Chapter Three

‘I feel like M…’

Unaware of himself, Isherwood had already chosen a spiritual person as his father figure, though not obviously so, when his own obviously-spiritual father was no more. W.H. Auden once wrote to Isherwood telling him that E.M. Forster, who thought of himself as an agnostic, ‘was a person who is so accustomed to the presence of God that he is unaware of it; he has never known what it feels like when that Presence is withdrawn’ (Scobie, ‘The Youth’ 31). Forster was for Isherwood everything that he meant by ‘Truly Strong Man.’ Much of this had to do with the total lack of gung-ho jingoism in Forster. Forster’s calm and brave remark that he would not want to go and fight in the Spanish Civil War because he would be scared to, comes extremely close to the pacifist mind-set that now started to become evident in Isherwood. However, it should also be mentioned that Isherwood would be deeply upset when Forster would come out in support of Winston Churchill during the Second World War, publishing a pamphlet called ‘Nordic Twilight.’

As has been attempted to show in the previous chapter, Isherwood’s spiritual journey started well before his coming to the United States and meeting Swami Prabhavananda. As early as in 1933 he wrote to E.M. Forster words that would reappear, in a slightly changed form, in 1940. Writing from l’Ile St. Nicholas, Chalia, Beoetia, Greece, he said, ‘I stopped this letter for five minutes in order to torture two blood-sucking flies to death. Living here has made me fiendishly cruel. We are always
murdering some insect or animal.’ On 7 November 1940 he would write in his journal, ‘The other night ... I ran the car over a tin can on our parking lot, and felt almost as bad as if I’d killed an animal. “Oh, God,” I said to myself, “must we always keep smashing things?”’ (GD 63) The sense of guilt that was covert in Greece, and palliated by humour, would become obvious and painful in California, United States.

The note of pacifism which started to emerge towards the end of Journey to a War became loud and clear in a letter written to E.M. Forster soon after Isherwood’s arrival in the United States. From New York he wrote of his desire to talk to Gerald Heard about pacifism ‘for I know now (it’s about the only thing I do know) that I’m a pacifist: or, [here Isherwood takes recourse to trusted humour] as Wystan defines it, I won’t kill people I don’t know personally.’ In a letter written the day before, he announced his pacifism to Spender (Finney, Isherwood 173). Isherwood informed John Lehmann of his pacifism in a letter dated 2 May 1939. But although he was looking at the prospect of losing many friends who would be bemused by his pacifism and interest in yoga, he still seemed homesick for England and his English friends. Once again, humour became operative, now as a link across the Atlantic. In a letter to Lehmann written on 7 July 1939 he said, ‘When I think of my friends, I remember them all laughing. The Past appears entirely in terms of jokes.’ This fondness for making humour the most important component of his memory endured till the very end. Even as late as in 1984, three years after he learnt of his malignant cancer, and less than two years before his death, he attended the funeral of Truman Capote. According to mutual friend John Gregory Dunne, ‘He was the last to speak. He got up, waited for the chapel to quiet, then said, “There was one wonderful thing about Truman, he could always make me laugh.”’ Then Christopher
started to laugh, and sat down. That was it, no bloated memories, just the laughter he wanted to remember...”

In the same letter to Lehmann, dated 7 July (1939), Isherwood spoke a little about his new friendship with Gerald Heard. It is interesting that among the things Isherwood liked about the Irish philosopher was that he was ‘terribly funny.’ But of course, merely being ‘funny’ would not be enough to sustain Isherwood’s interest in him. An element of theatre was essential too:

I didn’t deny that Gerald was a play-actor. … Indeed, I believed in him because he was theatrical … I should have been much more suspicious of him if he had presented himself as a grave infallible oracle. My own nature responded to his theatricality and found it reassuring, because I was a play-actor, too. (GD 14)

Isherwood was aware of the danger that Heard would one day start to take himself too seriously as a teacher. But he hastily reassured himself that this was not a real possibility because Gerald Heard ‘was too much a comedian not to become quickly aware of the funny side of his holiness’ (GD 17). One can surmise, therefore, that Isherwood associated humour with self-criticality as well. He seems to believe that a sense of humour prevents megalomania and self-importance.

Although Heard had spoken to Isherwood about Swami Prabhavananda much earlier it was not until late July 1939 that the Occidental writer met the Oriental monk. In the direct tradition of so many characters in Isherwood’s fiction and non-fiction, the forty-five-year old Swami appeared ‘boyish’ when they met alone for the first time, on 4 August (GD 24). The vanity which Isherwood began to mention towards the end of
Journey to a War now reasserted itself. He felt ‘awkward - like a rich, overdressed woman, in the plumes and bracelets of my vanity.’ With this ‘psychological make-up’ - as he was to later call it in A Single Man - he ‘started acting a little scene, trying to appear sympathetic’ (GD 24). It is also evident that his vanity was being seen by himself as a serious problem, an impediment in the path to spiritual development.

When, in 1942, he wrote to Lehmann about a selection of Vivekananda’s writings and speeches he marked out for special mention the fact that ‘Vivekananda has a very amusing style.’ This was obviously important to him because, writing about his hatred of Christianity in An Approach to Vedanta he says that among other things that he loathed about Christians was ‘their lack of humour’ (AV 13). But apart from the odd mention here and there he did not write much about his conversion to any of his English friends, not even to Forster. It is only when he was sure of the receptivity of the reader that he discussed his new beliefs. He found one such sympathetic correspondent in Peter Gamble. Mr. Gamble had written a profile of Isherwood and a review of Goodbye to Berlin in the Readers’ Union newsletter Readers’ News, February 1940. In response to Mr. Gamble’s confession that he had found something in yoga, Isherwood replied at length. Isherwood normally used humour and play-acting not only to put forward a point-of-view as interestingly as possible but also to vivify and simplify the idea being expressed. About his initiation into Eastern philosophy he wrote to Mr. Gamble, ‘My first step - after the nth revision of the “party-line” - was to exclaim: “For God’s sake, no more tactics! I can’t go on living in an ideological world in which what was right on Monday is no longer right on Saturday!”'
The change of his attitude towards Kathleen did not start with the researching for

*Kathleen and Frank* but much earlier. In the previous chapter I have noted how he may have consciously or unconsciously paid a tribute to Kathleen’s artistic talent. In 1946 he found himself acknowledging that he was too much the son of Kathleen to be ever able to make a successful clean break from her, geographically and spiritually. In that year while he revised his diaries from 1939 to 1944 he spoke not only about how he ‘came to adore

[his] father’s memory, dwelling always upon his civilian virtues, his gentleness, his humor, his musical and artistic talent’ (D 5) but also about how much he was his mother’s son. ‘As for [Vernon’s] drawing, it was a year before I took it seriously, and, by that time, he bitterly resented my lack of interest. It was like my mother’s attitude to my writing, all over again’ (D 9). Seven years into Vedantism and he was beginning to mend the spiritual bridge between himself and his mother which he would previously not even have considered of any consequence. [This new-found ability to see himself as his mother appears again on 19 April 1956 when, speaking about his relationship with Don, he mentions how he finds himself treated ‘as a sort of classic monster.’ Then he becomes introspective and decides, ‘But isn’t all this the purest justice of karma? Go back twenty years. For Don, substitute Richard. For Evelyn [Hooker], John Layard. For me, mother’ (D 609). On 12 April 1958, writing about how he dreaded Bachardy’s moods he confessed, ‘I feel like M. with Richard’ (D 746). On 23 January 1959 complaining about Don’s sulkiness he wrote that it was ‘childishly selfish, and leaves me in the position of an unkind parent, refusing’ (D 799).]

