has been lived … within narrow limits and he is naïve about most kinds of experience…. To reassure himself, he converts it into epic myth as fast as it happens. He is forever play-acting’ (DV 8). But there is a constant anxiety to safeguard against the play-acting becoming one in earnest. To ensure that it never happens there is the presence of bathos somewhere in the vicinity of the narrative. Hence, he underlines the comic manner in which he is bundled off into the steamer with the words, ‘My entrance upon Act One of the drama was lacking in style’ (DV 9). As if to further accentuate the bathetic the steamer happens to be called Coriolanus. Captain Dobson, among his other physical features, has ‘the pouchcd, bulging eyes of a comedian’ (DV 10). Later in the voyage the Captain appears more like ‘a comic music-hall sea dog’ (DV 13). Hardly surprising therefore that, as if establishing a subcutaneous kinship with our narrator, the Captain says, “‘This is the first stage of our daring voyage.’” In his own way he was trying to create an epic atmosphere. All right - I awarded him marks for effort’ (DV 11). In awarding the Captain ‘marks for effort’ ‘Isherwood’ introduces the third element of his technique - the element of the child-like. Layered over the patina of mock epic is now the further layer of the child-like. The Captain therefore becomes a schoolboy doing nothing more than an exercise. Soon it is the turn of ‘Christopher’ to be treated likewise. When he willfully refuses to accompany Mr. Lancaster to the banquet he is asked, ‘Why not?’ by the uncle in a manner akin to that of ‘an adult listening to the excuses of a schoolboy’ (DV 18). Mr. Lancaster shares with his nephew an uncanny ability to spot the child in any adult he meets. His analysis of the Peruvian Sr. Emilio Machado is one that could very well have been made by ‘Christopher’: ‘Isn’t he a dear old man? Doesn’t matter what age he is - he always stays a child’ (DV 38). As has been shown already, the
element of the child-in-the-adult is highlighted by Isherwood whenever he wants a
close-up of the child-in-the-adult whenever Isherwood wants a
character to be regarded sympathetically. He finds another use for this technique in this
novel. He uses it to deflect too much attention to the homoerotic overtones which
naturally become obvious in passages describing the sensually muscular body of
Waldemar. ‘We smiled at each other tentatively, then started to wrestle … swam races.
But though we were playing like kids, I was chiefly aware of the fact that he was already
a young man’ (DV 43).

The character of Waldemar carries over into the next chapter of the book -
‘Ambrose’. Although the homoerotic nature of their relationship always lurks at a
subtextual level, that there is extra-sexual affinity between the two is spelt out adequately.
That Waldemar likes ‘melodramatic explanations’ makes him temperamentally akin to
‘Christopher’ to an important extent, because this means they both appreciate the
necessity for drama in life (DV 48). Kinship of an even deeper nature is suggested
between ‘Christopher’ and Ambrose when it is said about the former that although he was
‘about my age...his figure was slim and erect and there was a boyishness in his quick
movements.’ That there is considerable dramatic potential here as well is something the
reader is alerted to by the remark that Ambrose ‘could have posed for the portrait of a
saint’ (DV 57). Later we are told that the character ‘has the sort of indifference to
discomfort and hardship which you would expect to find in a great hero or saint’ (DV 83).
Ambrose is also on Isherwood’s side of the binary that begins to form with the
appearance of Geoffrey. Geoffrey is virulently heterosexual, thereby setting himself up
on the opposite side of Ambrose, the stridently camp Greek Aleko, and indeed
‘Isherwood.’ In a stroke that is typical of Isherwood, and is reminiscent of his Berlin
works, homosexuality is encoded in Ambrose even by association, as when he is declared to be, in the perceived eye of Hans, an ‘eccentric, like Frederick the Great’ (DV 78). By bringing in a grand historical figure, widely regarded as having been homosexual, as a term of reference Isherwood is not only signaling the sexuality of Ambrose but also showing him up in a mock-heroic light, and thereby gesturing towards a comic performance, intended or unintended by the character concerned, that is very much the author’s stock-in-trade. This idea is underlined by the statement ‘but one must remember that Ambrose is a Shakespearean king’ (DV 85). Geoffrey is also unabashedly racist, opposed therefore to the ‘bolshevik’ Ambrose. This binary is only underlined by the fact that Geoffrey is only capable of an ossified kind of humour that does not amuse anymore. The only time Geoffrey approaches comedy is when he argues with Ambrose. Their quarrel is ‘seriocomic.’ But this binary breaks down when even in him Isherwood detects the child. Geoffrey has ‘an air of debauched boyishness’ (DV 64). He treats Hans ‘like a rude child.... he keeps up an incredibly babyish pretense that Hans’s name, Schimdt, is too difficult and foreign for him to remember!’ (DV 78) There is something ‘childlike in Geoffrey which makes him able to believe in and enter into Ambrose’s imaginary kingdom, as a child enters into the world of a fairy story’ (DV 84). Even Maria who arrives in pursuit of Geoffrey and is totally unwelcome in Ambrose’s all-male ‘kingdom’, shares this attribute with the others. She exclaims, ‘Oh! how I adore la vie de gipsy!’ clapping her hands ‘with childlike delight ... ’ (DV 99). When once ‘Isherwood’ comes upon Maria and some of the Greek boys in the undergrowth he is ‘like a grownup surprising children at a game’ (DV 101). But the tables are turned when Maria announces her reading of the psychology of Englishmen. She declares, ‘All the secrets of the
Englishmen are childish. That is why they will rather die in tortures than confess them’ (DV 105).

Ambrose and Aleko may be the most obvious performers on the island but they are not the only ones. Trying to extract some amusement from a sulking, irritable ‘Isherwood’ Maria gives him ‘a glance of truly vintage coquetry - not a day younger than 1914 - from under her sky-blue eyelids’ (DV 103). While ‘Isherwood’ watches and records everybody’s performance he himself is not immune to the attractions of having an audience. When the workmen find ‘Isherwood’ typing a letter home they stand around and watch. ‘I couldn’t stop typing as long as the workmen were watching me; it would have spoiled their fun’ (DV 82). This sense of performance is drawn attention to again when life on St. Gregory is described as ‘like a play which had to be performed day after day in its original version but with a cast which was no longer big enough.’ But of course the play being performed could not afford to be a tragedy. It would have to consist mostly of ‘clowning’ (DV 108).

This sense of comedy or farce is never far from the surface of Isherwood’s narrative even as we enter the next section of the book – ‘Waldemar.’ When we meet Waldemar now he is travelling under a different name – Eugen. This is for the benefit of the person who is with Waldemar now – Dorothy. The Dorothy-Waldemar relationship seems quite obviously to have been modeled on the real-life relationship that Isherwood had with the original of Waldemar, that is Heinz Neddermeyer. The fact that Isherwood is not only fictionalising himself in a female form but also giving her a name which has a clear homosexual resonance is yet another example of the queer performance that is at work here.³ This exercise in transverse is fittingly presented with as much humour as
possible. So, Waldemar’s name change is a ‘full farce’ which makes ‘Isherwood’ ‘hysterical’ (DV 121). In keeping with trend of Isherwoodian characterisation, Dorothy soon enough declares Waldemar to be ‘like a five-year-old child’ who sees the world ‘as one big children’s party’ (DV 123). But when Dorothy and Waldemar get a taxi, the driver treats them both ‘as if they were a pair of children’ (DV 131). With war clouds fast gathering over England, ‘Isherwood’ is dismayed to find how inconducive the English countryside is to a tragic treatment: ‘This scenery is too tame for tragedy. But that won’t stop tragedy from being performed here and pathetic little supporting actors from being pushed onto the stage to play tragic roles. Sophocles for the suburbs’ (DV 133).

‘Isherwood’ himself owns up to role-playing soon afterwards when he speaks of his lectures on China. He struts ‘mock-modestly, playing the hero – for the benefit of anyone attractive who may happen to be in the audience’ (DV 133). Just as he is careful not to take himself too seriously, he finds it difficult to take others seriously too. Earlier he had become hysterical with laughter in reacting to Waldemar’s assumed identity for Dorothy. We also find him unable to ‘help roaring with laughter’ at his friend Stephen Savage’s preoccupations (DV 141). And still later the only reaction ‘Isherwood’ and all his friends are capable of, in the face of the impending war is ‘Crisis laughter’ (DV 142). Humour, performance and homosexuality all come together graphically in the narrator’s reaction to the forecast that London would be bombed in two days when ‘Isherwood’ and his friend have sexual intercourse in front of a mirror. Says ‘Isherwood’s’ friend, ‘Like actors in a blue movie, except that we are much more attractive’ (DV 147). This self-conscious performance of queer sexuality and commenting on it with humour
encapsulates everything about Isherwood’s usage of play-acting and humour in his work. It is in this strain that ‘Isherwood’ speaks of ‘the super-scene’ in the House of Commons. ‘Chamberlain’s voice breaking. Queen Mary in tears’ (DV 153). It is as though the whole world were in costume and were performing. Everybody, be it ‘Isherwood’, or the British Prime Minister or the Queen Mother, are all playing their respective roles, always conscious of the audience.

