Conclusion

Isherwood had once said that when one sets about transforming fact into fiction one necessarily has to exercise certain amount of omission. The process which is involved in the transmogrification of fact into fiction necessitates a process of selective hiding or revealing, underplaying or overplaying as considered suitable. However in the case of Isherwood, we find that even the reverse is true: fictional techniques are often brought to bear even when writing a narrative that is supposed to be a statement of fact. Selectivity becomes operational, omissions become seemingly unavoidable, hence blurring even further the dividing line between fact and fiction.

Nowhere is this fictionalisation of fact more evident that in his supposed autobiographies, and nowhere in his autobiographies is it more obvious, in the light of this thesis, than in his book on his parents, Frank and Kathleen Isherwood. Insofar as he filled in the omitted sections of his Lions and Shadows in his revisionist Christopher and His Kind, he only filled in details of his sexuality. Revealing one’s sexual preference or activities may seem like the height of candour, but in the case of Isherwood there is no reason to think it is so. There are yet deeper aspects of his personality which have so far remained hidden. The ‘Kathleen Isherwood’ of his biography is not exactly the Kathleen Isherwood one encounters while reading her tiny but neatly written eight-and-a-half centimetres by six centimetres diaries. These journals, written practically all her adult life, were only very selectively used by Isherwood when writing Kathleen and Frank. It should perhaps be mentioned here, that when Isherwood began work on the book the title
was ‘Hero Father’. So, the focus was never meant to be on the mother at all. It is interesting that Isherwood studiously omitted any reference to India that he found in his mother’s journals and, as I have shown in my thesis, these references were plentiful. The journals are a testimony to a remarkably alive consciousness, one that is eager to learn and enjoy culture in various forms, but has a marked affinity to the Indian variety. While Brian Finney is of the opinion that until ‘the age of thirty-five [Isherwood] was in rebellion against his mother…’, I would like to suggest that his rebellion against his mother never really ended with his conversion to Vedanta (Finney 15). It is interesting that of all the letters that Kathleen wrote to Isherwood during his many years in the United States, only three were found to be in his personal collection of papers by James White and William H. White.¹ Had he truly made peace with his mother, he would have celebrated her Indophilia and not hidden it so completely. Perhaps this was an attempt to prevent any of the rebellious glamour being stolen from his Vedantic life. Surely, it would be difficult to assert that even in choosing his new religion he was making his mother in particular and his forsaken native country in general, uncomfortable if it got revealed that far from being uncomfortable, Kathleen had an interest in Eastern religions even when he himself was suffering from acute Indophobia, as he confesses in Christopher and his Kind.

In the 510-page book that is Kathleen and Frank the only time that ‘Kathleen’ and ‘Vedanta’ appear in the same sentence is when Isherwood accedes that once ‘she asked if Vedanta philosophy believed in afterlife’ (KF 499). Perhaps Isherwood’s complicated attitude towards India, which manifested itself in the ultimately Orientophobic portrayal of Bernhard Landauer in Goodbye to Berlin was itself in protest against his mother’s
Indophilia, her attending lectures by Jiddu Krishnamurti, her attending plays such as
Shakuntala et al. It is virtually impossible that Isherwood was not aware of his mother’s
familiarity with the writings of Krishnamurti or that she attended his lecture on 31 March
1928 or that she went to Waterloo Station to see off Leonard Tristram and Krishnamurti.
Tristram was, of course, a member of the Order of the Star of the East and was
accompanying Krishamurti on his journey on 2 April that same year. Isherwood was
living with his mother at this time and relations between them appear to have been
sufficiently warm so that he suggests, on 8 February, that they should go together to see a
modern-dress production of Macbeth. (Little over a month ago, on 5 January, Isherwood
had heard that All the Conspirators had been accepted by Jonathan Cape.) So, when he
ultimately finds himself associating with the same Indian theosophist, when he finds that
even in his conversion to Vedanta he has invariably been Kathleen Isherwood’s son, he
decides that at least this aspect of her personality would not be revealed. Therefore, in
Isherwood’s biography of her, we are left with a conception of Kathleen Isherwood that,
for all its attempts at fairness, suffers from significant omissions. Hardly surprising then
that, for all his admiration of Swami Prabhavananda, his barely-hidden antipathy of India
keeps getting in his way to a complete assimilation of everything Vedantic.