Three years earlier, in May 1943, Isherwood had started to send Kathleen issues of *Vedanta and the West* which he was editing and contributing to. The first creative piece
of writing that he did after his conversion to Vedanta, done expressly for publication in *Vedanta and the West*, was ‘The Wishing Tree.’ For a writer who had always had most of his adult characters imbued with a child-like quality it is only appropriate that this new phase in his career should start with the story in which children are shown to be wiser than adults. Isherwood obviously saw himself as a child in the world of Vedanta, detected the child-like in whatever he saw, and believed that children are only misguided by adults and are in fact much better off with their own intuitive discovery of life and the world. It is important to remember that he thought the Swami ‘boyish.’ If the Swami had been as unimpeachably adult as Aldous Huxley, Isherwood would not have felt so strongly drawn to him. Combined with this privileging of the child’s point-of-view, humour and irony are wielded to produce the desired effect of self-analysis in the reader.

When the uncle has told the children the story of the Kalpataru tree they are outwardly dismissive of it but inwardly believe. They all start wishing and the tree grants them all. ‘Most of the wishes are very unwise - many of them end in indigestion or tears - but the wishing tree fulfills them just the same’ (E 238). While Isherwood is perfectly serious when he calls these wish-addicted children ‘unlucky’ and that they may rightly ‘be regarded as lunatics’ when they became adults, he turns to irony when he shows us the party with whom the real blame rests - those ‘helpful elders’ who ‘are always suggesting to the children new things to wish for.’ So children stop asking themselves ‘such childish questions as: “Do I honestly want this?” “Do I really desire that?”’ - questions which, Isherwood implies should rightly be asked before a wish is made. Although he does not put the word ‘childish’ within scare quotes, he obviously uses the word ironically, implying that what the adults often regard as childish and therefore stupid, can in fact be
wise and intelligent. With mounting irony he says, ‘The wisdom of past generations have for ever decided what is, and what is not desirable, and enjoyable, and worthwhile’ (E 239). We see how little the Isherwood of All the Conspirators has changed. The generation gap articulated in that book and spelt out in a later introduction has now been sophisticated by irony but the articulation remains as strong. The quoted lines also look forward to Prater Violet where society, like a waiter, recommends worldly delights to have. The irony reaches fever pitch when he writes: ‘As long as you wish for the right things, you may be quite sure you really want them, no matter what disturbing doubts may trouble you from time to time.’ With great irony he suggests that one should always wish for money and power, ‘because, without these two basic wishes, [and here he applies his bathetic technique of tea-tabling by undercutting the obvious seriousness of the pursuit by bringing in the terminology of sport] the whole game of wishing becomes impossible.’ He ends this deeply ironic section with the words ‘by not wishing you are actually spoiling their [the wish-addicted others’] game - and that, everybody agrees, is not merely selfish, but dangerous and criminal too’ (E 239-240). Avarice and lust for power are critiqued by Isherwood in the only way he can: through irony, sarcasm, and therefore, humour.

But there is one boy in that group of children, who sees the Kalpataru tree in quite a different way. In what seems to have been inspired by accounts of Vivekananda’s state when facing the image of Goddess Kali at Dakshineshwar for the first time, Isherwood has the little boy merely standing ‘breathless in the moonlight beneath the great tree, and thrilled with such wonder and awe and love that he utterly forgot to speak his wish’ (E
241) In the case of Vivekananda, or Narendranath Dutta, as he was then, it can be argued that he was a foolproof adult until he met the child-like Ramakrishna. The incident of his standing dumb-founded in front of the Goddess Kali was possible because Ramakrishna had put Vivekananda in touch with the child in himself. It was Naren the inner-child who got to see the Goddess for what She was, not Naren the outer-adult. In one very important way, therefore, ‘The Wishing Tree’ becomes a significant first story in a new career, in the childhood of a new career - it privileges the child and the child-like. While we have noted the child-like in many of Isherwood’s adult characters never before has this child-like quality had a spiritual significance. So, in a significant way, this story marks both a continuation and a beginning. What one also has to note here is the faint echo of Isherwood’s own childhood in this story. While writing about the boy standing in front of the moon-lit tree and being awed into silence by the beauty of what he sees, it is likely that Isherwood may have also been thinking of the incident in his childhood when his father asked him to look carefully at a tree and not to automatically draw it as green.

Humour and play-acting are also in evidence in the essays he wrote for the magazine. A case in point may be ‘Hypothesis and Belief.’ In this essay Isherwood tries to make a case for the believer, by saying that a believer does not start implicitly believing everything that their spiritual teacher tells right from the beginning. They only believe, to begin with, in a hypothesis in the hope that the hypothesis will eventually ring true. Just as in any play, in this essay also there needs to be dialogue and confrontation. The sceptical and blunt friend of the new convert asks: ‘Yes, of course, I can quite understand why you did it, in a way... but tell me, do you actually believe all that?’ The
honest convert is expected to reply: ‘No, I don’t - yet’ (E 99). The pause before ‘yet’ is obviously meant to be dramatic, to heighten the effect of the word. The confrontation in the essay takes place when Isherwood pits ‘the dogmatist’ against ‘the scientifically-trained pedant.’ Although their hypothetical argument is not set down in dialogue, only reported, the inter-personal tension is made clear:

The dogmatist states his case, or rather, presents his dogmatic ultimatum.

The scientifically-trained pedant reminds him, none too patiently, that his assertions cannot be verified by the microscope, the slide-rule, or the laboratory experiment. Therefore, he continues, quite rightly, the dogma is merely another hypothesis. ... At this point a deadlock is reached, and the two men part in mutual annoyance. (E 101)

The action does not end there. Exit the dogmatist, enter Christ. Now the pedant has a mild change of heart because he is impressed by Christ’s personality and his tremendous psychological impact ‘not rationally but emotionally’ (E 101). The play reaches its climax with the pedant saying, ‘Although my scientific methods of analysis cannot deal with these statements, my intuition tells me that this man has some authority for his words.’ The pedant is transformed into a jury working at providing a verdict as to the credibility of Christ and other spiritual teachers. The usage of rapid-fire questions, which we note towards the end of Journey to a War and also in ‘The Wishing Tree’, is made here as well, as the jury asks: ‘What sort of men are telling us this? Are they charlatans? Do they seem sane? Do their lives bear out the truth of what they preach? ... Do they substantially agree with each other’s testimony?’ (E 102) The pedant now turns inward:
'Am I dissatisfied with my life as it is at present? And if so, am I sufficiently dissatisfied to want to do anything about it?' Doubts start to crowd around. Humour palliates the action. ‘Life is not so bad,’ observes Isherwood ironically, ‘if you have plenty of luck, a good physique and not too much imagination.’ But the pedant has now become a beginner in the path of religious effort. Isherwood gives him the last word: ‘Well, I am going to try... If at the end of three or four years, I can conscientiously say that I have done what was asked of me and had no results whatsoever, then I will give up the whole attempt as a bad job’ (E 103). These are, of course, Isherwood’s own thoughts as well. By expressing them as a dialogue he is dramatizing his thoughts. He is using drama to better articulate not only to his readers but also to himself the contours, risks, and possibilities of this new journey that he has embarked upon. That the essay can at all be discussed as if it were a play is proof enough of the fact that Isherwood needed to dramatise a problem in order to understand it. He had to think in terms of confrontation and dialogue, but the whole exercise had also to be marked by a distinct presence of humour.

