Chapter Two

‘I expect that’s how your son gets his talent’

The influence of Kathleen and Frank Isherwood comes across as strongly in their son’s first published novel as the personality of the young author himself. Much has been written of the archetypal figure of the Evil Mother that makes its first appearance in this novel. What has gone unnoticed is the fact that Kathleen Isherwood’s contribution to the book is more than that. At a visual level, this influence is manifest in the references to and appearances and evocations of drawings. It is impossible to believe that Isherwood was unaware of his parents’ love of drawing, especially watercolours. Both Kathleen and Frank took their art seriously. Even in the battlefield Frank never lost his artist’s eye, as is evident in this letter to Kathleen dated 25 September 1914: ‘It is a queer life but one gets into the way of crawling about on one’s hands and knees to avoid getting sniped...All the part of France we have passed through is charming - so graceful, and the colour so restrained and delicate.’ In the transcriptions of Frank’s letters Isherwood notes that during this time ‘Frank continues to ask for writing paper, literary periodicals, tobacco, cigarette papers, matches, sweets and soap’ but neglects to mention his longing for a paintbox too, as can be seen in a letter dated 11 October, 1914 (FIL viii). Worth quoting is from a letter to Kathleen written on Christmas Day that year:

The village here is in ruins and would make an awfully good sketch. The other night the Germans turned their search lights on to the ruined church
tower which stood out brightly illuminated against the sky and the ruined houses in the foreground. It was a very Brangwynesque effect and would have made a very good etching in his theatrical style. [my emphasis]

This was not lost on his wife. Her serious interest in painting can be guessed at from her diary of 1914 where appears an entry for 18 December to the effect that Kathleen got herself a new student’s card to copy paintings at the National Gallery. Her sketches of Marple Hall when they lived there, along with Frank’s drawings, were carefully preserved by her, so that on 29 December 1957 she eagerly showed them to Don Bachardy - the budding artist friend of her son. Isherwood was also taught by Frank how to observe the world around him. During an interview in 1973 when W.I. Scobie remarked on the fact that both Kathleen and Frank wrote very well, Isherwood replied that that was partly because they were good artists. He went on:

‘I’ve never known an artist who couldn’t write better than average. Their eye for detail and power of describing people is remarkable... My father had that to a great extent. … One of my earliest memories is that once, when I was trying to paint, imitating him, he asked me: ‘What colour is that tree?’ I said it was green, of course: Trees as a genus are green. ‘No it isn’t,’ he said. And in that light, when I looked, the tree was blue.

(Scobie, Paris Review 235)

Taking into account this artistic talent in his parents it becomes difficult to dismiss the visual element in Isherwood’s first novel as accidental. This ability to visualise stood
him in very good stead when he went to work as a scriptwriter for Berthold Viertel. As he said in an interview later, ‘I think it’s very good in the first place for most writers to be forced to visualize: you have to learn to stop relying on the word and thinking in terms of possible silent sequences or sequences where the dialogue plays against the image and so on’ (Higham 34). Painting is a performance, just as acting is. Both require a certain talent for expression in a manner that would make the end result, be it a painting or a play, aesthetically enjoyable. It is not surprising that Isherwood’s parents enjoyed both these modes of expression. This enjoyment of aesthetically expressing oneself lies at the heart of Isherwood’s artistic credo. His attitude is never one of dour seriousness and forbidding philosophical gravity of the kind that he found unattractive in the novels of Aldous Huxley. His notion of art is one that is informed by a lightness of touch, like the light brush strokes of a watercolour.

The narrative of All the Conspirators (1928), the novel whose working titles included one which could be the name of a painting – Seascape with Figures – practically opens with a framed engraving - ‘Sir Cloudesley and his men drowning between the Gilstone and the Retarriers’ - dated 1707, that hangs in the lodging house where Allen Chalmers and Philip Lindsay are staying. The real life scene of fishing boats outside is reflected on the glass of the engraving just as the reflected light renders the dining room of the lodging ‘shadowy’ (AC 11). The author’s punctilious establishment of this relationship between art and life, albeit at a purely visual level, is an indication of the predominance of the artist’s viewpoint. Although Philip tells Victor that he writes too, it is drawing which obviously interests him more. Kathleen’s art is evoked clearly at one
point in the book. As Philip gazes out of the window in Allen’s hotel room on the
morning after the drunken spectacle of Allen, he sees “the morning scene … delicately
pencilled, luminous, insipid, resembling a water-colour by an elderly gentlewoman (AC
29). Kathleen was very much ‘an elderly gentlewoman’ approaching sixty when the novel
was being written, and almost all of her work is in watercolour.

As far as a reflection of the relationship between the author and his mother is
concerned there is a telling moment in the narrative when Mrs. Lindsay has been trying to
entertain Victor Page in the absence of her children. She mentions shyly that before she
got married she used to go to Cambridge to sketch, adding, ‘Oh, no. Very amateurishly.’
Victor rejoins flatteringly, ‘I expect that’s how your son gets his talent.’ She says in reply
that it is very nice of him to say so but her son would have ‘despised my poor little
talents’(AC 70). This moment deserves closer inspection, because this is the only place,
before the reconciliatory book about his parents, where Isherwood may have, consciously
or unconsciously, paid his tribute to Kathleen’s talent. It is interesting that the idea of
Philip Lindsay - the Isherwood character - acquiring an eye for art from his parents, in
this case his mother, is voiced by one who is not portrayed in a very favourable light.
This tempts the reader to disregard whatever he says, more so when it is polite flattery.
However, on one occasion Philip remarks on Victor Page, ‘He’s got things in him you
wouldn’t suspect’ (AC 68). It is therefore only natural if the casual reader does not
suspect that Victor Page is voicing an idea which will be one of the essential foundation
stones of a book to be written by ‘Philip Lindsay’/ Christopher Isherwood forty-two years
later - *Kathleen and Frank*. In that book he would write about her, ‘She had grown so
accustomed to hearing Frank’s talents praised while hers were disregarded that she ...
thought little of them herself” (KF 10-11). In the words of her fictional counterpart, her skills were only ‘poor little talents.’ It is significant that the activity in which Philip is engaged at the end of the novel, signalling his mother’s triumph over him, is painting. When Allen comes to visit Philip, Mrs. Lindsay tells him that Philip has been drawing Joan. The importance of drawing, both as a technique in the novel and as an element in the story cannot be ignored. By that same argument one cannot acknowledge that drawing may not have played such an important role in the narrative had it not been for the exposure to art that Isherwood had from his parents. Information that the character of Philip Lindsay is based on Isherwood’s friend Hector Wintle may have been meant as a red-herring. While it can be said that Isherwood never painted, it cannot be denied that nor did Wintle.

Apart from the visual element of the book, other important aspects are the use of humour in the narrative and the figuring of performance. Much of the humour comes in the manner of tea-tabling. Just as in the modus operandi of the mock-heroic, here the triviality of the situation is underlined by the seriousness of its treatment. Hence, when Philip tries to effect a thaw in his relations with his mother by asking her if it would rain for long, she replies ‘I don’t know’ ‘as though someone in the next room were dying’(AC 47). If we take Mrs. Lindsay to be the prototype of Kathleen, this penchant for domestic theatre is corroborated by Isherwood in Kathleen and Frank. About her diaries he writes, ‘She wrote with a strong consciousness of personal and national drama, of herself and the England she was living in....She could invest minor domestic events with an epic quality’ (KF 10).
Humour is used as a device to ensure a sense of superiority. Allen says on one occasion, ‘Philip, in this theatrical mood, was too comic to annoy’ (AC 31). Here, by emphasizing Philip’s comic side Allen turns the former into a source of amusement, someone not to be taken seriously enough to provoke into annoyance. Thus Allen underlines his own superiority in the situation. Similarly, the only way in which Philip can get himself to undertake the ignominious task of writing a letter asking to be re-employed is by treating it as an amusement, by seeing the exercise as a test in a literary competition (AC 51). The best way known to Allen to deal with insult or hurt is to turn it into an object of amusement. Philip’s refusal to see him, the first time he tries to talk Philip out of going to Kenya, makes him ‘more amused than angry’ (AC 130). When Victor offers to show Joan a cut he had got on the knee during a game of football, she merely looks around the room with a ‘humorously deprecating glance’ (AC 76). After Philip’s sudden departure from home Victor gently coaxes Joan to eat something, but only draws from her a look of ‘hostile amusement’ (AC 137). There is a similarly patronising reference later to Victor’s ‘comic sincerity’ (AC 118). To be found amusing, therefore, becomes the worst insult, as does to be pointed out as lacking in humour. When Allen finally gets to talk to Philip to dissuade him from going to Kenya, the former’s faint smile, obviously meant to wound, elicits the hurt remark, ‘You think it amusing?’ (AC 124) But the worst insult Allen is capable of, and one that is sure to hurt Philip the most is the one with which their inconclusive conversation ends. Describing how, in trying to hurt others Philip is only harming himself, Allen implores ‘Haven’t you, well, even enough sense of humour to see that?’ (AC 125) Having a sense of humour, therefore, functions as a mark of intelligence.
Humour is also used as bathos. When Philip says to Allen, ‘Within six months I shall shoot myself or have a nervous breakdown and be stuffed into the nearest asylum’, his histrionics are frustrated by Allen’s deadpan remark, ‘It would be better if you tried gin. Just a thimble-full when you get back from office in the evenings. It makes one so good-tempered. And nobody’ll notice’ (AC 82). It is also bathetic the way the clumsy struggle between Victor and Allen ends when the former comes to see him about the disappearance of Philip. Their fight is broken up when Allen’s landlady Mrs. Rose enters into the room smiling, with a tray of tea things (AC 142). Tea-tabling, in this context, takes on an added layer of significance. The appearance of tea-things diffuses a potentially melodramatic situation.

In the novel, humour becomes inextricably linked with performance and theatricality. Characters indulge in overt or covert role-playing. Like any actor they are aware of their performance, their tone of voice, the effect intended, and are quick to exploit a situation for as much dramatic mileage as it is worth. They also enjoy the performances of others. One of the earliest examples of the awareness of tone of voice is when Allen thinks, ‘How strange. I said that in a tone of voice one uses to a child’ (AC 20). Each one is conscious of their own and others’ play-acting. When Philip tells Victor, during one of their first conversations in the book, that he writes a little, he is keenly aware of what Allen’s reaction to this would be if he were there: ‘I should like to make a gramophone record of your professional modesty voice’ (AC 24). Philip admonishes Allen at one point by saying, ‘I must say you rather overdo the professional cad touch’ (AC 31). When Philip points out that there is some slight difference between Cambridge and a hotel where women are staying, Allen makes an allusion to Victor when
replying, ‘You mimic his voice wonderfully’ (AC 31). Philip gets his opportunity later when, Allen’s ruthless diagnosis of the former’s malaise elicits the response, ‘You’ve certainly caught the voice marvellously’ - the voice, in this case, being that of Mrs. Lindsay (AC 83). In addition to this Philip is mentally assigned a part by Allen, a role that is even visually underlined by Philip himself at one point. ‘Philip rose to his feet, stretching himself wearily, posture of bored crucifixion, against the sea’ (AC 18). Hence Allen’s subsequent thought: ‘Properly appreciated, Philip’s a martyr - of sorts’ (AC 19).

When he refuses to eat anything till he has left the island, Philip leads Allen to think, ‘Philip, Blessed Saint and Martyr’ (AC 32). When this decision ends up making Philip sick, he finally gets an ironic canonisation from the author: ‘Poor Philip was somewhere below, retching miserably from his empty stomach. He had worn his martyr’s crown for several days. Now he was earning it’ (AC 35).

Much of the histrionics in the narrative is provided by Philip. At one point a conversation between him and Joan is brought to a halt by a little tubular gong in the hall sounded for dinner; the sound ‘sweet but penetrating, like theatrical church bells’ (AC 68) [my emphasis]. When Philip describes to Allen the announcement of Joan’s engagement to Victor Page, he adds, ‘All that was lacking, was a concealed orchestra to burst into the finale of “1812”’ (AC 99). It is Philip who frequently describes the domestic tension in terms of warfare. There is talk of ‘a rearguard action’ ‘a blockade’ and of course the author, who is writing quite obviously from Philip’s point of view, talks of ‘the tactics of their domestic guerrilla warfare’ (AC 42, 47, 79). As the Lindsays prepare to have Victor Page over for a few days Philip has ‘an amusing idea.’ ‘It would be delicately ironic to celebrate this visit by a feat of scene-shifting, a change of decor
which everyone would notice, except, possibly, Victor himself. He stood contemplating his sitting-room as though it were a new canvas’ (AC 96). Philip’s contemplating his sitting-room as though it were ‘a new canvas’ can be seen as an example of the way in which theatre and painting can be conflated, insofar as a stage can be read as a canvas. During Victor’s stay Philip keeps seeing things he is ‘certain would appeal to a choreographer. It rather reminds me of that charming ballet’ (AC 102). Philip’s virtuoso rendition of his troubles in the presence of Joan and Victor is punctuated by the author’s comment, ‘This was playing to the gallery with a vengeance; but where, after all, were the circle and the stalls?’ (AC 105) While preparations are afoot for Philip’s departure for Kenya he shouts at Joan for her unhappiness at his going. ‘For God’s sake,’ he cries, ‘don’t be so theatrical. You talk as if I’m on the steps to the scaffold’ [my emphasis]. He then forces his tone down to the pitch of reason, matter-of-factness, thereby proving that he himself is being no less theatrical (AC 129). Allen has the key to Philip’s character when he says to him, ‘It’s amazing how you love to dramatize everything’ (AC 124) [my emphasis].

