Preface

I first became of aware of Christopher Isherwood in January 1986, on hearing the news of his death. Not only did I get to hear about his death from the BBC World Service, I was also able to hear, that weekend, a dramatization of Mr. Norris Changes Trains on that same radio station. While this play engendered my interest in the author it was not enough to send me to the library for his books. In the coverage of his death I had not heard anything about his interest in Indian philosophy. I was therefore intrigued to find, sometime later, in a college wall magazine, an article on Ramakrishna where the name ‘Christopher Isherwood’ appeared. Now I was seriously interested to find out more about this extraordinary individual. Soon after that I finished my graduation and continued with my studies towards a Masters degree in English. It was during my postgraduate years that I read almost all of Isherwood’s novels, feverishly addicted to his quiet sense of humour, the astonishing range of his characters and the sheer talent for story-telling. So when the time came for me to choose my subject for Ph.D. I decided on Isherwood without a moment’s hesitation.

Much more difficult was choosing exactly which aspect of Isherwood I wanted to work on. Although I registered for my Ph.D. in January 1993 it was not until I got a Fulbright Pre-Doctoral Scholarship to go to the United States of America in 1996 that I finally knew what I wanted to investigate in this writer’s work. While I always knew that I would be examining his humour, his use of role-playing and his intermingling of fact
and fiction, I was not prepared for the way in which my focus would expand to include his attitude to India. For all the scholarship on Isherwood’s Vedantism there is hardly any exploration of the reasons behind his acute and life-long aversion to India the country and Indians the people, Swami Prabhavananda being one of the very few Indians he ever really liked. This widening of focus came about as a result of my reading his mother’s unpublished diaries at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre at the University of Texas at Austin. Kathleen Isherwood was revealed to me as a person who was enormously interested in India and Indians. This may well have been due to the influence of her Orientophiliac husband Frank but could also be attributed to her friendship with some British people who were actively interested in Indian culture and religion. I found it deeply puzzling that Isherwood does not mention any of this in his supposedly reconciliatory biography of his parents, namely *Kathleen and Frank*. By the time I returned to India in 1997 I was sure that I had to contextualize Isherwood’s Vedantism by highlighting the completely ignored Indophilia of his mother. I wondered if Isherwood’s oft-stated hatred of ‘Hindus’ (by which he possibly meant ‘Indians,’ since he does not appear to have any interest in Indian Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis or Buddhists either) was not a reaction to Kathleen’s enthusiasm for all things Indian. I wondered if this was not yet another way in which he was defying his ‘Evil Mother’. All the more extraordinary therefore that he should eventually find himself listening to the same Jiddu Krishnamurti in May 1944 whom his mother had read and heard in England in 1928. When I got an opportunity to interview Don Bachardy I asked him if Isherwood had ever mentioned Kathleen’s interest in Indian culture, politics and philosophy and I was answered in the negative. When Kathleen was attending Krishnamurti’s lecture, Isherwood was staying
with her, awaiting the publication of his debut novel *All the Conspirators*. So it is unlikely that he did not know about Krishnamurti considering that he was also on quite friendly terms with Kathleen at this time. Whatever be the reason for this curious silence on a very important aspect of Kathleen’s character, I felt it my duty to bring the matter to light. I also wanted to see how Isherwood deals with India when the time comes for him to actually travel to the dreaded country, not once but twice. As I discovered it was the trusted sense of humour, theatricality, and an ability to identify the childlike in the adult that supplied him the artistic weapons with which to confront this supposedly unattractive people. My thesis, therefore concerns with the influence I believe Isherwood’s heredity had on him and how the elements he inherited helped him to master the art of intermingling fact and fiction. Now that almost all of his fiction, non-fiction, diaries and correspondence have been published, the most recent being *The Animals: Love Letters between Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy* (2013), I am in a position to draw some inferences as to what were the literary/stylistic strings that he drew from his heredity and used them to weave all of his writing, be it fiction or non-fiction, pre-Vedantic or Vedantic, public or private.

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