Isherwood’s maternal grandmother Emily was a great theatre enthusiast and may well have described herself, as her grandson once did, as ‘a frustrated actor.’ Emily Machell ‘dressed somewhat in the style of Sarah Bernhardt, whom she adored,’ we learn from Isherwood in Kathleen and Frank (KF 18). So it may well have been her mother’s influence working when Kathleen took 11-year-old Christopher to see Sarah Bernhardt perform on 7 April 1916. According to Don Bachardy, as stated in Chapter One, it had made a great impact on the boy.7 Twenty-seven years later, in May 1943, while reading Life of Vivekananda, Isherwood must have been excited to find that in the late summer of
1900 in Paris two important icons of his life - one from his past, the other from his present - had met. Knowing the importance of theatre in his consciousness it is not difficult to understand why the meeting between Sarah Bernhardt and Vivekananda excited him enough to make him want to write an entire essay around it, a meeting about which so little information is available. Here it was, two figures from history who personified two most important aspects of Isherwood’s own character and consciousness, actually meeting in real place and time. With the precision of a researcher Isherwood contextualises the meeting with respect to where the two persons were in their respective careers. The way in which he narrates the encounter, Isherwood seems to suggest that a kind of symbiosis may have taken place that day. Even if one had not actually taken place Isherwood effects one anyway, giving Sarah Bernhardt’s personality a sense of one on a spiritual quest and Vivekananda, he says, ‘with his superb presence and sonorous voice, might well have been mistaken for a great actor’ (E 115). But as I have already suggested, if Vivekananda, like any other character in Isherwood’s hands, is to be interesting, he has to be not only a performer but also endowed with a sense of humour. Attention is therefore drawn to a photograph of Swamiji taken during that period. Sure enough, Isherwood detects ‘a curve of watchful humour’ in ‘the big lips and the lines spreading from the wide nostrils.’ Driving home the point about his humour is an anecdote about Vivekananda being asked by somebody, ‘Are you never serious, Swamiji?’ ‘Oh, yes. When I have the belly-ache’, replied ‘the smiling, joking’ Swami, who, Isherwood reminds us, ‘was already a very sick man’ (E 115). It goes without saying that when there is such a meeting of two public performers there is bound to be a sense of theatre, overt or covert; a sense which Isherwood could not but have been alive
to. It is as if to suggest this that he concludes the piece by saying, ‘All we *do* know is that their meeting, like every other event in this universe, did not take place by accident’ (E 116). The idea being that the encounter of Vivekananda and Bernhardt was engineered by that playwright – the Supreme Being - who is the author of the enormous theatre of *maya*. If all the world is *maya*, the meeting of these two individuals is also a carefully planned incident in that play.

That Vivekananda’s character leant itself to drama was something Isherwood found out yet again when, on 18 June 1960, at the Vedanta Society he watched two men perform a scene from Mahendranath Gupta’s book on Ramakrishna. The scene was one where Mr. Gupta talks to Vivekananda about the first time the former met Ramakrishna. Noted Isherwood in his journal, ‘The actor who played Vivekananda couldn’t have been hammier, but his abrasiveness was effective’ (D 867). Vivekananda also appeared in an article he wrote for *Vedanta and the West* entitled, ‘What Vedanta Means To Me.’ In this article, published in 1951, he makes it a point to enlist among the attributes of the monk that attracted him, ‘his humour.’

Writes Isherwood, ‘He appealed to me as the perfect anti-Puritan hero… the comedian who taught the deepest truths in idiotic jokes and frightful puns. That humour had its place in religion, that it could actually be a mode of spiritual self-expression, was a revelation to me’(WV 158-159). Isherwood wrote about Vivekananda on at least three other occasions. Once when, from 10 to 28 June 1960, he wrote the Introduction to a volume edited by John Yale - later Swami Vidyatmananda - entitled *What Religion Is: In the Words of Swami Vivekananda* and then on 20 January 1963 when he delivered an address on Vivekananda at the Vedanta Society of Southern California. In the November/December 1968 issue of *Vedanta and the West* was
published a foreword written by Isherwood to a volume of Vivekananda’s letters to his disciples.

In his introduction to John Yale’s book he did not fail to emphasize Vivekananda’s sense of humour at every possible opportunity. Describing the Swami’s first conversation with Mrs. Hale, Isherwood comments, ‘Mrs. Hale must have laughed as she listened to this; for Vivekananda always related his adventures and misadventures with humour, and his own deep chuckles were most infectious’ (WRI viii). Commenting on the observation of those Americans who met or saw Vivekananda in 1893 and found him “inly-pleased”, Isherwood comments, ‘There was a humorous, watchful gleam in his eyes which suggested calm, amused detachment of the spirit’ (WRI x). On his social style in the U.S.A. Isherwood writes, ‘No one could laugh at him as he laughed at himself; for no one else could appreciate the rich and subtle joke of his very presence in these surroundings - a monk preaching in a circus!’ (WRI xi) Vivekananda’s sayings such as ‘Look at the ocean and not at the wave; see no difference between ant and angel’ or ‘Every worm is the brother of the Nazarene’ or ‘Obey the Scriptures until you are strong enough to do without them’ or ‘Every man in Christian countries has a huge cathedral on his head, and on top of that a book’ or ‘The range of idols is from wood and stone to Jesus and Buddha’ are described by Isherwood as ‘serio-comic’ (WRI xii). He narrates his favourite anecdote illustrating Vivekananda’s humour - the one used in his essay on the meeting of the Swami and Sarah Bernhardt as cited above - which consists of someone once asking him if he was ever serious, to which the reply was, ‘Oh, yes, when I have a belly-ache.’ Isherwood continues that Vivekananda could see the ‘funny side of the many cranks and healers who unmercifully pestered him, hoping to steal a reflection
of his glory.’ He quotes from the monk’s letters where the latter referred ‘jokingly to “the sect of Mrs. Whirlpool” and to a certain mental healer “of metaphysical, chemico, physical-religioso, what-not”’ (WRI xviii). Towards the end of the introduction Isherwood enumerates the various elements of the Swami’s personality and in the list he makes it a point to include ‘its fury and its fun’ (WRI, xx). Rounding off his personal conception of his subject he declares: ‘First and last, he was the boy who dedicated his life to Ramakrishna’ (WRI, xxi). To refer to Vivekananda as a ‘boy’ is to again invoke the child-adult/child-parent/schoolboy-teacher prototype to which almost every relationship examined by Isherwood tends to conform.

The importance of humour that Isherwood assigns to Vivekananda’s character carries over even when he discusses the life of Vivekananda’s fellow monks. Even while describing the physical hardships that these fifteen men had to endure Isherwood emphasises the fact that ‘they joked and laughed continually.’ While they regarded Ramakrishna as a real presence in their midst ‘far from regarding him with awe and sadness, they could even make fun of him. A visitor to the house describes how Naren mimicked Ramakrishna going into ecstasy, while the others roared with laughter’ (WRI, xvii).

As has been noted frequently so far, Isherwood needs to find the combination of child-likeness, humour and play-acting in a character for it to be interesting to him. As has also been noted, he effortlessly finds the combination in Vivekananda. In his 20 January 1963 lecture he makes another connection between his pre-Vedantic past and Vedantic present when he evokes the figure of his childhood and indeed life-long hero T.E. Lawrence in a study of similarity between ‘Lawrence of Arabia’ and Vivekananda of
India. Speaking of the time when Narendranath Dutta first met Ramakrishna, Isherwood says:

You have this boy, eighteen years old, a college intellectual, an athlete, a boy burning with idealism, which nevertheless up to that point had been somewhat undirected. In this way, he was rather like the young figure of T.E. Lawrence, Colonel Lawrence of Arabia - he was subjecting himself to rigorous austerities, he had made up his mind to practice complete chastity, he watched his diet, he slept on the floor, he went through all kinds of preparatory disciplines, but perhaps without being quite consciously aware why he did them. He was looking for something to dedicate himself to.