However, he is not the only one who play-acts in the novel. When Victor comes to Allen demanding to be told where Philip was, they break into a clumsy tussle just as the former is about to leave. This encounter is given an appearance of being staged. There is mention of ‘a just audible falseness in tone. The negligence, the infinitesimal, apprehensive slurring of syllables, the slight deadening of the utterance, which one connects so intimately with: Well, what about it, then? Shall we, now? Right you are. I’m ready’ (AC 140). The gaiety between Victor and Joan is akin to the antagonism between Victor and Allen in the above incident, in that both are conscious efforts and
thus performances, play-acting. ‘They were both laughing now. Each waiting for the other to stop first’ (AC 152). Later in this stilted conversation Joan, ‘her voice...rather deliberately casual ... waited for him to speak until she could have yelled.’ Her voice rings with false animation when Victor informs her that his uncle was going to the Orkneys for May: ‘Really - how exciting’ (AC 153).

In *Christopher Isherwood: Myth and Anti-Myth* Paul Piazza describes the novel as a ‘melodrama of pseudoangst and convenient neurosis’ (Piazza 28). He also says, ‘Mother and son possess a complete repertoire of rehearsed responses and stage ploys: they weep, fast, fret, scold and scheme as occasion demands, masochistically relishing their roles as martyrs’ (Piazza 21). What is often overlooked is that in the novel every major character play-acts to a greater or lesser extent, even Victor Page - someone apparently incapable of something so sophisticated. Joan, Allen and Philip play their own roles, and so does even Victor’s sexually repressed uncle, Colonel Page. His whole life is an act, which sometimes even borders on camp, such as his habit of touching his small moustache with his napkin every once in a while, during meals. For Philip, Joan and Allen the combination of play-acting and humour becomes their way to go through life with a delusion of superiority, especially when the victim of their performance and amusement is someone as internally tortured and vulnerable as Victor.

In an essential way *All the Conspirators* is a direct continuation of *The Mortmere Stories* and ‘Gems of Belgian Architecture.’ The mock-heroic element noticed in the previous stories is evident here in the concept of tea-tabling, even if it works in reverse. Whereas in case of the mock-heroic the common and mundane is pitched up to a higher tone, here the struggle between generations is toned down to the level of tea-table
sparring of tongues. For this he has acknowledged his indebtedness to E.M. Forster. It is interesting that among the many reasons why he has said he admired Forster, one was comedy. He once said that although he did not agree with Forster’s description of himself as a comic writer, he did think that he was, in the coinage of Gerald Heard, ‘meta-comic’, or ‘a kind of comedy that goes beyond comedy and tragedy’ (Scobie, 227).

In a letter dated 12 June 1959 written to Robin Wade, who was the Script Organiser of BBC Television, Derek Parker suggests *All the Conspirators* as a television play, saying, ‘It’s interesting in that Philip (in reality a self-portrait) is in fact the original angry young man, the 1920s model, and there is a certain amusement-value in this. The characters are strongly dramatic, the action fairly so, and the book, well handled, could I think make compelling viewing.’ The book was ultimately not adapted for television because of Philip’s perceived homosexuality and his sister’s marrying ‘a Philistine.’ But the fact that the book was suggested for dramatisation at all is proof of the presence of drama and indeed theatre in it, not forgetting ‘the amusement-value.’ So, the book is acknowledged as being both potentially theatrical and comic.

We see much of what we found in *All the Conspirators* in Isherwood’s next book - *The Memorial* (1932). Here, as in the case of the previous book, much depends on having or not having a sense of humour and an ability to perform. An amused smile becomes more effective than a stern rebuke. One of the early uses of this we get at the beginning when Anne contemplates going into a convent. ‘She’d made enquiries, even tentatively mentioned it to Mary. And it was Mary’s indulgent, ever so faintly amused
smile that had made her feel: No, never. She couldn’t. She could never face the Gang, who, with their little jokes, could turn it all into just one more new sort of game’ (M 15). Anne decides that she shall not be a source of amusement for ‘the Gang’, who, by their own private joke evolved out of Anne’s decision to join the convent, would form an exclusive group from which Anne would be left out, deemed inferior. Not having a sense of humour is indicative of one’s intellectual inferiority. Being humourless is to be Othered. Humour becomes a constituent of the Self. Hence Anne’s longing ‘for someone who hasn’t got this tremendously highly developed sense of humour’ (M 15-16). It is interesting that she at once thinks of Eric. If one sees Eric as being the Isherwood character in the book, as there is a temptation to do, then we see him being attributed with a lack of humour just as the Isherwood character in the previous book – Philip Lindsay – had once been. Anne’s brother Maurice also knows the value of humour as a populariser. At Cambridge his friends’ laughter redeems an evening. ‘How he loved it when he could make everybody laugh’ (M 193). But Mary’s sense of humour humanises her when, during the wreath-laying ceremony at the memorial, she reacts to the ridiculous in the effect her father’s ponderousness was having on the respectful congregation. ‘She didn’t know whether she wanted to sink through the earth or merely to laugh’ (M 116). Her reaction is similar when she imagines how Lily must have arranged to have her over for lunch with Mr. Vernon, her father but Lily’s father-in-law - all in a show of the power Lily wants Mary to see she wields as the daughter-in-law. ‘What is there funny in all that? It made her smile, nevertheless’ (M 125). It was her humour which had made her married life bearable. She hated her husband Desmond Scriven’s sneering when asking Edward Blake about her parents.
She was developing, under the stress of her married life, a quite unfamiliar vein of humour, adapted partly from Scriven’s sarcasm, partly from Richard’s rarely made, dry, mild jokes. She was building up her fortifications. (M 138)

Similarly, when she writes to Edward about the recent excursion to her ancestral home, now owned by the Ramsbothams, she makes ‘the whole thing seem, of course, a tremendous joke’ (M 270).

Anne may see herself as lacking in a sense of humour but she still tries to perform. Preparing for her evening out with Tommy she feels ‘thirty-five at least - so sophisticated, so chic, so wearily false, so benign, so maternal’ (M 17). Like a performer she is conscious of her act: ‘Part of the wall was made of looking-glass. She kept catching sight of herself. Really, she had to admit, those eyes were pretty striking - and how really exquisitely I dance’ (M 19).

Mrs. Lily Vernon is as thinly disguised a portrait of Kathleen Isherwood as Mrs. Lindsay in the previous novel. However there is greater complexity in her this time. She is invested with knowledge ‘much greater than he [Major Ronald Charlesworth] would have expected from a woman’ (M 24). Although she is shown to have a love for the Past, the narrator calls it her ‘reactionary romanticism’, a term Isherwood may very well have used for his mother’s interest in the Past (M 29). Like Mrs. Lindsay before her, Mrs. Vernon painted watercolours. But more like Kathleen Isherwood, she has kept her portfolios, in which there is a watercolour of an old house in Cheshire, the house of her husband’s family, where she had stayed for some years since her widowhood. There are
more references to Lily Vernon’s watercolours than there were to Mrs. Lindsay’s. For example: ‘Lily had come up here to sketch while she was engaged. It made a beautiful water-colour’ (M 92).

Mr. Richard Vernon, like Frank, used to paint too, we are told. Like Frank, he died in the War, at Ypres. With her new friend Major Charlesworth, we are told, she goes to lectures at the National Portrait Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Here it must be mentioned that although the mother figure disappears from Isherwood’s fiction for the time being, when she does appear again, in his very last work of fiction, she continues to be a water-colorist! In *A Meeting by the River* (1967) she is the mother of Oliver and Patrick. In a letter to his mother Patrick says, ‘I kept wishing you could have been with me, with your water-colours’ (MR 34). Patrick describes the ‘incredible light during the few minutes of tropical evening’ as ‘a rich old eighteenth-century greenish-gold, exactly like a Gaudi’, an artist Kathleen may very well have been familiar with (MR 75). He tells her that she would love to sit on the water-stairs at the Monastery and ‘of course you would sketch the passing boats’ (MR 76). Like Kathleen, Mrs Vernon is a compulsive diarist. When she remembers that her husband Richard had once remarked that she ought to be an architect, we recall that Kathleen herself had taken lessons in architecture. Like Isherwood’s mother, the character in the novel took more pride in her husband’s superior sketching than in her own. There also seem to be an awareness on Isherwood’s part of Kathleen’s interest in religions other than her own Church-of-England Protestantism. Possible proof of this can be found in the altercation that takes place between Eric and
Mrs. Vernon when he discovers a book called *Mrs. Eddy* in his room, left presumably by his mother. Eric asks:

‘Is it yours?’

‘It belongs to Mrs. Prendergast.’

‘Then I wish she’d keep it.’

‘She lent it to me to read,’ said Lily. ‘It’s very interesting.’

‘I thought you were such a great Protestant.’

‘That doesn’t prevent me from listening to what other people have to say.’

‘You think people ought to dabble in every Religion?’

‘I think people ought to be broad-minded’ (M 206)

Like Kathleen, she wished her son to be a don. We are also told about Eric Vernon, the son, who seems to be a ‘young bounder’ (M 26). But the fact that the progress of the story will prove Eric to be the opposite, is a way of drawing the reader’s attention to Mrs. Vernon’s performance of the helpless, uncomplaining sinned-against mother. We have various occasions to see the play-acting of Lily Vernon. During a stiffly formal conversation over tea with Eric she asks, ‘And where shall you go next?’

‘I don’t know,’ he lied.

She smiled. It seemed to him that she had understood perfectly what he felt, had even taken a gently mocking interest in seeing how far he would allow himself, to-day, to be questioned. (M 49)

Here, as in the case of Anne confronting her mother Mary, a smile from the lady indicates an amusement in the superiority of her own position. As the narrator comments when Eric
starts to say goodbye to Lily, Eric ‘could swear that it had amused her to break through his carefully and painfully prepared armour. His armour of politeness, mildness, dullness’ (M 50). She checks the effect of her performance in the mirror, as we earlier saw Anne doing. When Mrs. Beddoes smiles at her once, ‘with the privileged irony of an old servant’, Mrs. Vernon smiles back in reply, ‘a smile, as she suddenly felt - catching a glimpse of it in the mirror - of the most extraordinary pathos and sweetness’, the confirmation she needed (M 72). Mary imagines social climber Mrs. Ramsbotham excusing Mr. Ramsbotham’s absence and spending his money. But Mary also acknowledges that in Mrs. Ramsbotham’s arsenal are the ‘elegant jokes’, jokes which give her the ultimate sense of being in control (M 247). Mrs. Beddoes also looks up to the ceiling ‘in serio-comic resignation’ when Grandad Vernon’s false teeth tumble out onto the plate during a meal. The old man himself regards this as a joke and laughs ‘quite frankly’ without making ‘the least attempt to hide the mess’ (M 159).

Sense of humour works differently while portraying the character of Edward Blake. A lonely, depressive homosexual, he has seen action during the War and is now casting about aimlessly. His sense of humour goes some way towards maintaining his sanity. But he did not always have this sense of humour. We are told that at school he was never popular. His unstable temper had alienated others. But perhaps most damning of all, ‘his jokes, overstrained and malicious, seldom raised a laugh’ (M 131). Going through life he learns the value of humour as a distancing agent and a safety valve. He can only deal with his hurt and disappointment at Richard Vernon’s falling in love with Lily by seeing the affair as ‘an essentially comic disease’ on Richard’s part (M 135). He carries out his duties as best man at Richard’s wedding ‘in a mood of slightly hysterical
humour’ and it seemed as though they had been ‘transported into the world of the comic picture postcard’ (M 135). When we see him first, it is on a Berlin street at night. At the Potsdamer Platz an omnibus seems to have narrowly escaped hitting him. ‘Why I might have been killed, he thought - and this was really extremely comic’ (M 54). He comes to his room and attempts suicide by shooting himself in the mouth. When he realises that his attempt has been unsuccessful he gets out and takes a taxi. ‘Edward suddenly realised that he was crumpling in his fist the psycho-analyst’s card. What a joke’ (M 61). Once he acquires this knowledge of life being a joke, he informs his every activity with this awareness. During his epicurean existence in the south of France with Margaret he does his exercises in the morning on the verandah of their villa. ‘Stark naked, with furious ironic energy, he perform[s] his comic religious ritual of strainings, stretchings and heavings’ (M 266). His homosexuality, the cause of much suffering before, now becomes a huge joke between him and Margaret. When they once drunkenly attempt to make love and fail, it is ‘really very funny and not in the least disgusting - but quite hopeless.’ They sit up in bed and laugh and laugh (M 269). More seriously, humour becomes an effective weapon with which to defend his independence in the face of Margaret’s inevitable possessiveness. When she patronisingly suggests that a young man named Olivier be invited to amuse him, Edward smiles his ‘méchant smile’ and says, ‘I think you might spare me the final humiliation of being pimped for’ (M 273). This is the shield of humour, or its pretence, that she uses when she is called upon to witness the domestic situation between Edward and his French lover Mitka. She watches everything, even Mitka’s being sent away to the cinema by Edward, with a ‘faintly amused smile’ (M 276).
She knows that the cruellest insult she could inflict on Edward is to say that she found the whole set-up funny. She starts to laugh uncontrollably.