The last section of the book is entitled ‘Paul’ and is based on the real-life character Denham Fouts. Speaking about Denham Fouts, Isherwood once said, ‘He was witty...and for all his sneerings about religion, he did take Vedanta seriously. … He was very much like Sally, they both tended to play-act their lives’ (Scobie, ‘The Youth’ 30). According to this description Denny Fouts was ‘camp’. This is why Denham Fouts fits into the stereotype of the Isherwoodian character so well. When we first see Paul he is ‘boyishly skinny,’ and is ‘dressed like a boy in his teens’ (DV 160). Much later Augustus Parr would see in Paul’s face ‘the face of a pre-adolescent boy’ (DV 201). Faced with a role-player, ‘Isherwood’ fine-tunes his performance as well, starting with the smile: ‘I smile my “We are amused” smile. I have started using this only recently; it is still in the experimental stage. Properly smiled, it should indicate that the smiler finds life great fun… sub specie aeternitatis as the eternal dance, maya, mother’s play’ (DV 162). By thus bringing in maya Isherwood introduces, for the first time overtly in his fictional work, the world of Vedanta which he had by then been involved with for over twenty years. This seemingly effortless introduction of the Vedantic is also proof of the porosity of the Vedantic discourse for a person like Isherwood with his obsessions of play-acting, humour and the child-in-the-adult. Within minutes of meeting each other ‘Isherwood’
and Paul seem to have struck a cord in each other. The cord struck being so profound that ‘Isherwood’ interprets Paul’s behaviour as saying to him: ‘if you and I were alone, we could cut out this play-acting’ (DV 164). But this being Los Angeles, a city in which everything is something else, all is chimera, play-acting goes on all around ‘Isherwood’.

In London it was the Prime Minister and Queen Mary. Here it is the houses, the furniture in them. All is performance. Thus the house in which Paul lives at that time with one of his many sponsors, Ruthie, has a roof beamed ‘like a Gothic chapel’, the living room is ‘full of that curiously theatrical furniture one [finds] in many old Hollywood houses. Those high-backed velvet chairs – you couldn’t imagine ordinary people of any century sitting in them, only actors in period costume’ (DV 170-171). Paul never loses an opportunity to perform. One his finest hours is in the courtroom where he appears under the charge of drunk driving. He looks ‘uncannily young’ and says ‘Guilty’ in ‘a small, clear voice.’ ‘Isherwood’ thinks it ‘the greatest thing since Joan of Arc’ (DV 218). Paul not only performs the role of the little boy with ease, but also breaks the heteronormative at every conceivable opportunity. He slips effortlessly into the role of the housekeeper when he first offers to make breakfast for ‘Isherwood’ (DV 184). He repeatedly calls ‘Isherwood’ ‘honey chile’ in a tone which can only be called camp, right to the end (DV 239, 252, 270). Further he also sings once, ‘dreamily’, ‘Someone to Watch Over Me’, the George-Gershwin song made famous by Lena Horne, the singer with whom Denny Fouts was ‘great friends’ according to Isherwood’s diary entry of 30 May 1943 (D 297). Paul’s dog has the appropriately show-business-evocative camp name of Gigi. His fascination with show business and facility with homosexual lingo also shows in his estimate of Parr when he declares, ‘Miss Parr is still the biggest saint in show business’ (DV 258).
‘Isherwood’ rightly deduces that Paul has assigned himself ‘the feminine role’ in the domestic set-up that he shares with ‘Christopher’ (DV 225). This is further underlined by Paul’s constantly referring to himself as Isherwood’s ‘Auntie’ (DV 243, 257). As the narrative progresses the character of Augustus Parr, based on Gerald Heard, makes his appearance. True to form one of the first descriptions we get of Augustus Parr has the word ‘theatrical’ in it (DV 174). So when ‘Isherwood’ first takes Paul to meet Augustus, and the latter leaves the room for a short while, they sit silent ‘like spectators in the theater who don’t want to break the spell because they know that this is only a quick scene change and not the end of an act’ (DV 190). Parr’s own performance leaves very little to be desired. When he speaks of the sheer beastliness of the world beginning to hurt one like ‘crushing your finger in a door’, ‘his face [contracts] with pain as he [speaks]; he [has] a trick of unconsciously miming his remarks.’ When he speaks of being ‘strapped down hand and foot…so that we cannot move a muscle’ he ‘[writhes] a little, as if straining against the bonds.’ He says, ‘pretension’s worst of them all. That’s the very dickens,’ and winces ‘as if from a familiar pang of rheumatism’ (DV 192). He knows the value of timing when giving a performance, and exploits this skill on the telephone when narrating his first day with Paul. On the verge of describing ‘something [that] took place this morning that moved one very much’, he heightens the climax by going into enormous diversions (DV 200). Not only does he play-act but Parr also mentally casts other people in theatrical scenarios. ‘Isherwood’ decides that Parr has cast Paul ‘in the role of spiritual mutant, egg-shell breaking chick’, ‘bless his histrionic old heart!’ (DV 216) Parr is not the only overtly spiritual person with a penchant for self-performance. Dave Wheelwright is ‘a bit of a spiritual prima donna’ (DV 216).
Incidentally, the other Christian in the group is Ian Banbury whose talk of Jesus makes ‘Isherwood’ squirm. Ian, however, redeems himself by reacting with calm and common sense to the hysteria let loose by the accusation of sexual intercourse with a minor made against Paul by the concerned minor’s jealous sister. Ian looks ‘quite boyish’ (DV 239). In the presence of such actors as these it is hardly surprising that a certain theatricality would become obvious in ‘Isherwood’’s interactions with both Paul and Parr. Thus his writing a cheque for ten thousand dollars in Paul’s name is ‘a wild theatrical gesture’, which when not having the dramatic effect it was meant to have, makes ‘Isherwood’ think, ‘My big act hadn’t quite come off’ (DV 212). However, since ‘Isherwood’’s play-acting does not go as far deep as that of Paul’s, for example, and because ‘Isherwood’ has a much stronger hold of reality than Paul does, he survives, while Paul ossifies in his role of a stylish man-about-town and dies a distinctly unstylish, undignified death in the john at a party thrown by himself.

Play-acting is of crucial importance in the next novel by Isherwood – A Single Man (1964). The performance starts with getting the voice right. In that hour of the day when the protagonist George has not really surfaced from sleep, if anyone calls him they would hear not the real voice of George but the consciousness’s mimicry of the public voice of George. ‘Its voice’s mimicry of their George is nearly perfect’ (SM 9). By the time he has fully woken up and is in fact busy killing ants in the kitchen with a Flit-gun he is conscious of the ‘audience’ of objects watching ‘life destroying life.’(SM 10) Living alone in a house that can only be reached by a bridge across a creek, and blocked off in the back by a steep bushy cliff, it is easy for him to make believe that he is on an
island, as he had enthused to his now-dead lover Jim when they had first seen it. (SM 15)

This need to make believe is something he shares with others who originally settled on
his street, although he finds it more convenient to think of them, and indeed their
contemporary equivalents, as his enemies. It is easy to demonize them. They also gave
their own imaginative spin on their living conditions, referring to their ‘stucco bungalows
and clapboard shacks as cottages; giving them cute names like The Fo’c’sle. … Their
utopian dream was of a subtropical English village with Montmartre manners’ (SM 13).