[Here Isherwood decides is where the similarities end] Lawrence’s self-dedication ended in tragedy. Vivekananda’s self-dedication ended in the greatest possible triumph. 9

It becomes evident, therefore, that Vivekananda fits in perfectly with Isherwood’s other characters, real or imaginary, who the writer found interesting or admirable during those years when he knew nothing about Vedanta and cared even less. Isherwood’s conception of Vivekananda may be made to look like an appropriation, but an appropriation that was waiting to happen. In this context it would be interesting to see how John van Druten conceives Vivekananda. Considering that van Druten was a professional playwright the highlight of whose career can be said to be his turning of Isherwood’s Berlin stories into the play I Am a Camera one may have expected him to play up Vivekananda’s ability to
perform on stage. He does no such thing. In his essay entitled ‘Vivekananda’, published in the January/February 1952 issue of *Vedanta and the West* he makes no mention of Vivekananda’s famous turn on the stage, albeit not as an actor, and ignores the Swami’s sense of humour completely. It is by contrasting van Druten’s idea of Vivekananda with Isherwood’s that one realises how closely the latter had examined the monk’s life and how many points of interest he had found in the personality revealed by the study.

In his foreword to the volume of Vivekananda’s letters Isherwood continues to highlight the element of fun that he found in the monk, the element of the child-like and the awareness of being a player in a play. ‘He is full of joy,’ writes Isherwood, ‘In his moments of seemingly furious indignation there is still a smile lurking, as it were, behind his features; and he never stops making fun of himself, even when he is downcast and ill.’

Isherwood mentions the fact that Vivekananda ‘delights in teasing his friends – to some of whom he has given nicknames, “Frankincense”, “Father Pope”, “Mother Church”’ (LSV 19-20). Underlining the infantile in Vivekananda Isherwood quotes the monk’s belief that he had never ceased to be ‘the boy who used to listen with rapt wonderment to the wonderful words of Ramakrishna under the banyan at Dakshineshwar’ (LSV 20). Isherwood ends by quoting at length from Vivekananda where he speaks of the world as a stage: ‘This play could not go on, if we were knowing players. We must play blindfolded. Some of us have taken the part of the rogue in the play, some heroic – never mind, it is all play’ (LSV 21).

Writing about his life from 1945 to 1951 in August 1971 Isherwood betrays an eagerness that Vivekananda should in his turn appreciate Isherwood’s own love of performance and humour. Speaking of his love of reading aloud from the *Katha*
Upanishad during the annual Vivekananda Puja, Isherwood says of himself, ‘He loved doing this; indeed it was (and has remained) for him the highest imaginable act of sacred camp – a little genuine devotion, a feeling of the absurdity of himself in this role, a sense that the performance is a joke shared with Swamiji, and of course his enjoyment of the sound of his own voice – all these elements are combined in the experience’ (LY 9, my emphasis).

Before Isherwood’s translation of the Bhagavad Gita (1944) was published, an article by him appeared in the September/October 1944 issue of Vedanta and the West. Entitled ‘Gita and the War’ the essay is so obviously written by the man who had so ardently espoused the concept of ‘Truly Strong Man’ decades earlier that it seems he was pre-desitined to come to the Gita sooner or later. While describing the nature of non-attached action he says that one who performs non-attached action ‘does not run away from life: he accepts it, much more completely than those whose pleasures are tinged with anxiety and whose defeats are embittered with regret’ (E 109). When he cites the example of Madame Curie refusing the Legion of Honour ‘with the matter-of-fact words: “I don’t see the utility of it”’ he may well have been thinking of his father who fought conscientiously in the Great War and yet was sufficiently non-attached to the action to sit in his trench and knit (E 110). Here tea-tabling and understatement take on a new significance. Just as the pre-Vedantic Isherwood used tea-tabling to reveal so much about life temporal, the Vedantic Isherwood has discovered a new importance of the instrument - it can also help one in, and be symptomatic of, the life spiritual. Although one quote comes from life and another from art, Madame Curie’s words have something essentially
in common with ‘One may as well begin with Helen’s letters to her sister’ - the opening line of *Howard’s End* which had a profound effect on Isherwood (Finney, *Isherwood* 70). They both reveal a mindset that may be considered ultimately saintly. It bears repetition that while Isherwood declares Madame Curie’s attitude to be that ‘of the saint’, Auden had once told Isherwood about E.M. Forster always being in the presence of God, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter (E 110). Therefore, when Isherwood studied *The Bhagavad Gita* it was not quite as alien a set of terms of reference as one imagines that he had to grapple with. Writing about the translation of *The Bhagavad Gita* to Lehmann, Isherwood said, ‘It would have a literary interest, aside from the philosophical.’ It is this literary interest with which a discussion of that text follows.

In keeping with Isherwood’s artistic predilections, *The Bhagavad Gita* - being a part of a whole - begins *in medias res*. As in a play there is the importance of dialogue and conflict. The dialogue is initially between Dhritarashtra and Sanjaya. Then, more importantly, between Arjuna and Krishna. The conflict is at three levels: the physical conflict of war, the political conflict of the Kauravas - or Kurus - and Pandavas, and the apparent spiritual conflict between war and pacifism as presented by the counseling of Arjuna by Krishna. Isherwood’s favourite narrative component, irony, is there in Arjuna’s horror that ‘clear-sighted’ as they are, they should kill their own relatives (BG 77). There is drama not only in the text, as already stated, but also in the language that Isherwood uses. His phrase ‘What is this crime / I am planning, O Krishna? / Murder most hateful…’ (BG 78) recalls Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* when in Act I Scene V the Ghost speaks to Hamlet of ‘Murder most foul.’ (It may be mentioned that where Shakespeare is only covertly present in this instance, his presence becomes overt by the time
Isherwood writes the commentary to Patanjali’s Yoga Aphorisms in the early fifties.) The dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna is marked by some amount of tension which sets it apart from other religious dialogues, such as the dialogue we shall encounter when discussing Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination. Here there is considerable initial resistance on the part of Arjuna towards accepting Krishna’s speech on face value. He interjects Krishna with questions like, ‘Vivaswat was born long before you. How am I to believe that you were the first to teach this yoga?’ (BG 111)

But there are other elements in the text which may have appealed to Isherwood the artist. The constant emphasis on discrimination, which essentially means living through one’s earthly life with a sense of detachment was exactly in keeping with the artistic stance that Isherwood of the 30’s had adopted. Just as then he was ‘a camera, recording, not thinking,’ here the Vedantic texts are constantly underlining the importance of detachment, warning against the dangers of involvement. Words which mean discrimination occur at numerous points in the text of the Isherwood-Prabhavananda Gīta. In the second chapter, ‘Yoga of Knowledge’, Krishna says, ‘To unite the heart with Brahman and then to act: that is the secret of non-attached work’ (BG 92). In the next chapter, ‘Karma Yoga’, Krishna says, ‘Do your duty always; but without attachment’ (BG 104). Later in the chapter he says, ‘But those who scorn my teaching, and do not follow it, are lost. They are without spiritual discrimination’ (BG 107). He reiterates the importance of ‘spiritual discrimination’ towards the end of the chapter (BG 109). In Chapter Four, ‘Renunciation through Knowledge’, he speaks of the importance of learning ‘how to reach a state of calm detachment from your work’ (BG 114). Towards the end of the chapter he exhorts Arjuna, ‘Where is your sword / Discrimination / Draw it
and slash / Delusion to pieces’ (BG 122). In Chapter Six, Krishna says, ‘For when a man loses attachment to sense-objects and to action…then he is said to have climbed to the height of union with Brahman’ (BG 136). Krishna seems to speak of artistic imagination and indeed negative capability when he tells Arjuna, ‘Who burns with the bliss / And suffers the sorrow / Of every creature / Within his own heart, / Making his own / Each bliss and each sorrow: / Him I hold highest of all the yogis’ (BG 144).