‘I wish you’d tell me the joke.’

‘There isn’t a joke. Or at least - yes, I can’t help it, it is funny - it’s like - ‘

‘What?’

‘Like being a nursery governess. Or a responsible private tutor.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I’m sorry, Edward. You made me say it, you know. But it is. I think one would have to have absolutely no sense of humour. You’ve got far too much.’

‘Perhaps not so much as you imagine.’ (M 278-279)

If Edward had been experiencing a shortfall in his sense of humour then, he seems to have been replenished before long. Within a week of Mitka’s leaving him, he returns to England a drunken wreck. He looks at the scared faces around him at Victoria, including that of Margaret, who has come to receive him, and thinks, ‘What a comic little town London [is]’ (M 280). Only this is not humour but a pretence of it, to help him fight the sad reality of his lonely, desperate life. His real humour reappears a year later when travelling by train he picks up his pencil to effect a reconciliation. ‘He’d suddenly thought of something funny to write to Margaret’ (M 281). So, humour divides and unites Edward and Margaret. They take refuge behind it to soften the blow of a hurt inflicted consciously or unconsciously by the other. They insult each other by saying that they lack it. But it is humour which ultimately brings them together.
Isherwood is determined that the comedy behind much of the action in the novel should be grasped. On at least one occasion he states so baldly, even at the cost of weakening the narrative. He writes:

Meanwhile she felt someone pushing through the crowd just behind her. It was Ramsbotham...carrying the wreath. He took his station just behind Lily. He was crimson in the face.

It was all extraodinarily comic. (M 111)

Isherwood’s tributes to Sherlock Holmes continue both in All the Conspirators and in The Memorial. In the former novel Allen is once said to resemble Sherlock Holmes. In the latter there are two references to the Victorian detective. Recalling his childhood Eric remembers the time spent with his father. ‘Who was Sherlock Holmes, Daddy?’ ‘Sherlock Holmes was a detective.’ ‘What’s a detective, Daddy?’ ‘If you’ll listen, you’ll hear’ (M 149). The other reference comes when the party consisting of Tommy Ramsbotham, his now-wife Anne, Maurice, Edward Blake, Mary Scriven, a Frenchman named Georges and Earle Gardiner return to the former home of the Vernon family, now owned by the Ramsbothams. When, after prolonged knocking on the main gate, they heard a dog starting to bark from inside the house. ‘Something’s begun to materialise,’ said Edward. ‘It’s the cry of a haound, Watson!’ replies Maurice, doing ‘one of his stock impersonations’ (M 240). The reference is obviously to the Sherlock-Holmes story “The Hound of the Baskervilles.”
So in his first two books he makes it clear that he finds it difficult to imagine life or its representation without the crucial element of humour in either. And often, if not always, humour comes out through some form of play-acting, even something as crude as an impersonation, as the quote above demonstrates. Isherwood sought out humour, especially the unintended kind, in whatever he saw. This naturally included films, because here one got both: the acting, preferably bad, and the humour resulting from it. Of Charles Boyer’s film *La Bataille*, which he may have seen in 1934, when it was released, Isherwood said to W.I. Scobie:

‘We [Auden and Isherwood] adored it - we saw these things again and again. Boyer trying to look Japanese was alone worth the price of admission....The film is so gloriously ridiculous. It has such utter contempt for history, engineering, naval strategy, Japan, Buddhism, adultery, artillery...’(Scobie, ‘The Youth’ 26)

He found humour in literature, and often in the most unexpected places, as is proven by the letters he wrote. During these years he regularly corresponded with E.M. Forster. In a letter written on his thirtieth birthday, from Las Palmas, he writes of a character in Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, ‘And Vronsky nearly comes off as a great comic character. There is a scene when he’s already had Anna once or twice and is being very polite about it: “For an instant of this bliss...” which makes me smile whenever I read it.’ Then he turns his comic gaze upon his life and says, ‘Like you, I am aware that this is the moment for a pronouncement. Like you, I fail to make it. I have no message
whatever to the British Public or the boys of the old school. At forty, if spared, I'll try again.‘

He continues in the same strains of humour and play-acting in his next book Mr. Norris Changes Trains (1935). Mr. Norris is arguably the most interesting character in the book, and therefore deserving of acute scrutiny. Isherwood makes sure that there is a lot to scrutinize. Since his life is built on fraud and charm, play-acting and humour are the tricks of Norris’s trade. The theatre metaphor is used liberally throughout the book, and the use starts very early on. About their first meeting William Bradshaw says of Mr. Norris: ‘His voice rang false; high-pitched in archly forced gaiety, it resembled the voice of a character in a pre-war drawing-room comedy’ (MN 8). The ‘archly forced gaiety’ may be because of stage-fright. This stage-fright may be because of two reasons: imminent inspection of his papers by the border control which may show them to be false, and performing in front of a new audience, albeit the audience of one - Bradshaw.

Later, when Bradshaw pays his first visit to his flat, the elaborate manner in which Mr. Norris receives him makes him want to laugh. ‘This little comedy was so unnecessary as to seem slightly sinister’ (MN 17). Like any actor, Arthur Norris needs the appropriate backdrop for his performance to shine. ‘Mine is a sensitive nature,’ he tells Bradshaw, ‘I react immediately to my surroundings ...To see me at my best, you must see me in my proper setting’(MN 57). The phrase ‘proper setting’ seems to indicate that Norris regards himself as an art object. We get a glimpse of how helpless he is without his ‘proper setting’ when unshaven and hungry Otto turns up at his flat a week after a fight at a Nazi Lokal. He says ‘Well, well, we live in stirring times’ and then pulls himself up as if with
a shock. His eyes wander over the tea things on the table, ‘like an actor deprived of his cue. There [is] no teapot on the table’ (MN 86). But most of the time he can turn any setting whatever into a stage for his performance, with the versatility of a consummate actor. Before he goes in to be interrogated by the police, we are told, ‘Arthur had the manner of one who mounts the steps of the scaffold’ (MN 74). Having survived the questioning, Norris emerges revitalised. After his recent performance of tragedy he is now ready for the other kind. ‘Accordingly we performed the comedy of entering the hotel, drinking a cup of coffee in the lounge and glancing through the morning papers’ (MN 75). An actor needs not only his setting but also his make-up. And the toilette of Arthur Norris reminds one of that of Belinda in Alexander Pope’s mock-heroic epic *The Rape of the Lock*. We are told about the entire procedure starting with the bath which Frl. Schroeder has to run early every morning. Then, his shaving and the combing of his wig by the barber’s boy. Then, while he powders his own nose, he is ready to talk to Bradshaw. He ‘thins’, rather than ‘plucks’ his eyebrows, uses a massage roller, massages his cheeks with face cream, powders it a little, followed by pedicure. We are also told that there are days when he makes up his face, and that every fortnight he cleans his hands and wrists with depilatory lotion! (MN 122-3) Just how much he needs the make-up is indicated later in the narrative, when he approaches the telephone receiver ‘holding the powder-puff like a defensive weapon’, with Schmidt at the end of the line (MN 161). Make-up, play-acting, humour: these are Norris’s weapons to help him make his way in the world. Towards the end of the book Arthur Norris does his best to make a grand exit, even to the extent of quoting a playwright known as much for his plays as for his real-life performances. He evokes Oscar Wilde in saying that he has put his genius into his life,
not into his art (MN 215). Getting ready to flee Germany at short notice he nonetheless does not neglect to distribute his largess. Admiringly Bradshaw comments, ‘Arthur certainly gave things away with an air; he knew how to play the Grand Seigneur’, much like he knew how to play various other roles, one might add (MN 214).

As Mr. Norris lives a life of daily play-acting, which involves repetition of the same actions, or going through the same motions, his lines are also set according to the action, even the time of day. The line about the ‘stirring times’ quoted above is one such. Bradshaw is unsure at first as to whether to laugh or not at Mr. Norris’s clumsy joke about their living in ‘stirring times, tea-stirring times’, but ‘it was only later, when I knew him better that I realized that these aged jokes (he had a whole repertoire of them) were not even intended to be laughed at. They belonged merely to certain occasions in the routine of his day. Not to have made one of them would have been like omitting to say grace’ (MN 22). But there are other occasions when laughter is desperately solicited. At a party Mr. Norris tells Bradshaw, ‘I said, Anni’s beauty is only sin-deep. I hope that’s original? Is it? Please laugh’ (MN 34). But not always is his humour received by a sympathetic audience. When he goes to speak at a meeting of the Communist Party his ‘graceful rentier wit’ distances him from his working-class listeners. It is only when he makes a more accessible joke that the audience applauds loudly (MN 62). Happy to abuse others, Mr. Norris wants to be amused too. And nobody seems to do that as well as William Bradshaw. When they are talking about the possible cruelty that may be inflicted on Norris during the police interrogation, Bradshaw teases him by saying that the police may put him through the third degree.
‘Oh, William, how can you say anything so dreadful? You make me feel quite faint.’

‘But, Arthur, surely that would be ... I mean, wouldn’t you rather enjoy it?’

Arthur giggled: ‘Ha, ha. Ha, ha. I must say this, William, that even in the darkest hour your humour never fails to restore me.’ (MN 71)

And later Norris reciprocates when asked to ‘Be brave, Comrade Norris. Think of Lenin.’ He replies, ‘I’m afraid, ha, ha, I find more inspiration in the Marquis de Sade’ (MN 73).

For William Bradshaw however, humour is not only to amuse and be pleasant to Norris with. It is also what facilitates his maintenance of a stance of superiority, especially when unedifying truths about himself stare him in the face. Realizing how he was being used by Norris and also, in a different way, by Bayer, he feels angry, ‘and at the same time rather amused’ (MN 83). But it is also this sense of humour that gives him a sense of distance from his own not-always-amusing condition. He is shocked to find out when going to Norris’s apartment after a long silence from the latter, that he was gone. “Gone?”

“Yes. Two days ago. The flat’s to let. Didn’t you know?” I suppose my face was a comic picture of dismay, for she added unpleasantly: “You weren’t the only one he didn’t tell...”’ (MN 98).

Bradshaw is, however, careful not to have the joke on himself for long. It is not he, but Arthur Norris who should amuse. Thus, when Schmidt hangs up mid-sentence on Mr. Norris after the former has been away for a long time, Arthur’s dismay is ‘so comic’ that Bradshaw has to smile (MN 162). When knowing very well what reaction he would
get, Bradshaw asks Arthur if he might give Baron von Pregnitz a message from Arthur, his face becomes ‘a comical study’ (MN 163).

There are other characters who are conscripted into the theatre of Norris’s life. We saw earlier how Bradshaw becomes a member of the cast of Norris’s play when they do their little comedy in the hotel. He becomes even more integral to the plot of Norris’s drama when he agrees to accompany Baron von Pregnitz to Switzerland. ‘We were like two unimportant characters in the first act of a play, put there to make conversation until it is time for the chief actor to appear’ (MN 175). Frl. Schroeder, who looks like a caricature of Mary Queen of Scots when dressed in Arthur Norris’s gift of pearls, is humoured by the man himself with terms of endearment such as ‘Her Majesty’ and even more interestingly, ‘La Divine Schroeder’ which can only be a reference to the actress Sarah Bernhardt (MN 39).

With Mr. Norris, and with many characters who were to subsequently appear in Isherwood’s fiction, what makes the play-acting even more necessary is that they are essentially overgrown children trying to live in an adult world. A pronounced element of infantalism can be noticed in many of Isherwood’s characters. As far as Mr. Norris is concerned it is made obvious by Bradshaw’s astute observation made also during their first encounter, that his eyes reminded him ‘of the eyes of a schoolboy surprised in the act of breaking one of the rules’ (MN 1). At one point later in the story, his eyes meet Bradshaw’s ‘in a glance of dishonest, smiling innocence’ (MN 165). We are told that when Schmidt doled out Norris his pocket money he would look ‘like a schoolboy who had received an unexpectedly large tip’ (MN 52). When Bradshaw confronts him with the question as to why he doesn’t go to Bayer’s office anymore, Mr. Norris breaks out ‘with
childish petulance’ (MN 92). Towards the end of the book when Bradshaw and Norris take the man keeping watch outside the apartment on a wild-goose chase, they snigger together, ‘like two boys poking fun at the schoolmaster’ (MN 208). But there are times, when Norris assumes the role of parent with respect to Bradshaw. When introducing him to Bayer, Norris says that Bradshaw speaks excellent German ‘like a mother recommending her son to the notice of the headmaster’ (MN 79). Secretly planning an operation involving Baron von Pregnitz, Bradshaw and a third party, Norris tells his young unsuspecting accomplice, ‘After all, I’m old enough to be your father. I think I may be excused for sometimes feeling myself in loco parentis’ (MN 157). Bradshaw congratulates him on his ‘admirable performance as the fond parent’ before asking him to spell out exactly what he has in mind (MN 158). However when Norris suddenly vanishes one day it is Bradshaw who begins to look around for excuses for his conduct, ‘and like an indulgent parent’ easily finds them (MN 100). In Ischerwood’s fiction, the roles of ‘child’ and ‘parent’ are not fixed to particular characters. They become one another’s ‘child’ or ‘parent’ as the situation demands.