George’s workplace shares this island-like atmosphere with his home. ‘The San Tomas
State College campus is back on the other side of the freeway. You cross over to it by a
bridge’ (SM 33). So, both at home or at work George can be only reached by crossing an
actual physical bridge. The fact that there is also a need for an emotional, social bridge is
something that becomes more and more marked as the narrative progresses. The role-
playing works in two ways. One is for his own benefit, the other for the benefit of the
others. The earlier make-believe was for his own benefit, to reinforce for himself the
feeling of being alone, isolated. We later come to know how important it is for George to
feel alone when we learn that his first few moments of unspoken confrontation with the
students of his class makes him feel ‘brilliant, vital, challenging, slightly mysterious, and
above all, foreign’ (SM 46). Now, as he drives into his workplace he ‘puts on the
psychological makeup’ for the role of the professor that his work requires himself to play
(SM 32). As he gets out of the car he feels an ‘eagerness for the play to begin.’ Soon the
performance begins: ‘He is all actor now; an actor on his way up from the dressing room,
hastening through the backstage world of props and lamps and stagehands to make his
entrance’ (SM 35).
We are told that George never enters a class with any student, because ‘a deeply-rooted dramatic instinct forbids him to do so.’ Today his entrance ‘is quite undramatic, according to conventional standards. Nevertheless this is a subtly contrived, outrageously theatrical effect’ (SM 45). It is significant that the one student who is to play an important role in the book is described with the word ‘humorous’ figuring in the description. Kenny Potter ‘would be conventionally handsome if he didn’t have a beaky nose; but it is a nice one, a large humorous organ’ (SM 48). As with his other books here also humour becomes a means to decide who is or is not a character’s ally or a potential ally. Kenny’s reaction to George’s jokes therefore becomes important. Sometimes Kenny laughs a ‘deep rather wild laugh’ when the latter has just made a joke, and George feels Kenny is laughing with him. But when the laughter comes a little late ‘George gets a spooky impression that Kenny is laughing not at the joke but at the whole situation’(SM 49). The Asians in the book are interesting especially in the light of what has been said in the previous chapter. Isherwood had remarked about Indians to Gore Vidal, after the former’s first visit to India, ‘There are so many of them. And how few there are of us, the white race. We must create special reservations for people like the Danes, to protect our exotic blond wildlife’ (Vidal 408). We find George remarking on the student demographic of his college that ‘the dark heads [are] far predominating over the blond’ (SM 37). George not only fails to find the Asians sexually attractive, but there is that significant lack as well, that of humour. Thus, not only is the beauty of Lois Yamaguchi and Alexander Mong the sexless beauty of ‘plants’ but he cannot decipher their smiles either: ‘but who can be sure of anything with these enigmatic Asians?’ (SM 49) The
almost-racist overtones of such sentiments become even more obvious when we consider that although Isherwood had meant this book to be speaking not just for homosexuals but all minorities, George conveniently decides that the ‘dark heads’ are, contrary to the wider social picture, the majority, at least in the campus, and are therefore unlikely to be allies of George. The lack of comic rapport between the Asians and George merely underlines this almost-racist configuration. However Lois seems to be partially redeemed by her affair with the Caucasian Kenny. Proof of this is the fact that Kenny and Lois are also attributed that Isherwoodian characteristic – the child-in-the-adult – which we have already found in so many of Isherwood’s characters. Thus, when George discovers the young lovers under a tree on campus he imagines them as ‘children playing at being stranded on a South Pacific atoll.’ George ‘passes quite close by their atoll as a steamship might, without stopping. Lois seems to know what he is, for she waves gaily at him, exactly as one waves to a steamship’ (SM 63).

When George briefly loses his temper on discovering that none of his class has read the text scheduled for discussion today – Huxley’s After Many a Summer – he tries to undo the damage by falling back on trusted humour. In his telling of the story of Tithonus he combines humour with subtle homoeroticism and gets the desired effect from the class, especially from the one closeted student in the class, named Wally Bryant. The audience laughs or smiles at four different places, even if they think the ‘pay-off’ a disappointment (SM 52-53). But it is not so much as an actor on or off stage, but as a ‘performer at the circus’ which ‘has no theatre-curtains to come down and hide him and thus preserve the magic spell of his act unbroken’ that George sees himself as the narrative progresses (SM 77). He finds something deeply depressing about the anonymity
of being ‘unfollowed by the spotlights yet plainly visible to anyone who cares to look at
him’ (SM 77). In lieu of the attention of others George decides to lavish attention on this
body himself. After a visit to the hospital to see the dying ex-lover of Jim, Doris, he goes
to the gymnasium for a vigorous workout. Standing in front of the mirror, he is at once
revealing the other Isherwoodian traits that have so far been missing. He finds about him
an ‘air of a withered boy’, can still see in the reflection someone ‘boyish, pretty’ and
when he looks grimly at himself he does so not only with ‘distaste’ but also with
‘humour’ (SM 88-89, my emphases). It is this humour that manifests itself not only in
the attitude of George but also in his actions. Thus, standing on the top of the hills
looking out over Los Angeles, he first projects himself grandly as ‘a sad Jewish prophet
of doom’ and then undercuts it, bathetically, by adding ‘as he takes a leak’ (SM 94).

Charlotte, who had started out as the central character in Isherwo-
dod’s plan for the
book, naturally has to be aware of the importance of performance, conscious of the effect.
When George comes to sup with her she tells where her son is now with his girlfriend
‘with conscious drama’ (SM 104). Also, when she asks George to tell her stories about
his last visit to England which she has heard many times before, she is ‘as persistent as a
child’ (SM 111). When he suggests that it is time for both to get some sleep, ‘she’s like a
child stalling off bedtime with questions’ (SM 121). As in the case of ‘Isherwood’s’
relationship with Sally Bowles in Goodbye to Berlin, or Stephen Monk’s relationship
with Gerda in The World in the Evening, the relationship between George and Charlotte is
one that is marked by the child-parent binary and by the presence of play-acting. In Tom
Ford’s 2009 film based on the novel there are memorable scenes of George and Charlotte
laughing together. Isherwood would have put it thus, as he often does in his fiction and
non-fiction: ‘We both laughed.’ When George finally succeeds in his efforts at putting Charlotte to sleep ‘she is like a child who has at last submitted to being tucked into her cot’ (SM 122). After leaving Charlotte’s house George goes to his old haunt, the Starboard Side, and not surprisingly finds, among other things, an elderly couple in a state of ‘mild quarrelsome alcoholism which makes it possible for them to live, in a play-relationship, like children’ (SM 126, my emphasis). Very soon George himself will revert, inevitably if temporarily, to a child-like state when he and his student go to the ocean to swim naked. While only a short while ago he was being Nanny to Charlotte and had so far been watching other people being child-like, while he himself was only boyish, now under the supervision of Kenny he finally becomes a child too: ‘Kenny’s hands are under George’s armpits and he is laughing and saying like a Nanny, “That’s enough for now!”’ George has ‘shrunk to child-size within the safety of Kenny’s bigness’ (SM 138-139).

Having put George back in touch with his own childhood, one evoked earlier in the narrative when the lonely breakfast being eaten by George takes him back to his childhood days in the nursery, Kenny leaves him to die quietly alone in his sleep. ‘The heartbreakingly insecure snugness of those nursery pleasures’, the memory of that ‘dear tiny doomed world’ returns in the end of the book where George leaves the ‘insecure snugness’ of his Californian bed with only the lifeless body inhabited by him remaining (SM 11).
The visual, and the comic aspects of *A Single Man* was discussed by Isherwood when he agreed with David J. Geherin that the novel would make ‘an excellent film’:

‘Oh yes, it’s very often been considered as a film....

One thing right away which occurs to me which I would like would be that the dead lover ought to be seen every so often, just sitting about in the room, smoking, lounging with his feet up, quite solid. Or he would be coming down the stairs and they would pass each other, or he would be seen looking in at the window.... There should be a considerable period before you realise that the person isn’t alive....

There’s a sequence toward the end where George is masturbating and has these sex fantasies and keeps changing the actors in the fantasies because they don’t function properly. This could be an extraordinary scene of comedy which I never have seen on the screen. There would be people like players in a football game continually running out onto the field.

(Geherin 157)

One of the reasons why Isherwood was so eager on the filmic aspect of the book was obviously because he was deeply inspired by a film when he was writing the book. In two different interviews he speaks of his indebtedness to Michelangelo Antonioni’s *La Notte*. In an interview given four years after the publication of *A Single Man* Isherwood said, ‘I was absolutely obsessed by *La Notte*.’ He continued:

It seemed to offer a reflection of the way that experience really happens to you. Of course it’s a terrible razor’s edge you have to walk in this kind of
art, because on the one hand you’ve got something so symbolic it’s bore and on the other hand you have a whole lot of irrelevancies that don’t connect. But the wanderings of Jeanne Moreau in the earlier part of *La Notte*, the business with the rocket, and this strange abrupt bloodthirsty fight between the boys, which is suddenly over again and she wanders off, all this seemed to me quite extraordinary. (Higham 38)

In 1973 he told Carola Kaplan, ‘I was obsessed with Antonioni’s *La Notte* at that time. I didn’t take anything from it but there was something about the feeling of *La Notte*’ (Caplan 272). In December 1964 Methuen sent a copy of *A Single Man* to the BBC for consideration as a play. In June 1971 Isherwood was asked to give permission to the adaptation of the book into a radio play, when he had already had film offers for the book. He replied on the 14th of that month giving the project a cautious approval as long as the script is written ‘without the slightest sentimentality and without special pleading – as I hope and believe the novel is.’ It is not until March 1972 that the script of the book adapted for the radio is ready. The play was ultimately recorded on 9 March 1972, adapted by Eric Ewens and produced by Richard Wortley, with music such as ‘Apple Honey’ by Woody Herman, ‘Venus’ by Frankie Avalon and ‘Poetry in Motion’ by Johnnie Tillotson, and was broadcast at 20:30 on Monday, 22 May that year. It may also be mentioned here that the novel was also adapted for the stage and starred Alec McCowen – further testimony to the ease with which the novel lends itself to a dramatic treatment. But it is not until 2009 that the novel finally made it to celluloid in Tom Ford’s award-winning adaptation with Colin Firth as George.
Isherwood’s last novel *A Meeting by the River* (1967) is perhaps the closest he ever got in his fiction to writing a play, in the sense that there is a total absence of the narrator, especially of the omniscient narrator that we find in some of his previous novels. Here the narrative takes the form of various characters speaking in monologues, through their letters and journal entries. May be this is the reason why it was so readily considered for a full-fledged dramatic treatment soon after it came out. Not only did Isherwood and Bachardy turn it into a play but also into a screenplay soon afterwards.