In order to make this Indian philosophy palatable he has to fall back onto his
reassuring native cultural icons and references, such as referring to T.E. Lawrence when
discussing Swami Vivekananda. From an extract in the bibliography of his personal
papers we know that on 14 November 1961, Isherwood’s presumed Indophilia had
doubtless led him to being invited to lunch with the then Indian Prime Minister
Jawaharlal Nehru and Nehru’s daughter Indira Gandhi. In a tone of voice that is strongly
reminescent of his mother, Isherwood notes of Nehru, ‘His manners were much better than those of other men present; he never sat down while any lady as standing…’ (White 14) But then Isherwood’s ego asserts itself and seems mildly offended by what follows. Nehru asks him what he was writing now. Isherwood tells him about ‘the novel’, presumably Down There on a Visit, and his Ramakrishna biography. Nehru’s response is just a ‘barely flicked’ eyelid. While Isherwood hopes that this might be the start of a conversation he is disappointed. Feeling snubbed he concludes, ‘Ah well, no doubt he got something from just watching us’ (White 15). Kathleen, had she been alive, would doubtless have been interested to hear of his son’s meeting Nehru, considering that this was the lady who had devoted an entire page of her 1948 diary to the assassination of Gandhi. In future I may want to delve into the deeper, psychological reasons behind this hatred of his mother that clouds over all his life and work and prevents him from allowing us to form a complete idea of her personality. However, now that all his diaries have been published, it can be said that Isherwood’s dislike of India was not total, and that it was tempered considerably by some favourable impressions that he made of the country during his 1963-64 visit. Just as the first-person narrator’s attitude towards Bernard changes from negative to positive in Goodbye to Berlin, Isherwood’s own attitude towards India seems to have been tempered into one that was less phobic.

But try as he might to ignore his family’s artistic and aesthetic legacy, heredity keeps coming to his help when he requires such aid. Kathleen and Frank’s artistic talents manifest in their novelist son in the form of a deep awareness of the visual. Not only is it remarkable that his lovers have tended to be visual artists, either painters or
photographers, as in the case of ‘Vernon Old’ and Bill Caskey, but that his most famous lover would not be the successful portrait-painter that he is, had Isherwood not spotted the talent in him and steadfastly encouraged him.² It needs to be mentioned in this context that, quite apart from men like ‘Vernon Old’ or Bill Caskey or Don Bachardy, there were others, friends and close acquaintances, who tended to be visual artists: painters or photographers. Among these are John Minton, Keith Vaughan, Francis Bacon, David Hockney, even George Grosz and photographers such as Georgia O’Keefe, George Platt Lynes and Carl van Vechten. It is this appeal to the visual which helped him deal with his dislike of India to some extent as can be gathered from Swami Vidyatmananda’s words. The Swami, previously known as John Yale, says in a paper delivered at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Calcutta on 20 May 1964, ‘From the very commencement of the project [of writing a biography of Ramakrishna], several years ago, Isherwood said that he felt the book must be well-illustrated’ (Vidyatmananda 254). So, in this sense the book was very much in that line of Isherwood books such as Journey to a War and Condor and the Cows where photographs were an important part of the work, serving an essentially complementary function to the text. Not only did Isherwood want to have in his book photographs depicting places and people associated with Ramakrishna but also to have some illustrations of the imperial presence of the British, a decision that would have pleased Kathleen greatly. This, especially considering that one of the two pictures turned out to be a sketch showing the future Edward VII, then Prince of Wales, leaving Jammu during his visit to India in 1875. Kathleen, it needs to be mentioned, was an ardent royalist and recorded in her diaries, royal births, deaths, marriages and overseas tours with enthusiasm.
Considering that John Yale and Isherwood were very close friends both in the U.S. and while in India, it may not be inaccurate to assume that Isherwood agreed with John Yale’s observation about Ramakrishna that the 19th century mystic ‘was the keenest of observers’ (Vidyatmananda 265). Keen observation is something Isherwood learned early on from his painter father. Add to this fact the common knowledge that as a child Ramakrishna himself was a clay-modeller, making clay statuettes of the Goddess Saraswati, for example, and it becomes clear that the artist in Ramakrishna may have also attracted Isherwood, whether or not he admitted to the same.