Arthur is not the only character who is not a fully-grown adult with the appropriate mental age. As we have seen, Bradshaw shows signs of infantilism too. But there is also Baron von Pregnitz. He has a deep love of ‘Winnie the Pooh’ (MN 29) and homoerotic adventure stories about boys marooned on desert islands. Like Norris, he too is not quite a mature adult but has to pretend being one. His laugh therefore is ‘aristocratic, manly and sham, scarcely to be heard nowadays except on the legitimate stage’ (MN 134).
It is not surprising therefore that Bayer, who can be seen as the real hero of the story, has the manner which befits his age and position. When Norris and Bradshaw are carried up to his office on the shoulders of party workers on the morning of the Communist’s winning of eleven seats, Bayer’s ‘smiling eyes [take] in the scene with the amusement of a tolerant schoolmaster’ (MN 141). This schoolmaster look becomes more important with the prospective knowledge that he was aware of Norris’s spying against his party all along and was using a blissfully unaware Norris to send out misinformation to his enemies.

What we find in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* therefore is the gradual coming together of humour, play-acting and infantalism in an organic combination; one in which the three contribute substantially to forming the tone of Isherwood’s authorial voice. Taken to plays from an early age by his mother, he realizes that acting is not just about speaking the lines, or only about getting the make-up right, or exclusively about perfecting the body language of the character, or even using the sets to advantage. It is all four of these. In his essay entitled ‘Language and Surface: Isherwood and the Thirties’ Alan Wilde concentrates on the language of Arthur Norris, calling it ‘a model of evasion and equivocation: polite and formulaic, full of meaningless repetitions, *chevilles*, insipid jokes, semantically vacuous really’s, indeed’s and rather’s, nervously wooden oh’s, dear me’s, and my dear boy’s’ (Wilde, ‘Language’ 482). He says that words such as ‘elegant’ and ‘compliment’ ‘go to the heart, or rather to the surface, of Arthur’s being, which is continuous only in the way it adheres to verbal and visible properties...which William mistakes for depths’(Wilde, ‘Language’ 483). I have discussed other aspects of his role-
playing. It is these aspects which combine to give Arthur Norris the weaponry with which he takes on life. A life that involves terrifying ‘phone-calls, inspections by border controls, spying, police interrogations, or, in the words of Norris’s nameplate, ‘Export and Import’ (MN 15).

Between Mr. Norris Changes Trains and Lions and Shadows (1938) Isherwood did some miscellaneous writing, such as ‘Some Notes on Auden’s Early Poetry’ in November 1937. It is interesting that the mock-heroic had by then already become an integral part of Isherwood’s aesthetic and artistic arsenal. Speaking about Auden’s obsession with Icelandic sagas he writes:

The saga-world is a schoolboy world, with its feuds, its practical jokes, its dark threats conveyed in puns and riddles and understatements...I once remarked to Auden that the atmosphere of Gisli the Outlaw very much reminded me of our schooldays. He was pleased with the idea: and soon after this, he produced his first play, Paid on Both Sides, in which the two worlds are so inextricably confused that it is impossible to say whether the characters are really epic heroes or only members of the school OTC. (E 19)

Also in 1937, reviewing a book on T.E. Lawrence he makes it a point to mention that ‘Bernard Shaw, Forster and Kennington were all struck by his apparent boyishness; even after the horrors of the desert campaign he looked ten years younger than his age.’ He adds, ‘He had a giggling laugh, played practical jokes, and interspersed his conversation
with schoolboy slang. His enthusiasm for mechanical dodges and gadgets, too, had an adolescent quality’ (E 23). The dramatisation that Isherwood uses in this novel, in which his fictional self is assigned a peripheral role, went on to be used in his next book where his fictional self occupies centre-stage.

In his introduction to Lions and Shadows he says, ‘Because this book is about the problems of a would-be writer, it is also about conduct. The style is the man. Because it is about conduct, I have had to dramatize it, or you would not get farther than the first page’ (LS 5). The expression ‘The style is the man’ echoes the Wildean witticism that in a man nothing is more important than his appearance. Thus, by logical extension, it is about the projection of an impression, the fashioning of an image, the creation of an effect, much like what successful play-acting requires. This anticipates a sense of theatricality in the narrative, and the reader is not disappointed. The cast starts to perform as soon as the narrative gets underway. As I have shown above, for Isherwood play-acting is organically linked with the actor’s, or rather the character’s, sense of humour. So, the dramatisation of Mr. Holmes starts with a description of his demeanour when he laughs: ‘When he had made a successful joke and the whole form was laughing, he would clasp his hands behind his back under his gown and look primly down his nose at the small neat brown shoes’ (LS 7). Then we are informed of the particulars of his performance. Mr. Holmes’s habit of screwing his head to one side ‘as if ducking an obstacle’ is mentioned, before qualifying it by saying that it may have been a nervous tic, but ‘more probably they were quite deliberate. … Almost everything Mr. Holmes did or
said contributed to a deliberate effect: he had the technique of a first-class clergyman or
actor’ (LS 7).

One-fourth through the book Isherwood theorises about his fascination for acting.
Explaining his addiction to the movies he says:

True, the behaviour you see on the screen isn’t natural behaviour; it is
acting, and often very bad acting too. But the acting has always a certain
relation to ordinary life; … Viewed from this standpoint, the stupidest film
may be full of astonishing revelations about the tempo and dynamics of
everyday life: you see how actions look in relation to each other; how
much space they occupy and how much time. (LS 53)

Soon after this theorising, the amateur theoretician narrates his opportunity to be an
amateur film-actor. On 20 March 1924 - although the date is not mentioned in the
narrative - he and his new friend Pembroke Stephens go to see film producer George
Pearson at the Lasky Studios in Islington and is surprised to be told that they have to get
into costume and take part in a crowd scene. He has to play a midshipman. In the section
of the narrative that follows we see how Isherwood combines humour and play-acting;
humour in describing the process, play-acting in performing the part for the reader’s
benefit all over again. This is Isherwood humorously re-enacting his film-acting:

Wildly and vaguely, I applied some colour to my cheekbones, smearing it
over with tan powder: my face, when I had finished, looked like a burst
poached egg. […] I had one big moment: together with a dozen others, I
was told to descend a flight of steps, drunkenly, my arms round two girls’
necks. This was a close shot: I must have been clearly recognisable.

Needless to say it was cut out of the picture. (LS 54)

At the end of the day Isherwood is paid 24 shillings for his role. It is interesting that the
first money he ever earned in his life was because of his acting. In a sense this was the
beginning of his career. Throughout the rest of his professional life as a writer he would
be acting, albeit in a different manner, to a different audience.

Given this love of play-acting it is only natural that when Isherwood and
Chalmers decide to perform ‘an overt act of hostility to the “Other Side”’ it would be as
theatrical as possible. The setting was to be the college feast. ‘Exactly what we were
going to do, we didn’t know. Perhaps Chalmers would simply jump on to the table and
shout: “J’en appelle!” … The phrase “J’en appelle!”’, which occurs in a poem by Villon,
meant, in our private slang, a kind of metaphysical challenge’ (LS 70). And since things
do not work out the way they plan it, there is nothing surprising about Isherwood’s wish,
expressed shortly afterwards, that he wanted to direct films (LS 77). Directing films
would give him the opportunity to do what he could not till then - to dramatise and
represent the drama as dramatically as possible. He does, however, soon get a chance to
do something dramatic, although, discreetly. He decides to fill with insults his answers to
questions for the forthcoming examinations. To prevent any back-tracking on this
decision he burns all his note-books, sells all his text-books, and with great sense of
theatre drops one particular book into the River Cam. Significantly enough, it is a
quotation from a play which he had written on the title page - ‘Which, pardon me, I do
not mean to read....’ from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. The theatricality of Isherwood’s insulting examination answers is underlined by his saying that when it was all done, and his fate sealed his ‘act seemed more than ever unreal to [him]: failing the Tripos had merely been a kind of extension of dream-action on to the plane of reality’ (LS 82). This was a ‘dream-action’ with all the unreality and drama of the plan he and Chalmers had made to throw the ‘metaphysical challenge’ to ‘The Others’ on the college feast day. The only difference was that whereas the challenge remained unissued, this dream definitely got translated into action. After getting himself sent down from Cambridge a long period of emotional and cultural aridity follows. This dire period ends with his being employed as the secretary to the String Quartet run by the Cheurets. Now Isherwood belonged to a peer group of secretaries of other orchestras and other organisations. He enjoys play-acting with one Mr. Hardy of the Gramophone Society.

Picturing a dynamic middle-aged man seated amidst a subservient staff of stenographers, I was, nevertheless, determined not to be outdone. ‘Very well, Mr. Hardy,’ I would rattle briskly into the mouthpiece, ‘I’ll have that typed out and sent round to you to-night … Mr. Hardy proved to be a mild, agreeable, literary young man of my own age. He told me that he had always supposed me to be forty, at least. (LS 90)

But this was not the only role that Isherwood plays at this time. He is also ‘Isherwood the Artist.’ He is a ‘lonely, excluded, monastic figure.’ (LS 92). His stance of the alienated artist is, therefore, incomprehensible to the totally untheatrical M. Cheuret. However the idea of ‘dream-action’ has obviously not lost any of its hold on Isherwood because now
he embarks on giving a fresh twist to the Mortmere idea. The chaos and mayhem that he and Chalmers had planned for the college feast day, the mayhem that Isherwood himself quietly wrecked in his answer sheets in Cambridge, he now enacts vicariously through the villagers in his new fiction. Here they get so involved with the violent doings of their fictive counterparts in the work of a writer who comes to stay in the village that they take on all the disorderly character traits of their fictional counterparts. So, life imitates art with a vengeance.

This sense of theatricality so permeates Isherwood’s consciousness that much of what goes on around him has a sense of unreality. He ends his long description of the General Strike by saying that the ‘Poshocracy’ - the privileged - won the Strike in the end. He remarks that everybody now magnanimously pretended ‘that nothing more serious had taken place than, so to speak, a jolly sham fight with pats of butter’ (LS 111). The fact that it was ‘sham’ means that it was ‘pretended’ in the first place. Here, we have play-acting going on at two different levels. There is a pretension about a pretension. A slight twist to this idea is effected in a subsequent section where he describes the bathers at the Bay.

...bathing, for these people, was something rather childish, slightly to be ashamed of … [S]ome bathers even behaved with an elaborately parodied childishness, just to show that they were well aware that this wasn’t, in any case, proper adult ‘sport.’ (LS 151)

While in both the cases cited the actors are at pains to show that there is no serious involvement with their actions, they are showing this with considerable
seriousness. In the case of the ‘Poshocrats’ they are seriously trying to show the strike as fun and games, the bathers are trying to show that these fun and games are not ‘serious.’ The Poshocrats are not serious about defeating the Strike, the bathers are not serious about the bathing. In both cases therefore the element of ‘sham’ is prominent. Therefore, play-acting is going on at a large scale. Another point that needs to be made is that the bathers are playing the role of good holiday-makers. Isherwood tells us later of ‘their grave ritual of pleasure’ (LS 152). They are going through the motions of holidaying. They have been cast in a role and they are delivering the lines as best they can, just like Mr. Norris’s jokes which were meant not so much to make one laugh but rather as ritual chants that need to be made at certain times of day, just as lines in a play can be spoken only at a certain point in the action and nowhere else.

We are reminded of Mr. Norris again and of the writer in Isherwood’s novel set in the village when Stephen Savage makes his appearance. Savage inhabits ‘a world of self-created and absorbing drama, into which each new acquaintance [is] immediately conscripted to play a part.’ He continues:

Savage illuminated you were like an expressionist producer, with the crudest and most eccentric of spot-lights: you were transfigured … in accordance with his arbitrary, prearranged conception of your role... I have seen several, who were otherwise quiet and reserved, shed tears, pray, perform exotic dances or seize each other by the hair; one eminently respectable lady was even moved to attack her husband with a knife. (LS 173)
Once again we have life imitating art. Only on the previous occasion life imitates art in fiction within fiction - *Lions and Shadows* being one -and thus gives it a meta-fictional dimension. Since the narrator is also scripting the drama of his own life, he gives it the same treatment, that is, exposing the element of sham in it, when he describes his decision to turn over a fresh leaf, to embark on a ‘New Life’:

Screwing the cap to my fountain-pen, rising from my chair, shutting the bureau, I turned the handle of my sitting-room door and opened it solemnly into the New Life. Descending the staircase of the dining-room I was Christopher Isherwood no longer, but a satanically proud, icy, impenetrable demon; an all-knowing, all-pardoning savior of mankind; a martyr-evangelist of the tea-table, from whom the most atrocious drawing-room tortures could ring no more than a polite proffer of the buttered scones. (LS 122)

Life imitates art once again when Isherwood announces his plans to leave the house. Whereas in the last extract Isherwood tea-tables his own move, here his move is tea-tabled by others. As he instantly starts to imagine sending postcards to his family from the most exotic places he can think of, the family itself has turned the imminent departure into ‘the mildest and most respectable of domestic adventures’: ‘We must try and find a nice bed-sitting-room ... perhaps somewhere near the river ... oughtn’t to give more than thirty shillings...’ (LS 123) The family has now successfully tea-tabled his bold, dramatic adventure into a nice, genteel sortie, and that too one undertaken not in defiance of the family but with its active support.
Isherwood uses the tea-tabling technique when he describes events in the outside world as well. For example, he tea-tables the death of Miss Chichester, his landlady at Bay. The last time he sees her alive she serves him afternoon tea and her last words to him are ‘My sister’s arriving to-day. I hope you’ll be comfortable.’ ‘The sister...had entered Miss Chichester’s sitting-room to find her stretched on the sofa, unconscious, before midnight. Miss Chichester was dead’ (LS 171-2). Her death is as unspectacular as her life.