The character of the Swami that is present in the letters and journal entries of Oliver embodies much of what can be considered both Vedantic and theatrical – a sense of detachment. One of the first indications we get of this detachment is when we hear him speak of his own body. The Swami takes his poor constitution with that crucial Isherwoodian attitude – a sense of humour. ‘I have a Bengali body’ he says, ‘not good for much!’ Oliver goes on to comment, ‘He was astonishingly cheerful about it… He actually did seem to find his inefficient body, and the predicament of being obliged to live inside it, funny!’ (MR 16) We know that this seemed to Isherwood to be even an artistic merit. In an interview to *Paris Review* he spoke about a book called *When Doctors Are Patients*, saying, ‘It was written by doctors who had different complaints, and one of them gave a marvelous description of what it’s like to have heart disease…. This doctor caught the drama of the thing, and he was objective about it’ (Scobie, *Paris Review* 222). Of course the first time that Isherwood used this kind of distancing technique was in the descriptions of Elizabeth Rydal’s heart disease in *The World in the Evening*. But he was clearly interested enough in it to use it again in this later book.
The play-acting in the book starts with Patrick’s letters to Oliver. When Patrick writes, ‘I’m afraid I am a shameless sentimentalist, and getting more of one as I get older,’ the reader is clearly alerted to the fact that this supposed confession may very well be anything but (MR 27). He postures as the listless lover to his Californian pick-up Tom when he writes to the young man, and in the process revealing his spectacular selfishness, ‘Tom, I need your love, terribly. And I’m asking you now to go on loving me, even though I haven’t told you I love you or made any promises’ (MR 42). Patrick never stops performing at the Monastery. At the prospect of being introduced to the Mahanta he has ‘a bad case of stage-fright’ (MR 49). He finds it comforting to think that Oliver play-acts too. So he can tell his wife Penelope that during the long wait for him at the airport Oliver ‘had no doubt been rehearsing our meeting…’(MR 50) and finds it discomforting that Oliver may be ‘utterly exposed. Even the thinnest mask, the one nearly all of us wear for decency, has been stripped off” (MR 51). Oliver is keenly aware of Patrick’s performance all the time. Patrick’s patronising attitude to the natives is not lost on Oliver who finds his brother ‘super-benevolent and super-diplomatic’ and that behind his ‘exceedingly polite and tactful’ exterior there is a ‘teasing sparkle’ which means ‘be frank, Brother dear, you’ve had to swallow this mumbo-jumbo…but you don’t believe it anymore than I do’ (MR 60-61).

For Patrick, play-acting is organically linked to the idea of fun. Oliver is aware of this when he confides to his journal that he should not worry about telling Patrick too much because the latter would not understand the spiritual activity going on inside him because he ‘wouldn’t be able to make a funny story out of it’ (MR 66). For Patrick living in the closet can also be fun. He explains to Tom that ‘there’s nothing dishonourable in
that, it can even be a lot of fun. We’ll play a game against them [the heterosexual majority], Tom, and we’ll outfox them and laugh at them while we are doing it. Do you know, I have a feeling that playing this game is going to be what binds us together more than anything else?’ (MR 72) So, as far Patrick is concerned the idea of play-acting and fun is even more important to him than even his sexuality. When he writes to Penelope and wonders about the way his visit to Oliver could be perceived by the monks he says, ‘There is some kind of opposition, deep down, between them and me, even if it’s no more serious than a game of chess. All right, I’m quite willing to play chess with them … It should be fun!’ (MR 85) In his final letter to Penelope before leaving India Patrick has to find a way to break to her as gently as possible his latest act of infidelity. He starts off by saying, ‘It seems to me that we only play at “marriage” for the benefit of other people, to reassure them that we’re like they are and not freaks’ (MR 153). This idea of playing at marriage reminds us of the Stephen Monk-Elizabeth Rydal marriage in The World in the Evening: marriage as play-acting. This allows for some diminishing of marital responsibility. This is further built on by portraying himself first as a teenager in an adult’s body and then, but inevitably, as a child in relation to whom she becomes the mother. He pleads, ‘Oh Penny, can’t we forget about “marriage” altogether and live in our own special way, the way that’s natural to us? Can’t I quite shamelessly be the child who keeps running home to you…?’ (MR 154) By giving himself the role of the child and casting his wife in the role of his mother Patrick is also perverting an exemplary story that Ramakrishna is quoted as having told to his disciples once. In the story the child is in the midst of his play, but cries, ‘I’ll go to Mummy’ once the mother calls, and leaves all his toys without a second thought. On the subject of Oliver’s doubts about monkhood
he says, ‘It would be funny, if it weren’t so horrible sad’ (MR 92). For Patrick, as for so many of Isherwood’s characters, it is essential to discover a person’s ability to be humorous in order to like them. So, the only way in which the formidable cultural and racial divide between him and the monks can be bridged is through an acknowledgement of their sense of fun. He tells his mother, ‘they’re well able to enjoy the humorous aspect of the solemn role their position in the Order demands that they play’ (MR 76). His terms of reference come naturally from the theatre. The marble seat where Oliver’s guru used to sit is ‘the sort of prop one associates with the less inspired productions of Shakespeare plays’ (MR 77). He describes Oliver’s forthcoming taking of monastic vows as his ‘première’ (MR 104). Naturally Patrick diagnoses, or pretends to, Oliver’s problem in terms of casting actors in parts. His final analysis is, ‘You were born to play one part, but Mother cast you for another! Don’t you think it’s time you took over your proper role?’ (MR 130) Thus it can be seen as poetic justice that he himself should be miscast, not by his Mother, but by Tom. Tom, casts Patrick in the role of ‘Lance’ a character in a steamy homosexual novel which Tom is obsessed with and which character Tom has been desperately wanting to find in real life. He explains this to Tom in the letter that essentially is meant to break off their relationship. He writes, ‘I very much fear that the person you think you know is … not even altogether disentangled from that absurd character Lance in the novel you gave me!’ (MR 139)

The posturing that Patrick indulges in is also to be found in his brother. The only difference being that in case of Oliver the posturing is also to himself. He confesses as much in his journal. He admits feeling hatred for Patrick, but diagnoses the problem as being that of the *poseur* ego. He admits, ‘It was already beginning to pose in its swami’s
robes and admire itself as a budding saint. Now it gets a glimpse of its unchanged unregenerate vicious monkey-face, and it’s shocked’ (29-30). Oliver is also conscious of Patrick’s compulsive play-acting, as we see soon. Patrick cannot fool Oliver when he gives his performance in front of the monks at a meal. His act as the shy, superstitious one in front of the monks is considered so ‘utterly outrageous’ that Patrick blushes (MR 97). Oliver is also aware of the importance of using humour to deal with Patrick. About Patrick’s efforts to talk Oliver out of taking sanyaas, the latter decides, ‘in order to think about Patrick sanely, I must concentrate on his funny side!’ (MR 97) Therefore, he finds the terminology of Patrick’s opening lines of the story of the affair with Tom ‘comically formal’ (MR 120). When Patrick puns on the word ‘damn’ Oliver is not blind to the fact that the word is ‘half making fun of itself’ (MR 122). Also, like Patrick, he decides, in the context of being made an exhibition of in the media, ‘to enter willingly into the game’ (MR 104). One way to effect this would be, as he realises, to be grateful to Patrick for having made him ‘face up to the comic picture of myself which the world will always have – the Englishman in Hindu masquerade, the holy fraud’ (MR 105). Not only is this in keeping with Isherwood’s artistic concerns which have to do with distance, objectivity achieved through play-acting and humour, but also in keeping with the constant Vedantic harping on objectivity, stated most clearly in the Gita and also in Shankaracharya’s Vivekachudamani, as we have seen in the previous chapter, both texts translated by Isherwood. Entirely appropriate therefore that among the various feelings that Oliver goes through in the days leading upto his monkhood is the feeling of amusement: ‘it’s a big joke’ (MR 107). This is also in keeping with the attitude of the Swami in the vision that Oliver has of him. With reference to Patrick the Swami seems ‘amused and even on
the verge of smiling – shaking his head over Patrick, so to speak, with an air of indulgent amusement, as if to say, ‘oh, my goodness, what will he be up to next?’ (MR 146)

Inspired by this vision Oliver himself also comes to understand the spiritual crisis already triggered off in Patrick in terms of humour. ‘If you look at this objectively,’ he writes in his journal, ‘it’s a pretty comic situation. Poor old Paddy – he’s in a state of grace…. He doesn’t dream what he is in for, but he’ll find out before long’ (MR 148).