It is this delight in and appreciation of the visual which, I propose, can be linked to his love of theatre. As we have seen, Kathleen Isherwood once noted in her diary that the boy Isherwood is fascinated by the pictures in his edition of Macbeth. One can say that the visual aspect of theatre was never far from Isherwood’s mind when he thought of theatricality. From his first novel onwards, one repeatedly finds an almost organic co-existence of the visual and the theatrical. As in the case of his love for the visual arts, in the case of this love of theatre also one can state that he could count among his friends thespians such as John Gielgud, Charles Laughton, Alec Guinness and Julie Harris. We find further proof of Isherwood’s love of the theatre from a postcard sent to Alexander Ince of Theatre Arts in New York. The card has a list of books that influenced him as a writer. In that list, apart from names such as Wuthering Heights, Joyce’s Ulysees, Dicken’s Oliver Twist and ‘all E.M. Forster’s novels’ there are, excluding Shakespeare, Tchekov’s plays, Ibsen’s plays and Brecht’s Dreigroschen op. But there were other writers that Isherwood, at various points in his life declared his admiration for, who were
appreciated for their humour. For example, speaking of the reasons why he liked D.H. Lawrence’s story ‘St. Mawr’ he said, ‘Well, ‘St. Mawr’ is really one of my favourite works, because I find the farcicalness of it so marvellous’ (Heilbrun, ‘Interview’ 259).

It was not merely the passive appreciation of theatre either that characterised his engagement with that art form. One website on the ‘gay’ resort of Cherry Grove, Fire Island, New York has the following section: ‘The growth of the Grove as a world-renowned gay resort also is traced to this epoch [late 1930s] and was perhaps heralded by the arrival at a party of Christopher Isherwood and W.H. Auden dressed as Dionysus and Ganymede, carried aloft on a gilded litter by a group of singing followers’ (‘Cherry Grove’). So, play-acting, even the more ‘camp’ variety, as is the case in this example, was being practised in real life, in full dress and make-up by avid theatre-goer Kathleen Isherwood’s son. What needs to be noticed here is that his play-acting almost always needed to be informed by a sense of humour. It could be a sense of the farce, or of quiet irony, but his concept of theatre had to have an element of humour in it. In Isherwood’s fiction and non-fiction, one notices that play-acting is used in a variety of ways by characters to engage with others, to define themselves, to protect themselves, to express themselves, or to hide themselves. Humour is used to those same ends in his work. Characters use humour to protect, express, define, or hide themselves. Edward Blake in The Memorial, the eponymous protagonist in Mr. Norris Changes Trains are two of many such characters. Humour is used to hide the narrator’s sexual attraction towards a character as in his use of humour in the context of Otto Nowak in Goodbye to Berlin. Bernard’s humour in the same book is shown to be malicious, in alignment with Isherwood’s prejudice against the Orient that Bernard must carry. Occasionally, humour
serves as a common bond between two characters, as in the case of Edward and Margaret in *The Memorial*, between Isherwood and Chalmers in *Lions and Shadows*, between Sally Bowles and Diana, Sally Bowles and Isherwood in *Goodbye to Berlin*. It is humour that bridges the cultural, communicational gap between Isherwood and the Chinese in *Journey to a War* and between Patrick and India in *A Meeting by the River*. In Isherwood’s imaginary encounter with Lord Byron, as recorded in *October*, they both laugh. One cannot understand Isherwood’s notion of play-acting without realizing that humour is organic to it. Significantly, it is the love of comic play-acting that cements the love between Frank and Kathleen Isherwood, as is obvious in *Kathleen and Frank*. On Frank’s part, this could even involve literary drag, as when he signs himself ‘Edith Boyle.’ Settled in California, Isherwood thinks of his English past ‘entirely in terms of jokes.’ He says on record that one of the reasons why he gave up Christianity was because of the Christians’ ‘lack of humour.’ As has been cited in Chapter Three, Isherwood writes about Vedantism, ‘That humour had its place in religion, that it could actually be a mode of spiritual self-expression, was a revelation to me.’