Seen from this point-of-view his theory of the ‘Truly Weak Man’ can easily be alternatively called ‘The Theatrical Man’ (LS 128). The ‘Truly Weak Man’’s reaction to life has to be sufficiently dramatic to attract the attention of the society to, and to convince himself of, the supposed bravery of it all. Similarly the ‘Truly Strong Man’’s life will be undramatic, hence unnoticed, because he does not have to prove anything either to himself or to society. The ‘truly strong men’ ‘have neither the time nor the occasion to throw themselves into a pose and try to be something great’ (LS 128). Isherwood repeatedly shows himself up as the classic example of the ‘Truly Weak Man.’ The desperate need to draw attention to himself resurfaces during his visit to Oxford to see Hugh Weston. No sooner does he sit down to a meeting of the college essay club than ‘against my will, against my better judgement, something inside me wanted to stand up, to declaim, to behave, to astound them all.’ However, always the artist Isherwood of the 30’s soon introduces bathos and distances himself from his 20’s self: ‘And because I wouldn’t, couldn’t, I sat and sulked, trying to look distinguished and abstractedly helping myself to unwisely large quantities of bananas, mulled claret and preserved fruits’ (LS 134). Before long play-acting becomes a professional necessity for Isherwood. Envious
of his friend Philip who can mix and mingle with tourists so easily he decides that the best he can ever do is to spy upon them. His work is cut out for him. ‘Henceforward, my problem is how to perfect a disguise.’ He already has a disguise for two local fishermen, Bruiser and Tim. His disguise was a purely verbal one, of course - ‘a slight Cockney twang’ (LS 153).

Considering that most of his time at Bay is supposed to be devoted to finishing his novel with the working title of Seascape with Figures it is hardly surprising that one of the improvements that is made on the work is that the ‘stage-directions’ - Chalmers’ phrase - such as ‘he said’ and ‘they both smiled’ had been cut to a minimum. Re-writing the novel the author realises, not surprisingly, that he is ‘strongest on dialogue, weakest on abstractions and generalisations’, before admitting that his models are ‘not novels at all, but detective stories’, and the plays of Ibsen and Tchekhov’ (LS 159). It is also a play that comes to the rescue when the final title is decided upon, interestingly enough the same play which had earlier supplied him the quote to put on the title-page of his most hated text-book in Cambridge. It is from Julius Ceasar that the phrase ‘All the conspirators’ travels to the title page of Isherwood’s first novel (LS 161). Appropriately enough, the scene depicting the immediate aftermath of the novel’s acceptance by Jonathan Cape, is transformed into a scene from a play or a movie: ‘…I ran all the way to the tube station; and the massed bands were playing their loudest, and the streets were full of waving flags’- yet another example of dream-action, though this time the cause and consequence are both happy (LS 167).

As the book nears its end Isherwood starts to tire of his role-playing. ‘I wanted to stop playing a rebel,’ he confesses (LS 178). From now on, he seems to indicate by what
follows, that all his role-playing and play-acting will be done in the pages of his books. By the time he starts planning his next book he asks himself, ‘Why not write the story in self-contained scenes, like a play...?’ or, more interestingly for our discussion, like ‘an epic disguised as a drawing-room comedy’ (LS 182).

Non-verbal communication is also one important aspect of play-acting. We find here that this communication mode echoes instances in his previous books, particularly in *The Memorial*. In that novel Mary Scriven’s ‘faintly amused smile’ dissuades her daughter Anne from becoming a hospital nurse (M 15). Here Chalmers has ‘a way of smiling, faintly but acidly, puffing at his pipe and saying nothing. I hated this smile: it deflated my most extravagant enthusiasms in a moment’ (LS 48).

In *The Memorial* humour divides and unites Edward and Margaret. For the two friends here - Chalmers and Isherwood - humour, that is ‘the same slang’, ‘the familiar jokes’, is a means of reassuring each other that their friendship is still working, when ‘The Rats’ Hostel tourist season [is] over for the summer’, when Isherwood has started to feel guilty that his ‘public-school daydreams’ are ‘an act of high treason to Wilfred, to Kathy...and everything it meant to us both’ (LS 51). Later when Chalmers discovers ‘tea-tabling’ humour figures prominently in the idea. Discussing the novel they are now going to write using the ‘tea-tabling’ technique, Chalmers decides that the last episode, which involves a jealous scene, a fight and a murder, ‘would have to be written as almost pure farce’ (LS 108). Hugh Weston, when he takes over from Chalmers as a figure of influence for Isherwood, continues this emphasis on humour. According to the precociously-gifted poet, ‘Love wasn’t exciting or romantic or even disgusting; it was funny. The poet must handle it and similar themes with a wry, bitter smile and a pair of
rubber surgical gloves’ (LS 118-9). Towards the end of the book when a painter friend of the Cheurets called Bill Scott becomes his gin-drinking friend, Isherwood does not neglect to mention that ‘at charades he was brilliant, mimicking French generals, Russian aristocrats, opera singers, nuns, performing burlesque ballet, juggling with plates’ (LS 162). For Isherwood, therefore, Bill’s charm has much to do with the fact that he can effect an entertaining combination of humour and play-acting with success. Hardly surprising, therefore, that when Isherwood finally plans his first novel seriously he conceives it as ‘my little comedy of bohemian life’ (LS 128). Later in the book when he has re-written his novel he realises that he is ‘a cartoonist, not a painter of oils’ (LS 159).

As I have mentioned before, Isherwood sought comedy wherever he could find it. He finds it in the chaos involving the wedding of his friends Polly and Roger East. According to his perception of things, the wedding ‘opened with a bit of slapstick farce’ (LS 134). He goes on to describe the cacophony of dress styles, much of it unsuitable for the occasion anyway, the undignified hurry with which the ceremony was rushed through, and finally, how at the end of it all Polly declares seriously how awful it would be if she had married ‘Bisherwood’ instead (LS 135). When, during his brief career as a medical student he befriends Platt, one the most important things to recommend Platt to Isherwood’s notice is that sometimes the former makes the latter ‘laugh a great deal.’ As an example we are told the story about an experiment going wrong in the chemistry laboratory one day, resulting in a thick, black liquid blocking the drain of the sink.

We were both distastefully regarding it when the demonstrator came around.

‘What have you got there, Platt?’
‘I don’t quite know sir,’ a grin suddenly split Platt’s sallow face from ear to ear: ‘I think it must be the Well of Loneliness.’ (LS 179)

The technique perfected by his writing these four books is now put to its most famous use ever - *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939). We are hardly into the fourth paragraph of the book that the mock-heroic tone, with which we have already become so familiar, resurfaces. Describing the room, the narrator tells us that ‘the tall tiled stove, gorgeously coloured, [is] like an altar’, and that ‘the washstand [is] like a Gothic shrine. … In the corner, three sham medieval halberds (from a theatrical company?) are fastened together to form a hatstand’ (GB 10). Right at the onset, therefore, we are introduced to the typical Isherwood tone of voice. One that consists of understated, but unmistakable humour, and a sense of theatricality. In case the sense of theatre-set does not register during the first few telling lines, Isherwood makes the hint obvious by suggesting that the halberds may have come from a theatrical company. The fact that Isherwood soon goes on to talk of the sheer solidity and permanence of the furniture, and thereby undermining the sense of theatrical *im*permanence, is meant to be a reflection on the owner of the furniture - the solid and seemingly immutable Frl. Shroeder. The play-acting starts soon afterwards. Frl. Shroeder tells ‘Herr Issyvoo’, ‘I know how to appeal to a mother’s feelings, although I’ve never had any children of my own’ (GB 13). Not only has she play-acted with the mother of one of the lodgers, but in a strange way she does become a mother-figure to her lodgers, who are of course not lodgers as far as she is concerned, but her ‘guests’ (GB 11). It does not matter how old her ‘guests’ may be. She talks of a
certain Prof. Koch who used to turn out the light and hide behind the door when he heard her approach his room and then would ‘roar like a lion to frighten me. Just like a child..’ (GB 14). As mentioned before, infantilism is often a feature of Isherwood’s characters. We shall notice it even in the persons that Isherwood discusses in his Vedantic writings.

If an Isherwood creation is to be interesting it has to have humour, sophisticated or otherwise. Frl. Schroeder has hers too. When the narrator asks her about the profession of a certain female lodger, ‘with the air of doing something extremely comic, she began waddling across the kitchen like a duck, mincingly holding a duster between her finger and thumb. Just by the door, she twirled triumphantly around, … and kissed her hand to me mockingly..’ (GB 17). Like the painter friend of the Cheurets that we met in *Lions and Shadows*, we find her to be a mimic. And mimicry, by its very nature, is a combination of humour and role-playing. This kind of domestic performance is shown against the more obvious one – that which is performed at the club named Troika. The dancers ‘[perform] their intricate evolutions, showing in their every movement a consciousness of the part they [are] playing’ thereby nullifying the illusion that they are a group who are dancing in sheer delight. The saxophonist sings into his megaphone ‘with a knowing leer, including us all in the conspiracy, charging his voice with innuendo, rolling his eyes in an epileptic pantomime of extreme joy’ (GB 25).

It is humour which humanises the figure of Herr Bernstein, the father of ‘Isherwood’s’ pupil. After telling his wife that he would not allow her to go in the car because it would cost him much more if the car was stoned than if she were, he turns his attention to the English teacher.
‘You can’t complain that we treat you badly here, young man, eh? Not only do we give you a nice dinner, but we pay you for eating it!’

I saw from Hippi’s expression that this was going a bit far, even for the Bernstein sense of humour; so I laughed and said:

‘Will you pay me a mark extra for every helping I eat?’

This amused Herr Bernstien very much: but he was careful to show that he knew I hadn’t meant it seriously. (GB 30)

‘Herr Issyvoo’ himself, operate as he does in this milieu, has his own repertoire of theatrical skills, which he never neglects to use. When he is with one of his pupils, in this case Frl. Hippi, he ‘[improvises] authoritatively, in [his] schoolmaster voice’ (GB 26-27). But his pupil has a part to play as well, one she does expertly: ‘And every three or four minutes, we are interrupted while she plays her part in the family game of exchanging entirely unimportant messages over the house-telephone’ (GB 29).

The importance of humour is also shown to be a unifying factor between two friends, as when Sally Bowles says about her lost friend Diana, ‘She made one nearly die of laughing. I absolutely adored her’ (GB 41). At the beginning of their friendship ‘Isherwood’ and Sally are brought close to each other by their common amusement in Fritz. ‘I tried to imitate Fritz. We both laughed’ (GB 43). Sally remembers those who make her laugh. She reminisces, ‘The first man who seduced me...was marvellous. I adored him. He was an absolute genius at comedy parts’ (GB 45). It is also a unifying factor where verbal language fails. When one of the lodgers - a prostitute - is asked how she can spend so much time with her Japanese client, she says that, among other things,
'we laugh a lot. He’s very fond of laughing…’ (GB 17). If humour divides, as on the occasion where Sally snaps at ‘Isherwood’, ‘You’re always laughing at me. Do you think I’m the most ghastly idiot?’ (GB 48), it also reconciles when, over Sally’s lie about her bogus French mother, they both begin to laugh (GB 49). When she starts her relationship with Klaus, the way in which Isherwood gets rid of Fritz amuse the couple. Says Sally, ‘Klaus and I nearly died of laughing’ (GB 52).