This being an Isherwood book it is not surprising that one of the ways in which there can be any rapport between these two brothers is if they connect on the level of humour. So much so that this humour may even mitigate the racist disgust Patrick feels about his brother going native. Writing to his mother Patrick says, ‘He hasn’t lost his sense of humour. And as long as he keeps that, India can never come between him and us’ (MR 48). That humour is essential to Patrick’s personality is also underlined by the fact that Oliver sees his brother even as an unconscious mimic. Oliver interprets Patrick’s close observation of the Mahanta as studying the monk’s mannerisms so that he can go back to England and mimic him. Oliver writes in his journal, ‘Patrick is the most uncanny mimic I know. Sometimes when he is talking about someone he’ll start mimicking that person without, I truly believe, being aware that he is doing it’ (MR 63).

An aspect of his work that we have seen both in his pre-Vedantic fiction and non-fiction and in his Vedantic fiction and non-fiction is also be found here – the idea of the child-in-the-adult. We have already seen how he projects himself as the prodigal child in the letter that breaks to Penelope the news of his latest infidelity. We also find this in Patrick’s estimate of the senior monks. He says that when he describes them as childlike he means ‘nothing bad.’ He explains to Tom, ‘It isn’t easy to turn yourself back into a
child again – the Bible points that out somewhere, I seem to vaguely recall.’ Giving ‘childlike’ a hitherto unseen gloss he says, ‘Children are extraordinarily wise, in their own way…. You can learn a great deal from them, provided you never forget that they are children and that you’re an adult’ (MR 111). Since this comes before his admission of unfaithfulness to Penelope we can take this gloss of ‘childlike’ as preparing of the ground before he himself takes on the persona of the child with respect to the adult Penelope.

In the final scene of the novel play-acting and humour coalesce. When Patrick puts his camera down having taken pictures of the berobed man who used to be his brother, he drops to his knees, takes the dust from the new monk’s feet and bows down before him. Comments the man who used to be called Oliver, ‘Once again, Patrick’s instinct had been absolutely correct, he had done the dramatically perfect thing!’ (MR 159) The two men, who till a few hours ago were brothers, embrace each other and the monk tries to control an attack of giggles. The new monk writes, ‘At that moment I seemed to stand outside myself and see the two of us, and the Swami, and the onlookers, all involved in this tremendous joke’ (MR 160).

A Meeting by the River was dramatised into a two-act play in 1973 and ‘staged to much critical acclaim in Los Angeles and New York’ according to London Magazine of April/May 1973 (Scobie, ‘Fat Hollywood’ 140). About the dramatisation of A Meeting by the River Isherwood said once, ‘It is far more realised than the book: it plays out the undecided duel between the two brothers more intensely, and so the nature of the comedy comes out more clearly.’ He went on, ‘…we saw that the very fact that the characters
were all elsewhere - except for the two principals - imposed a technique which was fun’ (Scobie, *Paris Review* 216). In an interview with David J. Geherin he elaborated on the comic aspect of the dramatisation:

> It is a religious comedy which ends up with both sides thinking they have won. At the end of the play Patrick … foresees a future in which Oliver will be a kind of English Gandhi. His last lines are, ‘Twenty years from now he’ll be running Asia.’ (Geherin 151)

On the other hand Oliver is reassured by a vision he has in which he sees that Patrick is already under the swami’s protection. Patrick ‘will simply hate being saved because he will suddenly start being completely dissatisfied with his life, get into the most awful mess with it’ (Geherin 151).

It is interesting to see how tentatively Isherwood’s reconciliation with his mother gets underway. In *A Meeting by the River* the mother figure reappears in Isherwood, after a gap of twenty-three years, and seven years after the death of Kathleen, and it is perhaps the most favourable aspect of her that is highlighted – her artistic talents. The next time she appears in Isherwood’s work she has the starring role, this being his book *Kathleen and Frank*. In 1944 there is the character of Mrs. Medwin in *Jacob’s Hands* and although Charlotte in *A Single Man* has a son, that is not what defines her primarily. But before we go on to a discussion of the biographical, as opposed to the fictional treatment of Kathleen Isherwood it should be noted that two years after the publication of *Kathleen and Frank* when *A Meeting by the River* is adapted for the stage the character of the mother is given an unabashedly flattering treatment. According to W.I. Scobie the
mother ‘is a sterling character, lonely, on the verges of terrible despair, yet courageous.
Her contempt for Patrick’s tricky, sycophantic letters home is boundless.’ He goes on to
write, ‘The mother’s rage against her cosy private hell also strikes home: “How dare you
talk to me about happiness! I’m full of hate and I’m old and I’m lonely”’ (Scobie, ‘Fat
Hollywood’ 143). The fact that the mother is so much better realised in the play may
have a lot to do with the fact that the reconciliatory book Kathleen and Frank had already
been written and the bridges were well on their way to being really mended.

Kathleen and Frank (1971) goes a long way to explaining not only Isherwood’s
personality but also the artistic imperatives behind his writing. Hardly a page into the
book and we learn that Kathleen ‘could invest minor domestic events with an epic
quality.’ He continues, ‘One can almost imagine her prefacing some of the more
portentous entries in her diary with the Biblical formula “That it might be fulfilled which
was spoken by the prophet…”’ (KF 10). This is diametrically opposed to Isherwood’s
use of ‘tea-tabling’ where the potentially dramatic and even melodramatic is reduced to
the level of bathos through ‘tea-tabling.’ There can also be seen the self-evasive or self-
denying aspect of Kathleen which is spoken of by Isherwood when he says, ‘she had
grown so accustomed to hearing Frank’s talents praised while hers were disregarded that
she now thought little of them herself’ (KF 11). But there is clearly a more direct linkage
between Kathleen and Isherwood’s preoccupation with drama and play-acting as can be
surmised from the fact that in Kathleen’s youth ‘the only real fun seems to have been
taking part in theatricals of various kinds’ (KF 12). We are told that she even once played
the role of Dolly Varden in a dramatisation of Dickens’s Barnaby Rudge (KF 12).
Isherwood goes on to suggest that a penchant for drama in day-to-day life may have been inherited by Kathleen from her parents Frederick and Emily who were ‘both of them star personalities, demanding complete cooperation from their supporting cast as they played opposite each other, with tremendous power and style, in a real-life melodrama about martyrdom’ (KF 15). In fact more than Frederick it is Emily who emerges as more important in this connection. According to Isherwood, ‘She had the temperament and stamina for [an actress]... She was a passionate theatregoer whenever she got the opportunity… She dressed somewhat in the style of Sarah Bernhardt, whom she adored’ (KF 18). So Isherwood’s maternal grandmother would have been delighted that her grandson later became the devotee of someone who had met Ms. Bernhardt and that the meeting was the subject of one of his essays, as we have seen in Chapter Two. Emily ‘was no imaginary invalid, but a great psychological virtuoso… her ailments were roles into which she threw herself with abandon’ (KF 19). She is also a psychosomatic virtuoso, as when she ‘[demonstrates] her martyrdom to Frederick’s behavior by a swollen gland and a mysterious crick in the neck’ (KF 238). Hardly surprising therefore that she would cast her daughter into a role as well. For Kathleen it was the role of ‘the mortal modern girl’ (KF 22). Just as Isherwood takes great care to bring out the histrionic in both Gerald Heard and, albeit to a lesser extent, in Swami Prabhavananda, we find Kathleen and Emily putting ‘preachers and actors in the same category…. [Kathleen] enjoyed good sermons as theatrical performances…’ (KF 25) The crucial difference between Kathleen’s appreciation of the dramatic in sermons and Isherwood’s appreciation of the same being that for the former the content of the sermon could be ignored completely.
Emily dreads Frederick becoming anything more genial than a villain in the lovers’ eyes, when Frank and Kathleen begin their courtship. She decides, Isherwood conjectures, that Frederick ‘must go on making Emily suffer. What did Emily do to ensure this? Probably, very little was necessary – only a word dropped from time to time, a meaning silence in answer to a question, a quick tragic glance, a patient sigh’ (KF 223). Thus Emily cannot help acting, just as Patrick, in A Meeting by the River, cannot help mimicking. Later we see that Emily and her penchant for acting occupies much of the space of Isherwood’s journal entry for 24 October 1979 to be found in the volume entitled October.

As someone so given to dramatics it is not surprising that Kathleen performs in her letters too. We are told that she ‘enjoyed veiled allusions and elaborate circumlocutions for their own sake, and sometimes she employed them with brilliant irony.’ She responded ‘hyperobediently’ during World War Two when the Government asked citizens to be cautious about how they write their letters. Hence we have Isherwood’s favourite example of this kind of epistolary performance; a performance that had to be, by default, comic. About a wedding she once wrote, ‘Owing to the political situation, there was a large hole in the roof of the church’ (KF 72). Kathleen therefore must have delighted that her husband-to-be detected the actress in her early on and even cast her in a suitably flattering role. Kathleen becomes ‘Elizabeth’ for Frank on 26 September 1900. ‘Elizabeth’ refers to Elizabeth Barrett, since Frank is on record as having noticed the ‘amiable literary invalid air which enwraps your Mother and yourself’ and Elizabeth Barrett was surely one of the best-known ‘literary invalids’ around (KF 117). This Browning play-acting continues even up to their engagement which is
described by Isherwood as ‘actually a kind of literary charade: they were playing a Mr. Browning and a Miss Barrett who talked poetically of elopement but would probably never elope’ (KF 140). Kathleen is allowed quite a few moments of drama in the book, one of the early instances of which is the incident of Maud Greenway’s outburst. Isherwood explains the outburst by saying that one can allow ‘for the fact that she is an actress and that her provincial existence probably needs drama to enliven it’ (KF 124). When Kathleen reports the outburst to Frank she, acting out of jealousy, tries ‘to create drama out of this ridiculously unimportant episode’ (KF 125). Elements of drama can be seen by Isherwood in her letters as well, as when he comments on a sentence in one of her letters to Frank. He observes, ‘Kathleen prints this last sentence very carefully in tiny block capitals, seemingly to indicate that it is a theatrical “aside”, spoken under her breath, which he is not to hear’ (KF129). When she gets married and comes to Wybersleigh she finds new source material to feed her sense of theatre. Her father-in-law’s ‘daily outings had the significance of a royal progress…’ (KF 261) which automatically imbued the exercise with theatricality.