It is this deep appreciation of theatre, which also includes an awareness of the visual, that combines with the effective tool of humour and an unique sense of detecting the child in the adult to facilitate Isherwood’s transition from his pre-Vedantic to Vedantic phase. It may be observed that in most of his fictional and non-fictional writing, the play-acting that is presented functions in the child-adult, child-parent, schoolboy-teacher mould. It is as if every relationship is a continual comic re-enactment of the child-adult binary in some form or the other. We see it even in his last novel – *A
Meeting by the River – in the way Patrick tries to reconfigure his relationship with wife Penelope. Patrick becomes the child, and Penelope, the parent. The two most important later relationships in his own life – that with Don Bachardy and with Swami Prabhavananda – are both obviously marked by the presence of this child-adult comic play-acting. On some rare occasions, that child-parent structure became painful, but it remained in place, as when Don Bachardy sulks and Isherwood finds himself in the position of an ‘unkind parent.’ Even when Isherwood writes about his relationship with Bill Caskey in The Lost Years, Caskey becomes a nanny to Isherwood. The elements of comedy, play-acting and the child-like in Ramakrishna’s personality need to be kept in mind too. In The Bhagavad Gita the relationship between Krishna and Arjuna also partakes of the pupil-teacher format. So, to speak of the importance of play-acting in Isherwood’s life and work is also to speak of the importance of the comic and the child-like in his life and work because these three elements constitute an organic whole that is shaped by an aesthetic sensibility that Isherwood clearly inherits from his parents. Moreover, the constant evocation of the child-parent mould in every relationship may be seen as the constant presence, even a postmodernist absent presence, of Frank and Kathleen Isherwood in the work of their novelist son.

An ironic, amused distance from the material world is crucial to the Vedantic mindset. The notion of non-attachment that Vedanta encourages in the human consciousness is almost identical to the non-attachment that an actor is supposed to feel towards the part that they play. They play the part for a time only. The part does not define the actor. There is more to the actor than the part they play. This actor-like
distance is what Vedanta also advocates. Vedanta also states that a person should not be defined by their material conditions, just as an actor cannot be defined by any one part that they play.

Yet all these aspects would not have been there in the first place had he not inherited them from the Bradshaw-Isherwoods and the Machell-Smiths. Even the choice of Vedanta may very well have been decided by Isherwood’s genes, unknown to himself.

Towards the end of Kathleen and Frank Isherwood writes that while reading his mother’s diaries and his father’s letters he ‘saw how heredity and kinship create a woven fabric; its patterns vary, but its strands are the same throughout.’ He continues, ‘Christopher has found that he is far more closely inter-woven with Kathleen and Frank than he had supposed, or liked to believe’ (KF 509). One could add that he was far more closely inter-woven with Kathleen than he ever acknowledged. In that weave are strands of theatricality, humour, visual arts, and a sustained interest in cultures other than that which one is born into. It is this complex weave that this thesis has sought to bring to light.

1 The three letters catalogued are dated 9 January 1959, 21 December 1959 and 24 November (No Year). Kathleen Isherwood died on 15 June 1960. So the three letters could very well be among her last to Isherwood. Christopher Isherwood: A Bibliography of His Personal Papers, ed. James White and William P. White, (Texas: Texas Center for Writers Press, 1987) 37.

2 ‘If he hadn’t encouraged me, I would never have been an artist….He took a very real interest in my work. Every day when I came home from art school, he would say, “Oh, let me see what you did.” And he would go through my drawings and say, ‘Oh, now that is a real advancement, that one!” Well, you know, that’s just golden! I mean, how many people take that much interest in one’s work?’

Christopher Isherwood, signed postcard to Alexander Ince, 3 Nov. 1953, Christopher Isherwood Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas at Austin)