With the entrance of Sally Bowles, performance - either on or off-stage - takes the pride of place in the narrative. We are relentlessly shown how terrible and yet indefatigable an actress she is. She dresses in dramatic black, ‘with a small cape over her shoulders and a little cap like a page-boy’s stuck jauntily on one side of her head’ (GB 34), whereas her fingers-nails, painted a ludicrous ‘emerald green’ are ‘as dirty as a little girl’s’ (GB 34-5). The familiar infantilism may be noted here. Her face is ‘powdered dead white’ and her lips are ‘brilliant cherry.’ When we see her talking to one of her beaux on the telephone, the narrator and friend Fritz watch her ‘like a performance at the theatre’ (GB 35). Here is clearly a bad actress, with a bad actress’s penchant for loud make-up, strong colours and overacting. Sally Bowles is obviously not one for pastel shades or understatement. Like a frustrated diva she demands attention and has to be noticed at all occasions. Entirely appropriate therefore that when she next appears the narrator thinks that her ensemble of black dress with white collar and cuffs has ‘produced a kind of theatrically chaste effect, like a nun in grand opera’ (GB 76). But because she is a character in an Isherwood story, and a character that is meant to be liked, she will not be allowed to maintain her grand opera demeanor for long. It has to be deflated, brought down to the level of opera buffa. There is, therefore, ‘something so extraordinarily comic
in Sally’s appearance.’ She seems to carry this air of comedy everywhere with her. Even in a police station, she is interviewed ‘with comic-opera informality’ (GB 94). Her delicate features, the beauty of which even the worst kind of make-up fails to hide, and her pose of self-conscious daintiness, is undercut by her words, ‘Chris, you swine, do tell me why you’re laughing?’ (GB 40) It is this play-acting that she tries to use to distance herself from her heartbreaks. When she realises that she has lost Klaus to another girl, she masks her grief with the words, ‘I can’t be angry with the fool. I just feel sorry for him in a motherly sort of way’ (GB 57). As has been mentioned before an Isherwood character will often adopt the role of a ‘parent’ or a ‘child.’ Not only is she a bad actress but has poor dialogue, all written by her, of course. In her egregious vocabulary the most overused word is ‘marvellous’, to the extent that it loses its usual meaning and gradually changes into a sad word. Hence, when she speaks of her aborted child she says, ‘It would have been rather marvellous to have had it.’ When she sits up in her bed alone at night and cradles the cushion as if it were her child she has ‘a most marvellous sort of shutting-off feeling from all the rest of the world’ (GB 73).

Humour becomes one of the most important adhesives in their relationship. In the narrative there is more than one occurrence of the sentence ‘We both laughed’ (GB 43, 68, 97) and of variations such as ‘We both began to laugh’ (GB 49, 67). They go to see a film meant to be desperately tragic and laugh so much they have to leave before the end (GB 58). Even when humour seems to drive a wedge between them, it does not quite. She is not pleased when ‘Chris’ laughs at her statement that a woman cannot be a great actress who hasn’t had any love-affairs.

‘What are you laughing at, Chris?’
‘I’m not laughing.’

‘You’re always laughing at me. Do you think I’m the most ghastly idiot?’

‘No, Sally. I don’t think you’re an idiot at all. It’s quite true, I was laughing. People I like often make me want to laugh at them. I don’t know why.’

‘Then you do like me, Christopher darling?’

‘Yes, of course I like you, Sally. What did you think?’ (GB 48)

Humour is important to Sally when appraising people. Speaking about the first man who seduced her, she pronounces him marvellous, and adds, ‘He was an absolute genius at comedy parts’ (GB 45). When Sally starts her affair with Klaus, there is an incident where she and Klaus ‘nearly died of laughing’ (GB 52).

Play-acting and humour continue to have crucial functions in the next section of the book, which concerns Peter Wilkinson and Otto Nowak. Otto is a threat to Isherwood the writer where neither Sally Bowles nor Peter Wilkinson is. The raw sex-appeal of Otto is something Isherwood cannot acknowledge without revealing his own homosexuality. Humour therefore comes to the rescue. He does not allow himself to dwell on the teenage working-class boy’s body for too long, before undercutting it, much as he undercuts Sally’s diva-esque air, with an element of the ridiculous.

Otto certainly has a superb pair of shoulders and chest for a boy of his age - but his body is nevertheless somehow slightly ridiculous. The beautiful ripe lines of the torso taper away too suddenly to his rather absurd little buttocks and spindly, immature legs. (GB 101-2)
Similarly, in the chapter entitled ‘The Nowaks’ when Otto describes his mother’s ill health Isherwood has to have Christopher smiling in spite of himself. Unable to acknowledge the frank sexuality of the sight of Otto ‘squatting there on the bed ... so animally alive, his naked brown body, so sleek with health’ Isherwood says ‘his talk of death seemed ludicrous, like the description of a funeral by a painted clown’ (GB 144). This literary subterfuge to hide the sexual overtone of the description of Otto’s body is spoken of by Isherwood himself in *Christopher and His Kind*. Since this is the first time that homosexuality makes an appearance in the Berlin stories, Isherwood is careful to maintain an ironic distance so as not to seem to be too involved with the story. This he does by frequently using bathos. Peter Wilkinson’s romantic awakening is effected by a tutor who is engaged to teach him. Their relationship unravels one evening ‘during a fearful row in the barn. Next morning, the tutor left, leaving a ten-page letter behind him. Peter meditated suicide. He heard later indirectly that the tutor had grown a moustache and gone to Australia’ (GB 103). However humour continues to play a crucial role in the narrative, its absence or presence an important part of the action. The fact that it is Otto’s body and not his mind that keeps Peter from leaving him becomes clear in the way Isherwood shows us that these two men do not even share a sense of humour. While Otto finds Peter’s company ‘genuinely amusing’, ‘often when Otto has been chattering rubbish for an hour without stopping, I can see that Peter really longs for him to be quiet and go away. But to admit this would be, in Peter’s eyes, a total defeat, so he only laughs and rubs his hands, tacitly appealing to me to support him in his pretence of finding Otto inexhaustibly delightful and funny’ (GB 113). Christopher, ever mindful of his position
in the narrative, is careful not to get too involved with Peter’s troubles with Otto. As usual it is humour that facilitates the maintenance of this distance. When Peter confides in him that when he had first met Otto he had thought they should live together for the rest of their lives, Christopher exclaims ‘Oh, my God!’ and ‘the vision of a life with Otto open[s] before [him], like a comic inferno’ (GB 124).

Otto Nowak reappears in the next section, but now in his family shack in Wassertorstraße. We now see Otto the play-actor. When Christopher goes to stay with the family of Nowaks, Otto greets him with ‘Why...it’s Christoph!’ Writes Christopher Otto, as usual, had begun acting at once. His face became illuminated by a sunrise of extreme joy. … His voice became languishing, reproachful:

‘We’ve missed you so much! Why have you never come to see us?’ (GB 131)

We are treated to Otto’s play-acting, or self-dramatization again when he announces to Christopher:

I shan’t be here much longer, Christoph. My nerves are breaking down. Very soon they’ll come and take me away. They’ll put me in a strait-waistcoat and feed me through a rubber tube. And when you come to visit me, I shan’t know who you are. (GB 157)

Incidentally, it may be mentioned that in *Christopher and His Kind* we learn that even the original of Otto Nowak was a considerable play-actor (CK 39). We soon learn that play-acting is not the monopoly of Otto. His sister Grete is twelve years old but knows how to
call out to her mother ‘in an affected, sing-song, ‘grown-up’ voice.’ When she gets slapped by Otto, but is obviously not hurt, ‘set[s] up a loud theatrical wail: ‘Oh, Otto, you’ve hurt me!’ She cover[s] her face with her hands and peeps at [Christopher] between the fingers’ (GB 134). Otto’s mother is not far behind either. When she wants to get her own back at Otto she merely has to praise his brother Lothar.

‘He’s not too proud to do any job, whatever it is, and when he’s scraped a few groschen together, instead of spending them on himself he comes straight to me and says: “Here you are, mother. Just buy yourself a pair of warm house-shoes for the winter.”’ Frau Nowak [holds] out her hand to me with the gesture of giving money. Like Otto, she had the trick of acting every scene she described. (GB 135)

The father, Herr Nowak, is no exception either. He describes an incident on the front, when he was a soldier, to Christopher and the rest of the family. For his performance he uses whatever props come to hand. Thus, the bread-knife becomes a bayonet, which he quickly puts aside when he assumes the role of the French soldier with whom he had his strange meeting. When the story climaxes with Herr Nowak shaking hands with the French soldier, he shakes Christopher’s hand instead! The performance comes to an end with Herr Nowak and the now-imaginary French soldier walking away from each other backwards. But because this is Isherwood mere play-acting will not be enough. The ‘retreating’ Herr Nowak, therefore, collides with a sideboard. A framed photograph falls off it and the glass breaks, bringing the performance to an end literally with a bang, but a comic one. As if to underline the intent of the accident, we are told
that Grete begins to laugh ‘loudly and affectedly’ (GB 140). Later we see Herr Nowak give imitations of the different ways in which Jews and Catholics prayed. For Hebrew and Latin he gabbles nonsense. He then goes on to tell grisly stories of executions to the delight of his children. Telling the story behind William the First’s decision never to sign a death warrant, he gives ‘a really most vivid and disgusting imitation of a decapitated head’, complete with the rolled-up eyes and the tongue hanging down one corner of the mouth (GB 155-6). When Christopher visits the Nowak household having earlier stopped being a paying guest, he is ‘pushed... into the living-room’ by Herr Nowak ‘with a large burlesque gesture of welcome’ (GB 164). Otto has by then been living with his newly-moneyed girl-friend. When they meet next their friendship is revitalised by humour. Just as in the case of Sally Bowles we see Christopher and Otto getting together again and we see the reappearance of the sentence ‘We both laughed’ (GB 166).

However, by the time the chapter comes to its end another kind of laughter takes over. The laughter that echoes around the sanatorium is shot through with sadness. Be it the ‘shrieks of laughter’ that break out when a couple of inmates tumble over (GB 166), the ‘brief, queer, hysterical little laugh’ of Otto’s mother (GB 167), the ‘bold’ laughter of Erica (GB 170), or the ‘bitter triumph’ in the laughter of Erna (GB 171). They are all expressions of an emptiness, a vacuum, which is momentarily forgotten in the presence of youth and health, embodied by Christopher and Otto, but which soon returns. We are left with the ‘terrifying intensity of unashamed despair’ in Erna’s eyes (GB 174). Similarly, where play-acting is used elsewhere to create distance or to underline the ironic element in the narrative here play-acting is not used here as a distancing instrument, because it has connotations of entertainment that would be inappropriate. In this case distance is created
by introducing an element of dream-like unreality. Just as play-acting is essentially at a
distance from reality, so is dreaming. Only the dream as a technique can also be used to
create the effect of a nightmare. It is this nightmarish effect that Isherwood introduces in
the narrative to allow Christopher the power to distance himself from the harrowing
atmosphere of the sanatorium. He says, ‘Everything which happened to me today was
curiously without impact: my senses were muffled, insulated, functioning as if in a vivid
dream’ (GB 169). Later, at the end of the visit, he says, ‘They all thronged round us for a
moment in the little circle of light in the panting bus, their lit faces ghastly like ghosts
against the black stems of the pines. This was the climax of my dream: the instant of
nightmare in which it would end’ (GB 174).

The final Berlin family to be introduced to the reader is that of the Landauers.
Humour becomes a dividing rather than a uniting or bonding element in his tutor-pupil
relationship with Natalia Landauer. When they go to the cinema she watches him closely
to see if he laughs during the supposedly funny film. This is where the strain starts to tell
on Christopher.

At first, I laughed exaggeratedly. Then, getting tired of this, I stopped
laughing altogether. Natalia got more and more impatient with me.
Towards the end of the film, she even began to nudge me at moments
when I should laugh. No sooner were the lights turned up, than she
pounced:
‘You see? I was right. You did not like it, no?’ …
‘I never laugh when I am amused,’ I said.
‘Oh, yes, perhaps! That shall be one of your English customs, not to laugh?’

‘No Englishman ever laughs when he’s amused.’

‘You wish I believe that? Then I will tell you: your Englishmen are mad.’

(GB 180)

It is humour which also distances Natalia’s widely-travelled but world-weary and possibly homosexual cousin Bernhard from Christopher. Natalia is the first to bring it to the reader’s attention. She says to Christopher: ‘When I laugh, it is to make fun, you know? But when Bernhard laugh at you, it is not nice…’ (GB 192). When, on a visit to Bernhard’s Gartenhaus flat, Christopher replies ‘Very happy’ to Bernhard’s question ‘And are you happy here?’ Bernhard’s laughter is ‘gentle ironical.’ ‘That is wonderful, I think... Most wonderful... A spirit possessed of such vitality that it can be happy, even in Berlin. You must teach me your secret. May I sit at your feet and learn wisdom?’ (GB 194) Bernhard is associated with the Orient. We start to have glimpses of Christopher’s Occidental prejudice, which vitiates the portrait. While he can say that he laughed, he was amused by the way Bernhard told stories, he saw in Natalia’s cousin ‘the arrogant humility of the East’ (GB 197). Bernhard’s smile is variously described as ‘mocking’ (GB 199), ‘soft expansive Oriental’ (GB 206), and ‘soft, and yet curiously hostile’ (GB 214). Contrasted with this perceived air of Oriental malice that Bernhard carries about, the firmly Occidental Natalia seems a more attractive proposition than she had been at first. So, Christopher comes to a party thrown by him and discovers Natalia there too, her laughter seems to have undergone a remarkable transformation, in his eyes.
Natalia’s laugh had changed, like everything else about her. It was no longer the laugh of the severe schoolgirl who had ordered me to read Jacobson and Goethe. And there was a dreamy, delighted smile upon her face - as though, I thought, she were listening, all the time, to lively, pleasant music. (GB 217)

Hardly surprising, therefore, that the quoted section is preceded by the significant sentence ‘We both laughed’ (GB 217). Whereas her smile speaks of life, Bernhard’s reminds Christopher of a lifeless Oriental statuette (GB 214). Whereas her smile is associated with music and youth, her cousin’s with ‘hostility of something ancient’ (GB 214). As if to further underline the firm linkage Isherwood is now establishing between Bernhard’s humour and a sense of the sinister, we are told that as Christopher goes home from the party he thinks not only of the party but also of a mortally wounded police-officer falling ‘dead at the feet of a cardboard figure advertising a comic film’ (GB 219).