Frank also emerges as one whose influence on Isherwood was substantial. Frank ‘could sing music-hall songs with funny grimaces and clown broadly as a character actor; he often played comic female roles’ (KF 36). His affinity with the female of the species was not restricted to performing gender-bending roles on stage. On one occasion he wrote to Kathleen in connection with a photograph of himself that he was waiting to send to her, in return for one of hers, ‘I am rather like a woman in many ways, you know’ (KF 74). After he was married to Kathleen he once wrote an essay entitled ‘The wit of Goldsmith compared with Thackeray’s’ which he signed ‘Edith Boyle’ (KF 269). There
are more examples of this resistance to heteronormativity, such as when he says that he refers to reports of their battles instead of describing them to Kathleen because ‘this is the way that I always evade military detail’ (KF 94). Later in the same letter he sighs, ‘I’m afraid, you know, I’m not really built for a warrior…’ (KF 95) In a letter dated 10 February 1900, Frank writes, ‘Even at my worst, I always carry my knitting! It’s such a resource’ (KF 99). When Frank receives a letter from Kathleen saying he was often in her thoughts, ‘I burst into tears and had to be mopped up by the nurse’ (KF 107). When he mentions these incidents he may be doing so at least partly out of a conception of himself as an actor, forever performing, always in character. This emerges in a sentence found in one of his letters to Kathleen written on 12 December 1900 when he says that his habit of exposing his ‘second soulside to anyone’ comes from his viewing himself ‘theatrically’ (KF 134).

As we have seen him do with a photograph of Swami Vivekananda, in Chapter Three, Isherwood manages to find humour in at least one army photograph of Frank. ‘His fancy uniform and absurd helmet seem to amuse him; he may actually be grinning, underneath his thick moustache’ (KF 84). A sense of humour, therefore, also provides a distance from one’s sense of self.

On his father’s side Isherwood did not just have Frank to discover anything unconventional about. There was his uncle Jack who is not only an Isherwoodian character from the pre-Vedanta days but also has an element of the Vedantic as well. Not only was he the owner of ‘the eyes and mouth of a humorist’ but also knew genuine London bohemia and had also practised ‘hatha yoga’ with his bohemian friends (KF 231-232). Frank’s elder brother Henry becomes an important character in this respect. Henry
is supposed to have been the best-looking of the three brothers, but his good looks, although described by others as aristocratic, were as far as Isherwood and indeed his theatre-literate mother were concerned, those which ‘in fact belong to leading actors. (Kathleen [was] being both satirical and accurate when she [likened] him to Forbes-Robertson’) (KF 120).

Henry also becomes important when one considers the fact that he was homosexual, as Isherwood first suggests in connection with the Bradshaw-Isherwood snobbery against the peerage. Henry was a problem in the sense that ‘his contacts with European high society, the Catholic hierarchy and the homosexual subculture had somehow subtly combined to declass him’ (KF 265). We get further details of Henry’s homosexuality later in the book (KF 492). It is through Henry that Isherwood dramatises his family members further back in time. Not satisfied with the fact that Henry liked to tell everyone that an encounter between the Chartists and his grandmother, that is Isherwood’s paternal great-grandmother, was used by Disraeli in his novel Sybil, he rectifies it, because Isherwood finds the encounter described in the novel not dramatic enough. He says that there is quite another passage where the heroine herself ‘confronts a raging mob’ and ‘harangues them in a style not unlike that of Mrs. Isherwood,’ and he goes on to quote the rousing passage (KF 175).

As the narrative progresses we learn of more Bradshaw-Isherwoods who are used as so much grist to the mill of young Christopher’s compulsive need to play-act. His ancestors are used as raw material to manufacture narratives as dramatic as possible. The section where he speaks of his ancestors this becomes overt: ‘Christopher took to describing John as a slobbering incoherent idiot, Elizabeth as a mumbling witchlike crone
… His prize exhibits were the two cousins who had really been arrested as “wandering lunatics”” (KF 305).

In addition to the instances of self-dramatisation that we find in Chapter One that Isherwood indulged in a child we find more instances of this in Kathleen and Frank. While describing Wyberslegh he says, ‘every view is a watercolor’ and then goes on to set himself up against this backdrop as Heathcliff of Wuthering Heights. ‘As Heathcliff’ he imagined himself standing all night in a storm outside Catherine Linton’s window; Catherine being for the moment a blond boy’ (KF 255). Writing about it in the seventies Isherwood says, ‘The elderly Christopher still enjoys playing this role, every time he comes back to Wybersleigh’ (KF 255).

Isherwood gives life at Marple Hall the characteristic air of a performance when he describes his childhood years there. Rooms in which guests were received are called ‘show rooms’ (KF 305). When there were not any guests being received they were like ‘the stage of an empty theatre.’ Guests who stayed overnight would discover some of the ‘backstage arrangements’ such as the fact that there was only one bathroom. The young Christopher would follow the servants on their rounds, his position being like that of ‘a stagehand behind the scenes of a theatrical production, he was part of the show.’ But when there were guests ‘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 was just a member of the audience’ (KF 306-307). But Isherwood soon gives us a detailed description of his histrionics at Marple. The toy theatre that Isherwood was presented on Christmas 1911 becomes the initial site of his theatrical activity before
the young actor graduates to writing his own plays, inspired by the performances of Sarah Bernhardt, thus continuing a line of admiration for the actress which can be traced back to his maternal grandmother (KF 372-373). As the book nears its end Christopher abundantly acknowledges Kathleen’s passion for the theatre, his own passion for the movies and Kathleen’s query to Isherwood as to whether Vedanta philosophy included a belief in an afterlife (KF 499). But as has been shown in Chapter One, Kathleen’s interest in India is carefully ignored.

Having started the autobiographical process of revisiting his life, he continues along the same lines by taking on that period of his life which he had not recorded in any great detail, the period between the years 1945 and 1951. A few months after he completed the final revisions to Kathleen and Frank Isherwood began work on reconstructing the diaries of the afore-mentioned years. The result – now published as The Lost Years (2000) – is an account in which many of the strains found in the earlier book emerge again. No strain emerges as powerfully as the obsession with play-acting. Now the stage for such role-playing shifts from the drawing room or the public platform to the bed. In great detail Isherwood repeatedly shows how role-playing was an integral part of his lovemaking. Also important to Isherwood is the necessity that the narrative must not be ‘bad drama’ like Kathleen and Frank was. By ‘bad drama’ Isherwood means, ‘Facts are never simple, they come in awkward bunches. … For instance, Christopher’s reactions to Kathleen are deplorably complex and therefore self-contradictory, and therefore bad drama’ (LY x).
He attributes the failure of his love affair with Bill Caskey to this lack of drama. Writing about their relationship in the third person he says, ‘They lived continually in the plain light of day, with no natural indulgence in fantasy, no artless playfulness, no imaginative games or magical naming.’ We have seen earlier how much importance Isherwood attaches to the idea of fun. He sees this lack of fun as being responsible for the joyless role-playing which characterised even their lovemaking. He writes, ‘Through their mutual distrust and inability to yield the pair were confined to a routine of self-conscious passion and relied upon forced playacting to fuel their lovemaking’ (LY xvii). As becomes clear later, the play-acting was not very satisfactory because while Caskey did not enjoy being the passive one during the love-making, in Christopher’s eyes he was ‘unalterably female.’ So there would be a gap between Caskey’s macho posturing and Isherwood’s allowing himself to be overpowered. Isherwood says, ‘They just had to ignore the gap and get on to the fuck scene as quickly as possible – like actors covering up a joint in a crudely cut script’ (LY 57).