This ability to feel for others will be lauded in the scripture that Isherwood would translate about nine years later. In explaining the five kinds of thought-waves that a man has Patanjali regarded a wave of pity as desirable, because ‘pity is an unselfish emotion which loosens the bond of our own egotism. We may suffer deeply when we see others suffering, but our pity will teach us understanding, and, hence freedom’ (YS 7). Also in his translation of Patanjali, which I shall discuss below, Isherwood quotes from Taoist scriptures where one can read, ‘Heaven arms with compassion those whom it would not see destroyed’ (YS 11).

This stress on ‘spiritual discrimination’ or ‘non-attachment’ or ‘detachment’ is of the essence in the next text that Isherwood and Swami Prabhavananda translated – Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination or rather Viveka-Chudamani (1947). The personality of Shankara must have held considerable fascination for Isherwood given what we have so far marked about what kind of personalities he crowds his fiction and non-fiction with. The opening line of his introduction to the translation reads: ‘Beautiful and fantastic clouds of legend surround the austere, charming, boyish figure of Shankara – saint, philosopher and poet’ (SD 1, my emphasis). He takes obvious delight in
narrating the incident of Shankara’s encounter with Mandan Misra, especially where ‘Shankara, with the mischievous spirit of a boy in his teens, climbed a nearby tree and jumped down from it into the courtyard [of Mandan Misra]’ (SD 5). In the conversation that follows between the boy-saint and the scholar the former’s sense of humour is showcased: On being asked by Misra, ‘Whence comes this shaven head?’ Shankara is said to have replied, ‘You have eyes to see, Sir, … the shaven head comes up from the neck’ (SD 5). What follows is a debate between the two on condition that if Shankara lost he would forsake his monkhood and become a family man and if Misra lost the latter would become a monk. Shankara did in the end prove himself superior to Misra. (This incident seems to have impressed Isherwood so much that it is related, in even greater detail, in the next translation he undertook with the Swami – How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali (1953) while explaining aphorism No.39 in the Chapter entitled ‘Powers.’) Before discussing the text of the translation it must be noted that here also the format is that of a reported dialogue just as it is in The Gita.

In The Gita the conversation between the guru-like Krishna and disciple-like Arjuna was reported in direct quotes by Sanjaya. Here Shankara fabricates a conversation between a guru called Devadatta and his unnamed disciple and he narrates the conversation in three different voices, that of himself, that of the guru and that of the disciple. However unlike the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna this dialogue is not marked by any resistance or counter-argument. The disciple here is completely receptive and passive, accepting whatever the guru tells him without question. Almost at the very beginning we are told by Shankara, ‘Through devotion to right discrimination [the wise man] will climb to the height of union with Brahman,’ the phrase recalling
exactly the phrase in the translation of *The Gita* discussed above (SD 41; BG 136).

However, unlike *The Gita* here *maya* is explained in exactly the terms that would prove conducive to someone like Isherwood. Shankara asks the disciple to realise that the latter should identify with the Atman, saying, ‘Stop identifying yourself with the coverings of ignorance, which are like the masks assumed by an actor’ (SD 95). Towards the end of the text Shankara says, ‘An actor remains the same person, even when dressed to play a part. The excellent knower of Brahman always remains Brahman, and nothing else’ (SD 145). The figure of the child-like adult is evoked as well in the lines where Shankara describes a man who remains absorbed in Brahman. He says, ‘The enjoyments which others find so irresistible he values as little as a small baby would’ (SD 121). The child also appears in another connection: ‘The child plays with his toys, forgetting even hunger and physical pain. In like manner, the knower of Brahman takes his delight in the Atman, forgetting all thought of “I” and “mine”’ (SD 141). It seems remarkable that in text after text that Isherwood translated much of what the text contained matched Isherwood’s personality and his artistic predilections. This becomes evident when he translates Patanjali’s *Yoga Aphorisms* in 1953.

In explaining Patanjali’s *Yoga Aphorisms* the idea of an actor becomes useful, as one could well imagine it would be. In the Chapter ‘Yoga and Its Aims’ Isherwood uses the idea of an actor in the connection of Aphorism No. 18. He explains the concept of ‘karma’ by calling it ‘fate.’ He goes to say:

> After a man has achieved liberation in yoga, his acts will cease to produce karmas. ... He is like an actor on the last night of play. He knows that the
play will never be performed again, no matter how well he does his part, no matter whether the audience boos or applauds. He has nothing to gain or lose by his performance. Nevertheless, he must play it through to the end until the final curtain falls and he can go home. (YS 24)

So, in the metaphor the actor is supposed to be the man who has become an illumined soul; the play, his earthly life; the reactions of the audience, his karmas; and his home, union with Brahman at the end of his physical life. The neatness with which this comparison works is further proof of the fact that Isherwood’s love of theatre and play-acting served him in very good stead when it came to his understanding Vedanta. Also helpful was his knowledge of Shakespeare. Reference has already been made to the Shakespearean echo in one phrase of his translation of The Gita. He uses quotes from *Julius Ceasar* and *Hamlet* to comment on Aphorism No. 9 in Chapter Two. In order to underline the contention that the doctrine of reincarnation is not fatalistic but in fact ‘a profoundly optimistic belief in the justice and order of the universe’ he says, ‘We are not hopelessly doomed. We are not under [a] mysterious prenatal curse. The “fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars….”’ All we need is courage and a determination not to give up the struggle’ (YS 80). Elaborating on Patanjali’s theory that we are afraid to die because we have a memory of our painful death in our previous incarnation Isherwood says, ‘Why should our fear of death necessarily depend on remembered experience? Suppose we have had no previous experience of death, doesn’t this make it all the more terrifying?’

He continues to pose questions. ‘Is there anything more fearful than the totally unknown? “Ay, but to die,” exclaims Shakespeare’s Hamlet, “and go we know not where”’ (YS 81).
On how we should regard Maya, Isherwood speaks of the great saints who had achieved union with Brahman. They ‘did not even regard maya with horror; rather, they saw it as a fascinating and amusing play’ (YS 92, my emphasis). The phrase ‘amusing play’ is significant because the play that is maya is seen by the wise not as a tragedy, but as a comedy. Therefore a sense of humour is crucial to correctly understanding the nature of the play that is life in which all creatures participate.