Surprisingly, after a pause of eight months, relations between the two men grow more cordial when Christopher himself visits Bernhard. For the first time in their friendship do we see the signpost of good relations: ‘We both laughed’ (GB 220), words repeated four pages later (GB 224), in the course of the same scene. The reader is now asked to admire him for his courage. He is the Truly Strong Man who laughs at a Nazi death-threat letter sent to him (GB 221). His smile is now ‘tired’ (GB 221). The second time Isherwood uses the sentence ‘We both laughed’ is the note at which Christopher’s last meeting with Bernhard ends.
There was something exaggerated in his laughter, as though the situation had some further dimension of humour to which I hadn’t penetrated. We were still laughing when we said goodbye.

Perhaps I am slow at jokes. (GB 225)

Gone is the Oriental malice now, replaced by (possibly Occidental?) courage and calm. When Christopher overhears the news of Bernhard having been shot, the horrific news is soon followed by one man starting to tell a joke to another about ‘the Jew and the Goy girl, with the wooden leg’ (GB 229). As in the scene of Christopher’s journey home from Bernhard’s party, here also humour is juxtaposed against premature mortality. Now the overall aesthetic motive becomes clear; a motive in common with W.H. Auden’s poem ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ (written in December 1938 when he and Isherwood were in Brussels working on Journey to a War) - the ultimate banality and meaninglessness of tragedy. As for the seemingly racist nature of Isherwood’s attitude to Bernard it was a direct result of a prejudiced hatred that the writer felt for not just anyone from the East but for Hindus in particular. He admits this in Christopher and His Kind, but I shall focus on this in the third chapter.

Humour and theatricality return with their combined power in the final chapter, entitled ‘A Berlin Diary Winter 1932-33.’ The stage is set in a manner so as to remind one of comic opera or any comic performance. The Memorial Church in Berlin is ‘a sparkling nucleus of light, like a sham diamond’ (GB 230). Very much a theatrical backdrop, the buildings of the civic centre are ‘copies of copies.’ Isherwood seems to be
speaking as a proto-postmodernist, a precursor to Baudrillard and his idea of ‘simulacra.’

‘And they are all so pompous, so very correct - all except the cathedral...’ It is ‘at first sight, so startlingly funny that one searches for a name suitably preposterous - the Church of the Immaculate Consumption’ (GB 231). Humour is used to inject a sense of unreality into the description of the scene and those that follow. In an unmistakable echo of Mortmere we are told of the butcher with a ‘peculiar sexual perversion. His greatest erotic pleasure was to pinch and slap the cheeks of a sensitive, well-bred girl or woman .... unless he was allowed to realise his fantasy, he refused absolutely to do business’ (GB 234). We find overt play-acting, the kind which allows for truth to be smuggled out to the world. Thus when Fritz and the narrator are asked by one of a party of drunk American youths if men dressed as women in the cabaret inside meant that the men were ‘queer’, Fritz drawls, ‘Eventually we’re all queer.’ When the American turns to the narrator and asks: ‘You queer too, hey?’ he gets the reply ‘Yes, very queer indeed’ (GB 238). At the ‘communist dive’ it is ‘all thoroughly sham and gay and jolly: you couldn’t help feeling at home, immediately’ (GB 239). But humour continues to perform its function of a protective mask, revealing and yet not revealing. Hence when ‘a strikingly handsome boy of sixteen or seventeen’ comes into the café, any possible sexual excitement aroused by Rudi’s leather shorts and despatch-rider’s boots is diffused by the line: ‘After his whirlwind entry, and a succession of curt, martial handshakes, he sat down quite quietly beside us and ordered a glass of tea’ (GB 240). This is tea-tabling not to subvert melodrama, but to liquidate sexual tension, just as it is during obviously homoerotic descriptions of Otto’s teenage body in ‘The Nowaks’ chapter. The element of the mock-heroic, therefore, comes in as a matter of course. ‘It is really a fascinating little
world of intrigue and counter-intrigue. Its Napolean is the sinister bomb-making Martin; Werner is its Danton; Rudi its Joan of Arc’ (GB 240). This combination of homoeroticism and mock-heroism continues when the narrator is shown a scout magazine by Rudi. He is shown ‘dozens of photographs of boys, all taken with the camera tilted upwards, from beneath, so that they look like epic giants, in profile against enormous clouds.’ The point is driven home by the fact that ‘there were half-a-dozen boys in the room with us: all of them in a state of heroic semi-nudity, wearing the shortest of shorts and the thinnest of shirts and singlets, although the weather was cold.’ This tone of mock-heroism also informs the Nazi youth. When a young and drunk Nazi thunders ‘Blood must flow!’ his girlfriend soothes him with ‘But, of course, it’s going to flow, darling. The Leader’s promised that in our programme’ (GB 245). During a Nazi march, the crowds gathered to watch break into the Communist anthem ‘International.’

The Nazis slunk past, marching as fast as they knew how, between their double rows of protectors. … When the procession had passed, an elderly fat little S.A. man, who had somehow got left behind, came panting along at the double, desperately scared of finding himself alone, and trying vainly to catch up with the rest. The whole crowd roared with laughter. (GB 250)

(Incidentally this is based on a real incident that Isherwood described in a letter to William Plomer dated 25 January, 1933. What is interesting is that in the letter Isherwood effects a comparison with schoolboys which is not found in the book. In the letter ‘The Nazis, in their would-be jaunty brown uniforms, slouched by with slightly
sickly smiles, like boys who have sneaked to the Headmaster. But this is soon replaced by another kind of laughter. Indication of that comes with the grin on a Nazi’s face when he is shouted at by a badly-beaten up communist for turning up at his doorstep with a collection box (GB 252). When a liberal pacifist publisher’s house is raided and books piled onto a lorry the driver picks up one of the titles and reads it out mockingly: *Nie Wieder Krieg!* ‘Everybody roar[s] with laughter. ‘No More War!’ echo[s] a fat, well-dressed woman, with a scornful, savage laugh’ (GB 253).

It is appropriate that just as storm clouds of war start gathering over Germany and ‘Christopher Isherwood’ is about to leave Berlin and Germany for good, ‘the sun shines and Hitler is master of the city.’ He catches his face in the mirror of a shop and is horrified to see that he is smiling. ‘You can’t help smiling, in such beautiful weather’ (GB 255). The horrific political reality is almost falsified by the beautiful meteorological reality and the whole scene is given a further sense of unreality by Christopher’s observation that the whole scene has a ‘striking resemblance to something one remembers as normal and pleasant in the past - like a very good photograph.’ He ends by saying: ‘No. Even now I can’t altogether believe that any of this has really happened’ (GB 256).

*Goodbye to Berlin* was published in England on 1 March 1939. On the 16th of the same month was published *Journey to a War*. If we see the ‘Christopher Isherwood’ of the Berlin stories as someone whose basic attitudes are identical to those of the writer Christopher Isherwood, this idea is given further credence by one characteristic that carries over from the Berlin stories to *Journey to a War* - an ill-disguised or sometimes overt phobia of the Orient, something Kathleen Isherwood is unlikely to have shared with
her supposedly open-minded, liberal son. Kathleen seems to have had a lively interest in
China, although but understandably, not a sophisticated one. But then, one might argue
that a simple, open-minded interest is better than no interest at all. (In July 1921, for
instance, we find her reading a book named *A Woman in China* by a certain Mary Gaunt.
On 10 July she wrote in her journal, ‘[After] all the *Great Wall of China* doesn’t sound so
impossible to see or the Holy Way to the wonderful *Ming Tomb* & can be done in a two-
day expedition from Peking where she [Mary Gaunt] stayed.’ The Books Section at the
end of Kathleen’s 1933 diary has a whole page devoted to Chieh T’ai Ssu, ‘the Monastery
of the Platform of Vows.’ That phrase occurs in a book read by her, called *Peking Picnic*
by Ann Bridge. The aforementioned page contains a lengthy extract from the book. In
1935, on 30 October she attended a lecture on Chinese art delivered by Mr. A.F. Kendrick
at the Royal Chelsea Hospital and on 2 December took Isherwood to see a ‘Chinese
Exhibition’, probably one put up to compliment the lecture mentioned above. On 3
January 1938, sixteen days before her elder son’s departure for China, Kathleen watched
the film of the Pearl S. Buck novel ‘The Good Earth.’ I may also mention here that on 7
February she even had Chinese tea at home! What one finds interesting is that Kathleen
Isherwood was not living in a society where Chinese culture was *the* hegemonic culture.
If she chose, she could have ignored the far-from-dominant presence of Chinese culture in
British society. She chose not to. She sought out cultures that were not British. Whatever
be the motive for her doing so, the fact remains that she was not indifferent to Asian
cultures.)

We are introduced to Isherwood’s phobia of the Orient in the previous book
through the portrayal of the character of Bernhard. The attitude ‘Christopher’ has to
Bernhard seems to be strikingly similar to the one Isherwood has to the Orient subsequently. One such subsequent exhibition is in *Journey to a War*. Whereas ‘Christopher’ never seriously considers Bernhard’s offer of their going away to China, his creator does just that. Only in the latter’s case the companion is the eminently Occidental, in fact downright Nordic, friend W.H. Auden. Although Isherwood’s contribution to the book is the prose whereas Auden’s is the poetry, it may not be too far-fetched to deduce that these two Occidentals may have been similar in some of their attitudes to the culture shock that was China. In one of the short poems by Auden which opens the book, there is a reference to ‘A septic East, odd fowl and flowers, odder dresses’ (JW 12) and in another ‘Here in the East our bankers have erected/ A worthy temple to the Comic Muse’ and ‘off-stage, a war/ Thuds like the slamming of a distant door:/ Each has his comic role in life to fill,/ Though life be neither comic nor a game’ (JW 13). With Auden’s use of the phrase ‘comic role’ we are alerted to the fact that the combination of humour and role-playing will continue to be a part of Isherwood’s technical arsenal and will also be integral to the general tone of the narrative. Only this time the technique would be used not to shape fiction but facts.

Isherwood uses a distancing technique we are familiar with from the sanatorium scene in the previous book. He makes their entry into unfamiliar, potentially unsettling, territory into a dream.

One’s first entry into a war-stricken country as neutral observer is bound to be dream-like, unreal. And, indeed, this whole enormous voyage, from January London to tropical February Hongkong had had the quality - now boring, now extraordinarily beautiful - of a dream. At Hongkong, we had
Another familiar distancing technique that Isherwood uses here is that of undercutting the reality of the characters’ conditions by somehow insinuating that they are only playing roles. As in the case of his previous books, the characters are shown to be children playing at adulthood. Hence: ‘We were adult, if amateur, war-correspondents entering upon the scene of our duties. But, for the moment, I could experience only an irresponsible, schoolboyish feeling of excitement’ (JW 19). They even get treated accordingly. When they are given tea at a suburban drawing room and the air-raids begin, the hostess tells Isherwood, ‘They’re moving off now,’ [with] the kindly air of one who wishes to reassure a slightly nervous child about thunderstorms. ‘They never stay very long’’ (JW 22-3). Roles are awarded to others, like the story-starved American journalist. ‘A disillusioned journalist,’ writes Isherwood, ‘is the Byron, the romantic Hamlet of our modern world’ (JW 20). Subjects are found for cartoons as well. When they see the crowd of warehouses along the bank, many of which have Union Jacks, swastikas, or Stars and Stripes painted upon their roofs they imagine ‘a comic drawing of a conscientious Japanese observer looking down in perplexity from a bombing-plane upon a wilderness of neutral flags, and finally espying a tiny, unprotected Chinese patch: ‘Don’t you think...we might be able to fit a little one in, just there?’ (JW 20) Also in evidence is the technique of tea-tabling - literally. Hearing the sound of distant bombings Isherwood asks the suburban hostess if that is not an air-raid she replies, smiling, ‘Yes, I expect it is. They come over about this time, most afternoons ... Do you take sugar and
milk?’ (JW 22) When air-raid sirens go off during their visit to Mayor Tsang Yan-fu, the man himself is implacable. ‘We are not afraid! Let us have some tea!’ As in the case of Bernhard, it is sense of humour that bridges the xenophobic gap on the part of Isherwood. ‘Mr. Tsang’s kind of humour, if properly exploited, should win China many friends abroad’ (JW 26). It is the good humour - this time combined with a flair for theatrical performance - of yet another Chinese, a Colonel, which disarms Isherwood. At a dinner the Colonel starts to demonstrate the various ways of singing stock characters of Chinese opera. When the performance is at its most terrifying - demonstration of the role of a bandit - the Colonel ‘burst[s] out laughing - with a gesture of comic indignation at his placid, bespectacled wife: “How shall I sing... when she looks at me like that?”’ (JW 28) A sense of comedy permeates the entire narrative and in unsuspected ways. Capa and Fernhout - friends Isherwood and Auden had made during their voyage from Marseille to Hongkong - surface in China, full of ‘horse-play, bottom-pinching ... endless jokes about les poules’ and Capa, in particular, has ‘drooping black comedian’s eyes’ (JW 43). When dozens of people try to clamber on to a train before its departure they are beaten off with sticks.