Role-playing not only went into the lovemaking between Isherwood and Caskey but also into the narratives of his affair that the former had to present in front of Denny Fouts. Fouts is presented as a Satan-like figure who provokes Christopher into starting an affair and then gets Isherwood to talk about the affair. So Christopher has to give ‘a blow-by-blow and word-for-word description of their affair; and thus the affair turns into a theatrical performance’ (LY 19). Nor is Denny the only one to be thus entertained. There is the novelist and screenwriter John Collier who, although heterosexual himself, was curious about Isherwood’s affairs. So, as with Fouts, ‘Christopher now prepared to give a theatrical performance for Collier’s benefit, and his own’ (LY 32). Soon there is
another participant. There is the message boy Steve who actually wanted to become an actor. He started an affair with Christopher which was conducted in the studio of the film they were working on, with a lot of play-acting as masquerade. Collier was the only other person who was aware of this. Writes Isherwood, ‘Collier, Steve and Christopher all enjoyed the dramatic aspects of this affair’ (LY 33). He even finds this capacity to play-act in his boyfriend from the Berlin days when they meet up again many years later. On the subject of the ghost story that Berthold Szczesny had told Christopher we learn from Berthold’s wife that Berthold had confessed to her that the story was a complete fabrication. ‘Christopher was hugely impressed by the trouble Berthold had taken; his playacting seemed to show a genuinely disinterested wish to entertain, which is the mark of a real artist’ (LY 137). One of the last characters to appear in Lost Years is the American novelist Speed Lamkin. In the figure of Lamkin, sexuality and play-acting combine with humour to produce an effect that is recognisably Isherwoodian. This is how Christopher and Speed conduct their affair:

They were clowning an affair, and the clowning sometimes became nearly realistic…. [E]mbracing in Speed’s parked car, they would imagine a glamorous love life, with a New York apartment and a Bel Air home with two swimming pools. … [H]e did enjoy their intimacy, and mentally playing house with him. (LY 283)

In Lost Years we also get a clear view of the connection between Isherwood’s ‘infantilism’ and his sexuality. Early awareness of his homosexuality is inextricably linked with his experiences at St. Edmund’s School. He writes, ‘All of his orgasms with
other boys had been while wrestling’ (LY 57). Remembering his time in Berlin he says, ‘Boxing excited him, too; he had a fetishistic attitude to boxing gloves’ (LY 58). It is this element of the infantile that is also shown to be lacking in his affair with Bill Caskey. On one occasion, ‘when Christopher suggested wrestling, Caskey was amused, in a grown-up way; he referred to it as “prep-school stuff” and Christopher was so embarrassed that he never mentioned it again’(LY 59). Yet, the play-acting continues in Isherwood’s mind. He imagines what an outsider’s impression of their affair would be and he suggests they may have appeared to others like ‘children playing at being grown-ups’ (LY 60). But, we soon discover that their relationship was not so much that of two children playing at being grown-ups as much as one of a child and an adult. Isherwood writes of their 1947 visit to New York that it was during this time that Caskey was mentally assigned the role of Nanny by him. Caskey, like a nanny, was to ‘wait on him and relieve him from the tension of making decisions. (He reserved the right to sulk and passively resist, just as a child does, when Nanny’s decisions didn’t suit him)’(LY 118). And Caskey lives up to his role to Christopher’s evident satisfaction, as when Christopher wakes up after a drunken night to find himself being driven in their car by Caskey. He realises where they are going when Caskey says that the last thing Christopher said the previous night was ‘Take me to Wystan’ so he was taking him to meet Auden. Isherwood comments, ‘This was Caskey in his aspect as the perfect nanny’ (LY 138). It must also be mentioned here that this casting of Caskey in the role of nanny is also of a piece with Christopher’s arrogance, as he himself admits later in the memoir. Christopher ‘thought of himself as an art aristocrat or brahmin, a person privileged by his talent to demand the service… of others’ (LY 181). He was so fixated on the nanny figure that he even found one in the
relationship between Tennessee Williams and Frank Merlo. As far as Christopher is concerned Merlo is ‘the ideal nanny; the truest friend and lover Tennessee could ever hope to have’ (LY 208).

Of course we now know where this infantilism came from. During the 1947 visit to Kathleen when Christopher tries to talk her out of her indignation that he had been sterilized she responds ‘with an obstinate pout which made her look for a moment like a young girl: “But I want grandchildren!”’ (LY 111) So even this was Kathleen’s legacy. But as has been noticed in earlier chapters Isherwood found something child-like in almost everyone he met. Truman Capote, for instance, impresses him as ‘the marvellously gracious little baby personage’ (LY 119). On another occasion he decides, ‘As a host Truman was like a masterful child leading a gang of children’ (LY 126).

It was another kind of play-acting that Christopher had to do when he returned to England for the first time since settling down in the US. Isherwood observes, ‘Christopher, being what he was – a born playactor – could only express [his conviction that he was now well-and-truly an American] by thinking himself into an Anglo-American persona, expressly designed for his English audience’ (LY 86). The English audience also included his mother. Kathleen was treated to her son’s role-playing one day when he thumbed a ride ‘California style’ when accompanying Kathleen to Manchester. Isherwood recalls, ‘Christopher greatly enjoyed treating Kathleen to this bit of playacting’ (LY 89). But not all performance was done with so much self-assurance. Isherwood writes of how Forster’s gaze often made him feel ‘false and tricky. Christopher reacted to this feeling by trying to make Forster laugh. He usually could; the uneasier he felt, the more sparkling his comedy act became’ (LY 95).
Once he started dramatising his past he continued by treating his years from May 1928 to January 1939 in his book *Christopher and His Kind* (1977). Considering what we have been noticing in Isherwood’s work so far it is not surprising that one of the first important characters to appear in the book would be a young man whose name essentially means ‘Baby’ (CK 11). Soon enough Isherwood’s constant fascination with the notion of the child-in-the-adult is explained too. Hirschfeld classifies him ‘infantile’. ‘Christopher didn’t object to the epithet; he interpreted it as “boyish”’ (CK 28). Those who Isherwood had been unable to write about before were now appearing with a vengeance and all true to the Isherwood type. There is André Gide ‘in full costume as the Great French Novelist, complete with cape’ (CK 20). There is Erwin Hansen, friend of Hirschfeld’s lover, whose ‘unbourgeois behaviour wasn’t altogether spontaneous but a part of his political persona’ (CK 27). But much of what the book contains is revisionist autobiography and further discussion of the book would prove to be repetitive.

On *Christopher and His Kind* he said to W.I. Scobie, ‘I cut down enormously on the number of characters, friends who just didn’t fit into the story. This is the first sign of passing from truth to fiction’ (Scobie, ‘The Youth’ 23). He also said, ‘...I’ve always felt very little difference between fiction and non-fiction. ... What lies we tell to our friends, after all, when we’re telling ‘true’ stories!’ (Scobie, ‘The Youth’ 24)

Christopher Isherwood dramatised not only his persona, and his life – as the above quote demonstrates – but also his creative process. He told Derek Hart, while talking about the way *A Single Man* came into being, ‘Well, I started to write the book in this way, and then suddenly that voice - that sort of impatient voice from inside - said: What
are you fussing around with this woman for? Let’s go down to the interesting part. So,
poor old Charlotte, she’s still in the book, but she has only a minor role’ (Hart 449).

When W.I. Scobie asked him how he overcame writer’s block he said that sometimes he
got a helpful idea from the unconscious by irritating it, ‘ - deliberately writing nonsense
until it intervenes, as it were, saying, “All right, idiot, let me fix this’” (Scobie, Paris
Review 239). Speaking about the way in which he kept the narrator of the Berlin stories
in the closet, he told Paul Bailey, ‘I’m perfectly willing to admit that I also had the motive
of prudence that I certainly didn’t want to come out and say that I was gay at that time...
But that’s only part of the motive. I think the backseat driver certainly had quite other
motives. I think his motives were entirely literary, really’ (Bailey).

When living in California he continued to dramatise mentally the behaviour of
those he observed or knew about. For instance, he saw one of his most famous theories
exemplified in the homophobic Californian police chief Ed Davis: ‘I sometimes wonder if
he is not camping it up - he carries on in such a way that you think it is an act. And
perhaps he does not really dislike homosexuals’ (Burton 59).

His life and art really came full circle towards the end. In what can be seen as use
of the tea-tabling technique found in his work from the very beginning, he once spoke
thus of his contribution to the effort for greater understanding of homosexuality. Even
the language recalls his introduction to All the Conspirators in its Minerva paperback
edition. There, in June 1957, he had spoken of ‘this story of a trivial but furious battle
which combatants fight out passionately and dirtily to a finish, using whatever weapons
come to their hands’ (AC 9). In 1977 he said, ‘Of course - it’s wonderful to have
something to be aggressive about.... One uses what weapons come to hand.... appearing in
quite serious academic gatherings and not screaming and waving the flag, but just laying
it right down on the carpet for them to look at. And doing it rather casually in the middle
of a speech about something else - that is also part of the battle’ (Burton 60). Isherwood
thus took tea-tabling as a weapon and used it to fight homophobia in his real life. A
technique once used in his work now began to be used in life.