Whereas in translating The Gita or Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination Isherwood did not have any chance to use humour he does get such opportunities while commenting on Patanjali’s Aphorisms. In connection with the first aphorism of Section Two Isherwood is faced with the difficulty of conveying all the nuances of the Sanskrit word tapah, or as Isherwood phonetically reproduces it, giving the Sanskrit root word tapas, which he says can only be partially translated as ‘austerity.’ Isherwood says that the English word ‘has a forbidding sound.’ He says that its two possible alternatives, ‘mortification’ and ‘discipline’ have the same problem. He writes, ‘Discipline, to most of us, suggests a drill sergeant; mortification, a horrible gangrene; austerity, a cabinet minister telling the public that it must eat less butter’ (YS 62). While commenting on the ordinary men’s obsession with pleasure and the popularity of the carpe diem concept Isherwood says these people, ignorant of their spirituality, would say that Patanjali was ‘a timid old kill-joy grandmother’ (YS 89). Commenting on Patanjali’s aphorism where there is an indication that even gifts may not be accepted by the dedicated yogi, Isherwood says that while most gifts one receives are relatively harmless there are some which are not – ‘especially when they belong to that rather sinister category described by income-tax specialists as “business gifts”’ (YS 98).
As we soon discover, this presence of humour serves to make another point that becomes obvious once we reach Aphorism No. 41. Here Patanjali speaks of the results that come from observing the yogic practices or *niyamas*. One of the results is ‘cheerfulness of mind.’ Vivekananda is quoted as saying, ‘The first sign of your becoming religious is that you are becoming cheerful’ (YS 105). Towards the end of his commentary on the aphorism Isherwood says:

Logically, there is no reason why contentment should cause happiness. …

The fact that this is not so is striking proof that intense happiness, the joy of the Atman, is always within us; that it can be released at any time by breaking down the barriers of desire and fear which we have built around it. How, otherwise, could we be so happy without any apparent reason?

(YS 106-107)

Suddenly sense of humour takes on a spiritual dimension and becomes an index of one’s spiritual well-being. It is as if to drive the point home that the earlier book translated by the Swami and Isherwood – *Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination* – ends on a note of euphoria. This is something that Isherwood does not fail to mark in his introduction to the text. He says that the pupil in the book achieves union of Brahman and the book ‘closes with the magnificent outburst of his joy’ (SD 37). So, in the three translations that Isherwood made of Vedantic or at least Hindu scriptures, we find all those characteristic features that we have already found in his fiction, non-fiction even before he discovered Vedanta.
That Isherwood found it impossible to write seriously about anything if he did not do it with humour becomes evident in his discussion in his essay on ‘The Problem of the Religious Novel.’ While saying how difficult it is to make a credible portraiture of a saint in literature he says that Dostoevski comes closest to it in the novel *The Brothers Karamazov.* What he finds praiseworthy about it is not only that it has been done with warmth, insight, naturalness and ‘the least sentimentality’, but also ‘in terms almost of farce’ (E 117). The scene where the to-be-Father-Zossima asks the pardon of his opponent is the kind of scene Isherwood says he would like to have in his religious novel - not only ‘something ... entirely natural’, but equally importantly to him, ‘something slightly comic’ (E 118). He thinks that most writers have not succeeded in that phase of the story where the saint works toward a complete spiritual realisation because they have made it ‘too sombre and depressing.’ So, while he praises George Moore for his novels *Evelyn Innes* and *Sister Teresa,* he withholds some of it because the writer ‘made his protagonist’s spiritual history too gloomy’ (E 119). He says that the novel *Evelyn Innes* ‘ends on a note of sadness, against which I protest.’ He resents the notion that mishaps and setbacks in the path of spiritual progress cannot be described with ‘some of the humour’ with which one’s failures in cookery or skiing can be described. However, while in this area he considers Maugham to have made some progress - in his portrayal of ‘Larry’ - the progress has been too much, so much so that the spiritual setbacks have been rendered virtually non-existent. While he fails to suggest exactly how a truly credible portrait of a saint may be drawn, he ends on a characteristically humorous note. He says that perhaps only a saint could write ‘a truly comprehensive religious novel’ but ‘saints, unfortunately, are not in the habit of writing novels’ (E 120).
While Isherwood may have come to the realisation that a sense of humour was an important accessory in one’s pursuit of spirituality through intuition - a faculty he attached enormous significance to as we will soon see - much of that realisation may also have been concretised by his discussions with Gerald Heard. Heard’s estimate of the importance of humour was spelt out in an article by him entitled ‘Fun’ which was published in *Vedanta and the West* in its September/October 1952 issue, exactly a year after Isherwood’s own article in which he expresses his surprise at being taught, through Vivekananda’s writings and letters, that humour also has its place in religion. In that article Isherwood had written, ‘Like every small boy of Puritan upbringing, I had always longed to laugh out loud and make improper noises in church. I didn’t know then that humour also had its exponents in the Christian tradition’ (WV 159). He goes on to cite the example of St. Philip Neri who allowed children to play games around the altar during mass and who was also known to sit on the Pope’s lap and pull the papal beard in fun! In his article, Heard links humour directly with worldly detachment and, more importantly, detachment from one’s own ego - a virtue that lies at the very heart of Vedanta. He writes, ‘Our objectivity consists in recognising our own private and personal subjectivity. Seeing our own peculiarity, we see ourselves with detachment’ (Heard 131). He underpins laughter theoretically by saying that it is the ‘fun’s vocalisation’ given rise to by the thought, one can even say realisation, that ‘humorous fun so often has darted higher and deeper on its iridescent vanes than has the arrow of wit.’ He goes on to say that to the humorous ‘so many common things, rather than appearing banal, seem funny. … Their humility provides that they are not easily bored and very easily amused.’ He
says that the conscious of one’s own ego, and a sense of its uniqueness alienates man not only from the material but also from the spiritual world: ‘the sudden sense of being a private, lonely person in an alien universe. This constriction takes place when comedy dies’ (Heard 131). Obsessive involvement with one’s own sorrows is seen as harmful even to one’s sanity and is only a form of intoxication. Laughter provides an insight into the real nature of things. Linking it directly to Vedantism, Heard says that maya is lila - ‘the dance of God...which becomes cosmic comedy.’ He concludes by saying that in our age the universe ‘is best conceived of as a dance, the play of life best conceived as comedy, and morality as that abandonment of the pathetic pride which clings to its arthritic dignity’ (Heard 133). Here ‘dignity’, of course, is being used in the sense of ego-consciousness. True liberation of the fetters of the self and acquisition of an insight into the nature of our existence then becomes impossible without a sense of humour.