The train-guards even chased particularly agile boys right along the platform, thrashing them unmercifully. But this, it seemed, was only a kind of game, for the victims’ padded coats were so thick that the blows only raised a cloud of dust and lice; and pursuer and pursued roared with laughter. (JW 85-86)
Raw recruits, being put through exercises ‘which suggested ballet-dancing’ are given some much-needed comic relief by Isherwood who finds his own position of passing and repassing the same platoon lost for direction incredibly funny when combined with the fact that, in his newly-made riding boots, he was unsuccessfully trying to look ‘very stern and official. Presently I had to laugh; the recruits grinned back. I gave them a mock salute, which they returned. Their officers shouted at them, but they were smiling, too’ (JW 47). In another incident, while on a train, as ‘friends of the Generalissimo and the King of England’ they are peeped at and smiled at by the car-boys through the corridor window. ‘We may have undone Chiang’s work a little by winking and waving back’ (JW 63). Auden starts to teach one of the car-boys, Chin-dung, English. This becomes a comic performance, what with a crowd of passengers and beggars crowding around to watch and ‘roaring with laughter whenever the anatomical lesson reached an intimate area’ (JW 114). But at other times the humour is unintended. When asked by them if there were many railway accidents in his area, Mr. Wong, the Inspector of Railways from Sian, says reassuringly, ‘Oh no, we only had two in the last three weeks’ (JW 116). Isherwood and Auden carry this mood of jocularity around with them wherever they go. Just as they do not take their situation seriously, others do not take them seriously. It is all a comedy, all humorous histrionics. When Miss Agnes Smedley cross-examines them she does so ‘mockingly rather than aggressively.... Our answers seemed to amuse her. She shook a little, unsmiling, with the faintest kind of laughter; but all the time she held us, suspiciously, with her fearless, bitter, grey eyes’ (JW 50). So much so that even Chiang Kai-shek’s obvious authority is undercut by a sense of the juvenile. Hence, when asked to pose before the camera, he stiffens ‘visibly, like a schoolboy who is warned to
hold himself upright’ (JW 58). Dr. McClure is ‘a stalwart, sandy, bullet-headed Canadian Scot, with the energy of a whirlwind and the high spirits of a sixteen year-old boy’ (JW 67). At the Kwei-teh hospital nicotine has ‘the daring attraction of a minor vice... Mission-doctors [are] obliged to smoke in secret, like schoolboys’ (JW 78). Mr. T.Y. Liu, the secretary of the civil government and correspondent of *South-Eastern Daily News* ‘in some moods ... has the face of a sixteen-year-old boy’ (JW 182). How appropriate, therefore, that we have a British naval officer saying about the latest development in the war, ‘Afraid we didn’t put up a very good show tonight. Looks as if they caught the home team on the ground,’ using cricket terminology to talk about something which is hardly a sport (JW 61). On hearing of Da Man’s throwing of a Japanese officer into a shallow river and bashing his head in with a stone, Peter Fleming exclaims ‘Oh, jolly good!’ which, Isherwood comments, is done ‘assuming the tone of one who applauds a record high jump or a pretty drive to leg’ (JW 203). At the end of their journey to Tunki toasts are drunk, ‘A.W. ... thanked for his efficiency, Shien for his endurance, Peter for his leadership: the examination results [are] published and everybody [comes] out equal top’ (JW 220).

Preconceived notions of everything Chinese are challenged at every step. Isherwood and Auden are disappointed by the informality of their procession into the dining-room. Their rehearsed speeches and compliments are given no occasion to be exhibited. They do not get to bandy elaborate compliments with General Wu who is ‘unacquainted with the subtleties of European stage-Chinese’ (JW 29). Nor is the element of the mock-heroic unused, as in: ‘When a new dish comes in, the host makes a gesture towards it with his
chopsticks, like a cavalry commander pointing with his sabre to an enemy position, and the attack begins’ (JW 30).

In a section that gives new meaning to the phrase ‘comedy of manners’ Isherwood and Auden participate in an extraordinary performance of politeness with their Chinese hosts:

On the whole the food was very nice, but our hosts disparaged it out of courtesy - and of course we had to protest: ‘Horrible stuff, this. We must apologize....’ ‘No, no! Not horrible. Wonderful!’ ‘Very poor after your English cookery.’ ‘English cookery disgusting! Chinese cookery marvellous!’ ‘We are so sorry.’ ‘The best lunch we ever had in our lives.’ ‘Miserable.’ ‘Excellent.’ ‘Bad.’ ‘Good.’ ‘No!’ ‘Yes!’ And so on. We kept it up throughout the meal. (JW 185)

Not only people, but even places join the comic performance that is the book. The Guest-House in Sian is a ‘caprice’, a hotel so un-Oriental in its Germanic, severe modernity that Isherwood thinks ‘the swing doors might open on to Fifth Avenue, Piccadilly, Unter den Linden. The illusion is nearly complete’ except that ‘now and then a tattered rickshaw-coolie, popping his head in to joke with page-boys, reminds you of what is really outside’ (JW 119). In keeping with the spirit of the narrative, even when real life crashes into the life of illusion it does so with humour. The rickshaw-coolie shatters the sense of theatre but by joking with the cast of page-boys. Even after they leave China and are ensconced in the Occidental comfort of the British Ambassador’s private villa in the French
Concession of Shanghai, the residence assumes the unreal theatricality of a ‘life-size doll’s house’ (JW 228). According to Douglas Kerr it is humour that redeems the book. In his article ‘Disorientations: Auden and Isherwood’s China’, he says that Isherwood’s part of the book is a failure: ‘It is a failure of arrival, comprehension, integration, and closure’ (Kerr 56). Because of Isherwood’s severe attitudinal drawbacks he is in a peculiar position. ‘Isherwood cannot emulate the confident authority of [Peter] Fleming’s Asia discourse, but nor can he escape its genre. So his travel book implodes, turning its own inadequacies into comedy’ (Kerr 62). According to Kerr, ‘China precipitates a kind of crisis of representation for the genre, mode and authority of Isherwood’s writing, a crisis which that writing is too scrupulous not to admit, and from which it salvages at least its distinct tone of ironic comedy’ (Kerr 66).

Hardly surprising, therefore, that when Isherwood and Auden finally leave China, Isherwood’s ‘memory in the years to come would prefer [the] simple theatrical picture’ - which is also, but naturally, ‘romantic and false’, of ‘the brown river in the rain, the boat-men in their dark bat-wing capes, the tree-crowned pagodas on the foreshore, the mountains scarved in mist…’ He says, ‘These [are] the scenery of the traveller’s dream; they [are] the mysterious,’ and here even the English language fails him, sending him to French - ‘l’Extrême Orient’ (JW 224).

But there are other places, as in the example just quoted, where we are reminded of Isherwood’s father, or at least of his penchant for art. When Isherwood writes about the table laid for a Chinese meal the words could very well have been of the artist Frank’s.
[The table] looks rather like you were sitting down to a competition in water-colour painting. The chopsticks, lying side by side, resemble paint-brushes. The paints are represented by little dishes of sauces, red, green and brown. The tea-bowls, with their lids, might well contain paint-water. There is even a kind of tiny paint-rag, on which the chopsticks can be wiped. (JW 30)

During a train journey Isherwood observes, ‘The peasants on the stations wore huge turbans, like figures in a Rembrandt biblical painting’ (JW 38). Isherwood is obviously thinking of Frank’s letter to Kathleen, dated Christmas Day 1914 and quoted above, when he - Isherwood - writes ‘Outside, in the station square, moonlight heighten[s] the drama of the shattered buildings; this might [be] Ypres in 1915’ (JW 64).

However, although Journey to a War has much in common with the books that precede it, a strangely new note starts to sound towards the end of the book, one that we are not familiar with from our reading of Isherwood so far. A totally unsuspected spiritual level starts to open up in the narrative. In a later book we have Auden, disguised as Hugh Weston, being prescient enough to say to Isherwood when the latter was in the middle of one of his usual anti-God tirades, ‘Careful! Careful! If you keep going on like that, my dear, you’ll have such a conversion one of these days!’ (DV 117) For the first time in Isherwood we see something close to a spiritual awakening. The first signs are tentative. About a trudge in the sun he writes, ‘Our walk was long and rough.: I envied Auden his rubber shoes and bitterly repented of the vanity which had prompted me to
wear my own uncomfortable, slightly oversize boots’ (JW 103). The acknowledgement of his own vanity strikes a note we have not heard in Isherwood till now. While on journey by train he writes, ‘Our little egotisms, our ambitions, our vanities, were absorbed, identified utterly with the rush of the speeding train…’ (JW 118) So, since ‘there is no arguing with the complacency of a mystic’ he turns over and sleeps (JW 119). Vanity raises its head again when he writes that their ‘dealings with the military on the Sü-chow front have accustomed [them] to being saluted: it is a form of vanity that grows on you very quickly. Indeed, [he is] now quite piqued when soldiers don’t salute’ (JW 130). Isherwood gives ironic expression to his awful guilt at being borne by Chinese coolies.

We gazed at their bulging calves and straining thighs and rehearsed every dishonest excuse for allowing ourselves to be carried by human beings: they are used to it, it’s giving them employment, they don’t feel. … Never mind, my feet hurt. I’m paying him, aren’t I? Three times as much, in fact, as he’d get from a Chinese. Sentimentality helps no one. Why don’t you walk? I can’t, I tell you. … Oh, dear. I’m so heavy … (JW 216)

The mood of self-analysis is followed by another, not very surprising state of mind. Of the epicurean splendour of Journey’s End he writes that ‘one could arrive for the weekend and stay for fifteen years - eating, sleeping, swimming’ and then suddenly ‘standing for hours in a daze of stupified reverence before the little Ming tomb in the garden’ (JW 169). Self-analysis, propensity to meditate reveal in turn a strong note of pacifism, unheard of in Isherwood till now. He writes, “War is bombing an already disused arsenal,
missing it, and killing a few old women. … War is untidy, inefficient, obscure, and largely a matter of chance” (JW 192).

But most remarkable of all is a passage which clearly looks forward to his first novel after conversion to Vedanta. Foreshadowing *Prater Violet* Isherwood writes of their stay at Journey’s End:

> Were we, perhaps, going to stay on here forever?... After all, why go to Nanchang? Why go anywhere? Why bother about the Fourth Army? It could take care of itself. What was this journey? An illusion. What were America, England, London, the spring publishing season, our families, our friends, ambitions, money, love? Only modes of the First Temptation of the Demon - and why should one temptation be better than another?(JW 172)

Although Isherwood was not to know this, *Journey to a War* the book and journey to China the adventure was really the start of a longer journey due East, albeit mostly spiritually. Unbeknown to himself his state of mind had already become ripe for a tremendous spiritual adventure, one that would necessitate not only physical but also emotional travel. Only in 1962, with the publication of *Down There on a Visit* do we come to know that this nascent spiritual streak had been noted by Auden, as mentioned above. By the time the book was published Isherwood had been in the United States of America for almost two months, and within two more months he would be applying for
U.S. residency. In another two months he would meet Swami Prabhavananda and his life would undergo the most fundamental spiritual change ever. The propensity to self-criticism, meditation and philosophising that we notice in *Journey to a War* will now be given a sharper focus, a proper raison d’être, a clear direction to a clear goal. But this would not mean abandoning other aspects of his craft and mental make-up. Theatre would continue to shape his narrative and humour to inform it. The presence of the child in the adult would continue to be noted in the characters which appear in his pages. But all this would now be assimilated into the overarching philosophy of Vedanta.

1 While the initial part of the quote, i.e., till ‘…getting sniped,’ may be found in *Kathleen and Frank* (413), the part beginning with ‘all the part of France…’ can only be found in the transcript of Frank’s letters made by Isherwood. U of Texas, Austin.

2 This section also can only be found in the transcript and not in the extract from the same letter given in *Kathleen and Frank* (433). Reference is being made to Sir Frank Brangwyn, RA (1867-1956), who was a Welsh painter. He is well-known for his huge etchings for which he used zinc, rather than the usual copper, plates.

3 Derek Parker, letter to Robin Wade, 12 June 1959. BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham. WAC T48/339/1.


5 Christopher Isherwood, letter to E.M. Forster, 26 August 1934. King’s College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge.

One should remember that for Isherwood detective stories would mean almost exclusively those written by Arthur Conan Doyle. And seen in the light of his remarks about Sherlock Holmes being a comic character, detective stories meant not just the clever twists and turns of the plot but also humour, intended or otherwise.

Isherwood writes: ‘The fictitious “Isherwood” takes the attitude of an amused, slightly contemptuous onlooker. He nearly gives himself away when he speaks of “the beautiful, ripe lines of the torso.”’ So, lest the reader suspect him of finding Otto physically attractive, he adds that Otto’s legs are “spindly” (CK 38).