His last published writing till date is his journal of a month in 1979 which was
printed with sketches of various people by Don Bachardy in the volume October (1983).
Considering that he would be maintaining his journal for only four more years, stopping
the year the volume was published, we can see that till the very end a sense of drama and
theatre consistently informed his perception of everything. Not only was he still play-
acting in his own life, still capable of artistic distance that we had noted in his various
third-person narratives of autobiography, and still capable of detecting a play-actor
wherever he saw one. One of the earliest examples of role-playing in the book comes in
his entry for 1 October when he writes:

Don often describes his work as a confrontation. He himself, with a pen
gripped in his mouth ready for use when it is needed instead of a brush,
reminds me of a pirate carrying a dagger between his teeth while boarding
the enemy. He seems to be attacking the sitter. So now I counter-
attacked. Summoning up all my latent hostility, I glared at him
unwaverningly, with accusing eyes. (O 11)
This is echoed in a remark made by Isherwood about Bachardy to Dan (possibly Luckenbill) less than a month before Isherwood’s death. On seeing Bachardy return from his studio with more paint for further drawings he said, ‘Here comes the torturer again.’ Bachardy comments that it ‘was said in a wry playful tone of voice which he meant to be loud enough for me to hear. We all three laughed’ (Bachardy xv). As we have noticed in his novels, laughter continues to be an important ingredient in a friendship or a growing friendship. Speaking of his fantasy of getting to know Lord Byron he says that the Romantic poet’s ‘voice would tremble with emotion’ while confiding in Isherwood before they ‘both begin to laugh hilariously’ (O 16). He says he loves Lord Byron because the latter is ‘a serious playactor. His love affairs and his political heroics, including challenges to duels, have the comic undertones of grand opera’ (O 16). Of being waylaid by a ‘pious intense lady’ wanting him to help a mutual friend with a Sanskrit-to-English translation Isherwood comments: ‘The inwardness of this comedy is that the lady knows perfectly well that I know all about this translation and that I have already promised the translator I’ll revise it for him. But she can’t resist irritating me … by going into her act’ (O 22).

While attending a show at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, honouring the memory of Mary Pickford he focusses on her comedic talents, he acknowledges that there ‘are certain resemblances to Chaplin in her comedy routines, but she can’t be compared to him as a comedian’ (O 31). There is his doctor Elsie who is, significantly enough, not only ‘show-biz-struck’, ‘loves murder-mysteries’ but also ‘relishes describing how she dramatically exposed the ignorance of another doctor … or the duplicity of a medical witness testifying for the defense of a crooked pharmaceutical
firm in a lawsuit’ (O 35). The fact that the word ‘dramatically’ is used in this connection is only significant insofar as it underlines what is almost a given in any Isherwoodian character. In a boxing match between two Japanese being shown on TV Isherwood finds ‘a certain quality of playacting.’ When one of the boxers falls to his knees and rolls over ‘into the classic, and to me, erotic sprawl of the knocked-out boxer’ Isherwood gets the impression that ‘his behaviour [is] deliberate’ (O 52). There is the obligatory child-in-the-adult, in the shape of one Jim White. ‘Jim, in his late thirties, still looks boyish and is boyishly merry’ (O 80). Among the things that he says he loves about the painter David Hockney are his ‘corny jokes and puns, which are always delivered deadpan, like a music hall comedian’s,’ and ‘the way he dresses – he’ll wear a comic cap and sneakers with a suit, or a pair of striped clown’s pants with an elegant cardigan jacket – making the clownish part of his costume send up the conventional part’ (O 55). David Hockney is a kind of link with his childhood because he hails from Bradford, which is only thirty miles away, as Isherwood notes, from where he himself was born. He is mentally taken back to Wybersleigh on the occasion of storm when Isherwood and Bachardy feel ‘how exposed [they] are, between the wind-funnel of the canyon and the roaring ocean. We become Wuthering Heights West’ (O 80). But we go further back in time with Isherwood in the course of his October 1979 journal. Maternal grandmother Emily Machell Smith, familiar to the reader from her appearance in Kathleen and Frank, makes another appearance here, in the entry written on her one hundred and thirty-ninth birth anniversary. From remembering her, Isherwood finally explains his fascination with play-acting:
From her and from my Father, who used to play farcical female roles in amateur theatricals, I inherited a desire to act. This I have satisfied during my later life by speaking in public, with a preference for question-and-answer sessions, which is the least demanding of all such art-forms….

There are no lines for you to forget and, even if your mind goes blank in the midst of a reply, all you need to do is tell the audience what has happened; they will laugh and whisper to each other approvingly, ‘he’s so natural!’ (O 67)

Another way in which his life came full circle is that there seemed a chance that his last earnings, like his first earnings, would be from appearing in a film. Two years before his death Isherwood was approached by British filmmakers Ismail Merchant and James Ivory. He and Don Bachardy were to be the subject of a fly-in-the-wall documentary about them:

It was to have been constructed somewhat like the already published journal of the month October…. We had a plan…to move in with a small crew and follow him on his rounds for a month… there was a possibility of dramatising some of the California episodes, some comic, some more serious, that had taken place in the past and which Isherwood, with his flair for scene-setting and enjoyment of the grotesque, would have relished describing in detail. (Ivory 93)

Although Isherwood’s rapidly deteriorating health and lack of funds frustrated the transformation of the project to reality, it is interesting that a man whose first earnings
had been as part of a crowd scene in a film, and whose appearances in films were restricted to walk-on parts, was, towards the end of his life, being recognised as a celluloid-worthy performer. In James Ivory’s article there is a keen awareness of Isherwood’s ability to perform before the camera, even when the play-acting only involves pretending that there is no camera, and he makes special mention of Isherwood’s flair for ‘scene-setting’. Just as interesting is the inclusion of a possibility of dramatising some comic episodes, which he was perceptive enough to acknowledge Isherwood’s forte - a comic and entertaining raconteur. In 2007 a documentary was indeed made on Isherwood and Bachardy, in which the camera follows Bachardy on his daily rounds, and the film also features a great amount of home movie footage of Isherwood. Chris and Don: A Love Story by Guido Santi and Tina Mascara now looks like a companion piece to the documentary Ismail Merchant and James Ivory were planning to make.

The last time Isherwood picked up a pen to write was probably on 20 October 1985 when he signed yet another of Bachardy’s portraits of him. But the ability to regard himself in the third person remained undiminished. On 2 December 1985, he told Bachardy about the Isherwood portraits done that day, ‘I like the ones of him dying’ (Bachardy xiv). These words, which can be taken to be his last, encapsulate all that we have been tracing his life and work so far. Talking of himself in the third person is not only an evocation, conscious or otherwise, of his narrative voice in the Berlin years, but also a proof of the level to which he had assimilated Vedanta. He had by then come to enjoy the distance that a Vedantic frame of mind allowed him to view himself from. He was not the body that had been represented on paper by the brush-strokes of Don Bachardy. That was somebody else. That was an entity called ‘Christopher Isherwood.’
The voice making the comment on the other hand is that of one who was aware of its own spirituality, aware of ‘Christopher Isherwood’s’ temporality. ‘Christopher Isherwood’ is merely a character he had been playing all his life. What Don Bachardy had captured with his paint was ‘Christopher Isherwood’ the temporal. It is this distance that lies at the root of all humour. One is only able to see the ridiculous in something or someone when one regards it or them from a distance. One should not forget either that Isherwood had also, in a way that is only natural, reverted to a stage which can be described as infancy. As Bachardy writes in his journal of 2 December, the last several months of his life Isherwood had taken less and less interest in Bachardy’s work. Gone was that fatherly, adult combination of interest and encouragement that had characterised Isherwood’s response to Bachardy’s work for over thirty years. Now there was a child-like lack of interest in the drawings and an unwillingness to sign and date the drawings. All of which points in only one direction, which is that towards the end of his life his spirituality had merged with his personality and the former had transcended the latter. He died on 4 January 1986. Isherwood seems to have assimilated the teaching of the *Gita* that a dead body is only as valuable as a set of cast-off clothes. The clothes may be of use to others but not anymore to the one who has taken them off. Isherwood’s body was donated to the Los Angeles Medical Center as a cadaver to be used for medical research.

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1 Kathleen Isherwood. Journal entry of Friday, 18 October 1946. The talk was given the same day by W.J. Turner in the ‘Living Writers Series’, No. 3. Christopher Isherwood Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, U of Texas, Austin.

2 Recalling the ‘Christopher Isherwood’ of *Goodbye to Berlin* seems particularly appropriate here since, like his previous appearance, this one too is marked by the unrelenting sexlessness of the character. We are
not told about his suspected homosexuality, but there are clues, as in Bergmann’s humorous question as to who he sought: ‘Is it Mr. W.H. you seek, or the Dark Lady of the Sonnets?’ (PV 30)

3 In the world of homosexual men, a common euphemism by which they refer to themselves, is ‘friends of Dorothy’, Dorothy being the part played by Judy Garland – an icon among homosexual men – in the film The Wizard of Oz.

4 Acknowledgement of the receipt of the book, 11 December 1964, WAC T48/339/1, BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham, Reading.


6 ‘Worn-out garments / Are shed by the body: / Worn-out bodies / Are shed by the dweller / Within the body: / New bodies are donned / By the dweller, like garments’(BG 85).