It is a well-known fact that Isherwood did not particularly enjoy writing the biography of Ramakrishna. Much of this had to do with the fact that he was constantly being censored and edited by the monks down at the Belur Math. Not only did the writer in him object to this treatment, but also, I would suggest, his dislike of Indians. Even in this he was very much Kathleen’s son, although, as we see in the First Chapter, she later learnt to take an open-minded aesthetic and current-affairs interest in the East. (When she attended the wedding of Prince Victor Duleep Singh and Lady Anne Coventry on 4 January 1898 she had found the bridegroom appalling, fat and oriental.) The first time we become aware of Isherwood’s Orientophobia is in his treatment of the character of Bernhard Landauer in Goodbye to Berlin. It reappears in Journey to a War where he
shows a studied disregard for Chinese culture and spends all his time in China immersing himself in the English world of English literature. It is therefore hardly surprising that his Occidental soul recoiled at the thought of too intimate an association with the Orient when he decided to become a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda. There were aspects of the temple that repelled him strongly - ‘the specifically Indian aspects of the Ramakrishna cult.’ He protested, ‘Why did the rituals in the shrine have to be Hindu rituals? Why did several of the women devotees like to wear sarees in the shrine-room? Why were the prayers in Sanskrit? Why did we so often have curry at meals?’ (AV 32) His dislike of Indians started to manifest itself virulently soon after he moved into the Brahmanananda Cottage at the Vedanta Society of Southern California on 6 February 1943. Writing about his first days at the monastery he expressed in 1946 his dislike of the way the Swami’s nephew Asit behaved with him ‘just because I was British.’ Apparently, Asit ‘never lost an opportunity of making me [Isherwood] responsible for the British policy in India. Sometimes I was amused, sometimes I lost my temper’ (D 270). On 25 May 1943 he notes his irritability at the sound of Indian records being played by George (D 295). On 16 July 1943 he is disgusted by the way Swami Vishwananda used the washroom allotted to the former (D 304). He admitted to Sudhira on 27 July 1943: ‘I don’t really like Indians as a race; Swami is an exception’ (D 308). On 10 August 1943 he nearly decided to tell Swami, “India is getting between me and God”’ (D 309). He uses the word ‘aversion’ frequently. For instance, on 9 October 1943, he speaks of ‘aversion prevailing’ after ‘three days of severe puja.’ Further, ‘A sudden gust of aversion and fear that Swami will give me a Sanskrit name.’ On 15 October 1943 he makes a list of what he does not like about each Swami at the head of each Vedanta Center in America that he visited, and
declares ‘Prabhavananda is the only one of them who’s really civilised, really tolerant; the only one who really understands the West’ (D 328). On 17 April and on 12 June 1944 he expresses his resentment against India but on the latter occasion he says that he likes one puja: The Vivekananda’s Birthday Puja. On that day ‘Sister personally serves him his coffee in the shrine room - two cups - and a cigarette, which she lights and leaves burning on an ashtray. Meanwhile somebody reads the Katha Upanishad aloud’ (D 348). This puja is acceptable to him, one can guess, because the coffee and the cigarette are sufficiently untainted by any Indian-ness.

As in the case of Herr Issyvoo and Bernhard Landauer, Isherwood softened towards Asit only when the latter was leaving Isherwood’s life - the day Asit got inducted into the U.S. Army on 18 September 1944. ‘I felt a sudden affection for Asit, and hugged him when we said goodbye’ (D 368).

Isherwood himself moved out of the Vedanta Center on 23 August 1945, seven months after Asit was released from the Army. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in connection with the treatment given to Bernard Landauer, Isherwood admitted to a strong prejudice against Hindus, by which he could mean ‘Indians’, in his autobiography Christopher and His Kind. He speaks of his anti-Hindu sentiments when writing about the original of Bernard Landauer – Wilfred Isreal. He says:

Isherwood stresses the ‘oriental’ aspect of Bernard. In this case, the epithet seems to refer to the Chinese. But Christopher had a prejudice, at that period in his life, against another Oriental race, the Hindus. He found something repellent – that is to say – personally disturbing – in Hindu
humility and passivity and the arrogance he felt it concealed. As a matter of principle, he sided with the Hindus against the British Raj and agreed that they had every right to treat their English conquerors with arrogance. Still, he identified instinctively with the English. And so he found deeply disturbing the picture of himself confronted by one of these humble-arrogant figures, a Hindu or a Wilfred – someone who ‘knew’ about life and whose knowledge may be superior to his…. This prejudice of Christopher’s, I now realize, sprang from fear – fear of unknown something which the Hindus knew; the something which he might one day have to accept and which might change his life. (CK 58)

One book that could have helped him have a less prejudiced and a more balanced, even playful and friendly attitude towards Indians was J.R. Ackerley’s Hindoo Holiday. We learn from one of his footnotes in Lost Years that one of the books he read in 1948 was Hindoo Holiday. While he observes that this ‘must have been a rereading,’ he adds that he wished he ‘could remember what Christopher thought of it in the light of his now increased knowledge of things Indian, but I don’t’ (LY 176). The fact that he does not remember anything at all about the book is significant. It indicates how little he was in fact interested in ‘things Indian’ and that his interests were strictly limited to Vedanta and nothing else beyond it. This was yet another sign of the general dislike of India that he was so troubled by. There may have been another reason why Hindoo Holiday does not appear to have made a lasting impression on him. This may have to do with an antipathy he felt for the personality of J.R. Ackerley. Once when speaking about Ackerley he
mentioned Jewish humour. He said that Ackerley’s gloom was ‘a sort of Jewish gloom, but without the Jewish wit which always goes with it - it’s just gloom. …[Y]ou felt Ackerley wasn’t enjoying it very much, and that wasn’t so sympathetic.’13 So, the perceived lack of humour in Ackerley may well have been an influencing factor in Isherwood’s tepid response to the former’s book.

Notwithstanding his dislike of India, we still get a glimpse of the way there was a psychological readiness beginning to happen for the work that was about to be given him – writing of the Ramakrishna biography. We have an example of that in his memoirs Lost Years. On 5 May 1947 he joined a gymnasium run by a German called Pilates. Pilates once told him, “If you’ll just touch your toes one single time, every day of your life, you’ll be alright” – which made Christopher think of a saint begging some hopelessly worldly householder to please try to remember God for at least one moment each day’ (LY 121). Whether or not Isherwood was aware of it, Ramakrishna often said almost exactly those words to the many ‘hopelessly worldly householder’ devotees he had.

But by 1953 the stirrings of his dislike of India started all over again. At Trabuco, he wrote in his journal on 27 January that year, ‘This worship of Ramakrishna - its Indianness - still bothers me often’ (D 453). It is in this state of mind that Isherwood’s preparation for the Ramakrishna biography started on 1 April 1956 when he began to read Saradananda’s Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master. He finished it on 23 August. On reading the book he must have recognised a figure from his pre-Vedanta days. In Lions and Shadows he had written about ‘the pure-in-heart man’ who had become an ideal for Isherwood and Auden after their acquaintance with Homer Lane. As Isherwood had described him, eighteen years before he read Saradananda’s book, the ‘pure-at-heart man’
was ‘free and easy...without worries or inhibitions. He was a wonderful listener, but
never “sympathised” with your troubles; and the only advice he ever gave you was in the
form of parables’ (LS 186). It is uncanny how perfectly the description fits Ramakrishna.
The next book that he read was Romain Rolland’s *The Life of Ramakrishna*. On 3 March
1957 he gave a talk entitled ‘Who is Ramakrishna?’ at the Sarada Math. Since this
speech was not sent to Belur Math first for their approval, we can get as correct an idea of
Isherwood’s conception of Ramakrishna as we ever can. ‘He was fond of dressing up,’
Isherwood says quite early in the biographical part of his speech, ‘for he loved acting, and
was incredibly skillful as a mimic.’ By ascribing a talent for mimicry to Ramakrishna
Isherwood manages to combine the two most important criteria in a likable personality-
love of play-acting and a sense of humour. Here it must be mentioned that
Ramakrishna’s sense of fun and humour was one of the first things that may have
endeared Isherwood to the mystic. Well before he had properly started to prepare for the
biography he was already aware of this important aspect of Ramakrishna’s personality
tavel diary, *The Condor and the Cows* he writes:

> Ramakrishna’s own spiritual genius was frequently expressed in humour -
not the sly clever kind, but real rampant clowning, childlike silliness,
e extravagance worthy of the Marx Brothers. … And it can move mountains.
> It is utterly subversive, outrageous, unsel-conscious, improper, infectious.
> Indeed, it is one of the purest and most beautiful aspects of Love. (CC
> 183)
The presence of the crucial phrase ‘childlike silliness’ needs to be noted too. By describing Ramakrishna in terms of the Marx Brothers Isherwood is effectively signaling his readiness to engage with the nineteenth-century Bengali mystic. Later in the speech he speaks of the two books he has been reading - *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* by Mahendra Gupta and *Ramakrishna, the Great Master* by Saradananda - and says of the latter that it ‘conveys in a way in which no other writing does, the extraordinary mixture of simplicity, fun, and strangeness which was Ramakrishna’ (WiR 18, my emphasis). However, his dislike of India may have been encouraged by an anecdote which he relates towards the end of the talk - a story that he says he rather likes. It deals with a traveler who visited Dakshineshwar possibly in the early 1920’s. Isherwood describes Ramakrishna’s room then as the traveler had presumably found it - ‘littered, untidy and uncared for, and the whole place in a terrible state.’ On asking a monk why the place was in such a bad condition the traveler was told that ‘the Master’ was not there. He was over on the other side of the river, at the [Belur] monastery. Isherwood extracts the moral that Ramakrishna can be ‘every bit as much alive right here in California, as he is over in India’ (WiR 19). Tempting as this thought may very well have been to Isherwood the Californian devotee of Ramakrishna, the would-be biographer Isherwood could not afford to give in to it. By May 1957 it became obvious to Isherwood that he would soon have to go to India - a prospect which predictably upset him. In a fit of his characteristic hypochondria Isherwood wrote in his diary of 8 October 1957 that although he was quite well aware that he may never return he still felt unable to write any memorable last words (D 732). On that day he and Don Bachardy flew to Japan at the start of their big Oriental
tour, the most important part of which was to be Calcutta where he would be visiting places associated with Ramakrishna.

Isherwood’s visit to West Bengal from 30 November to 9 December 1957 was not a pleasant one, mostly because of his ill health. According to Isherwood-biographer Peter Parker, Isherwood began to feel sick even before he left Bangkok for Calcutta, got worse on the plane, and had temperature by the time he reached Calcutta. Writing about it twenty-two years later Isherwood attributed his illness to ‘some bug picked up in Bangkok’ (GD 228). This can be argued to have been, albeit partly, psychosomatic, given his hatred of the idea of going to India at all, and given his talent for psychosomatic illnesses, a talent evident even in the characters of his novels from his debut novel All the Conspirators. The hotel into which Isherwood and Bachardy had booked themselves turned out to be filthy. Bachardy went out and booked themselves into the Great Eastern Hotel. All of 1 December Isherwood lay sick in bed. On 2 December he telephoned Belur Math and two Swamis came to see him at the hotel. Isherwood’s work started from the next day when, in a car, Swami Vitashokananda took the couple to see Balaram Bose’s house, the Holy Trinity Church - where Ramakrishna once went - Keshab Sen’s church, Lily Cottage of Keshab Sen, the Sanskrit School started by Ramkumar and the Cossipore Garden House. On 4 December, the same Swami took them to Udbodhan, being the house of Ma Sarada, Ramakrishna’s wife. Later that day Isherwood and Bachardy moved into a room at the Belur Math Guest House and went to see Dakshineshwar, across the river, a short distance due north. Once at Belur Isherwood seems to have recovered enough to attend vespers on 4 and 5 December, Bachardy joining him on the second day. Not only does he seem to have been struck by the beauty
and peace of Belur, the mysteriousness of the Ganga, reminding him vaguely of Venice, but the vespers seem to have made an impression on him. He was struck by the singing and the sense of rhythm and beauty of the officiating monk’s gestures. On asking Mr. Bachardy about his time at Belur he said,

...I never forgot it. It made a huge impression on me, and I know it did on Chris. It was incredibly beautiful and significant. I remember my first experience of vespers in the Belur Math, the noise and the movement and the smoke. Oh, it was just a dazzling experience. We were both stunned by it. (Chatterjee 106)

Although not spelt out in so many words, it is obvious that the reason why the vespers at Belur had such a tremendous effect on the couple in general, and on Isherwood, in particular, was the sheer theatre of the ritual. The fact that attending the vespers is as visual and dramatic an experience as it is spiritual is something that must have spoken to Isherwood the theatre enthusiast. Here was a faith which acknowledged the necessity of the dramatic, the striking, the visual and therefore a faith which would attract the theatre and film-fanatic with spiritual aspirations.

On 5 December they set out to look for the house where Gopal Ma lived, but found instead a house where Ramakrishna had once visited. Later they also went to the place where he was cremated. On the evening of the next day they started on their train journey to Jayrambati and Kamarpukur, accompanied by the Swami, of course. They arrived at Bankura in the small hours of the next morning, 7 December. After meeting the brothers of Swami Prabhavananda and their families, the party drove onward to
Jayrambati and then to Kamarpukur. In his letter to the Swami back in Hollywood, Isherwood mentioned that one of the places he had liked most was the courtyard where Ramakrishna had played the part of Shiva as a boy; yet another example of how Isherwood’s own childhood interests had neatly dove-tailed into his adult spiritual life. Just as he had arranged for performances of Shakespeare as a little boy with his parents as the audience, here he was standing at the spot where the object his spiritual aspirations had indulged in childhood theatricals himself. After meeting Prabhavananda’s brothers again, the party got on the train back to Calcutta. Isherwood and Bachardy spent all of the next day resting at Belur and left West Bengal, and indeed India, the next day, 9 December, having earlier in the day gone to Dakshineshwar again and once again visited Ramakrishna’s room. However, for all the special treatment that Isherwood and Bachardy got from the Indians, there can be very little doubt that they were happy to be going home. Once again, in keeping with the tradition of the exits of ‘Bernhard Landauer’, China and Asit, the exit of Belur and its people from Isherwood’s life, gave rise to benevolent feelings in him. He ended up feeling a wonderful sense of kindness around himself and his friend on the evening of their flight. After sometime in England and New York they arrived back in Santa Monica on 30 January 1958.

By 22 August he had finished writing the autobiographical section of his Ramakrishna biography - the part that he enjoyed most - and had decided that the whole section should be brought out as a separate book, which later became *An Approach to Vedanta*. Then, on 30 August he decided to do the introductory chapter in dialogue. Towards the end of the year Isherwood also planned to write, and then abandoned the
idea of, a retrospective diary of their tour of Asia based on Bachardy’s diaries, some
notes, some possibly carbon copies of letters he had written of the trip. Perhaps the only
published article he wrote using the material gathered from the tour was ‘The Home of
Ramakrishna’ which appeared in the July/August 1958 issue of Vedanta and the West. He
describes Calcutta as ‘the dirtiest and most depressing city in the country’ and attributes
much of it to the ‘enormous quantities of refugees [that] have come in from East
Pakistan.’ Interestingly enough he praises an aspect of Calcutta that his mother
Kathleen would have approved of as well. He is very impressed by the reply he receives
when he asks the Swami who was the guide during the tour - Swami Vitashokananda -
why Calcuttans had not torn down the statues of various ‘not even at all distinguished or
interesting British generals and statesmen which still stand around the streets and parks.’
“Well,” replies the Swami, “we did remove one or two to begin with, but then we
reflected that after all, this was an historical phase in India’s development, and they
should be kept there as a reminder of that phase.” ‘This,’ Isherwood declares, ‘I thought
was truly admirable’ (HoR 22). He writes approvingly of Belur, picking out for special
mention the swami in charge of the daily worship at the Ramakrishna shrine and meeting
the then-head of Belur Swami Sankarananda. The not-very-attractive reports of
Dakshineshwar that Isherwood had already had seems to have been added to in some
ways. He writes disapprovingly of the ‘crowds of children and demands for money’ and
the ‘rough and broken’ surface of the courtyard that made his walking shoeless
‘unpleasant’ (HoR 25). He considers Ramakrishna’s room at Dakshineshwar the best one
he could have had but is shocked by the smallness of Holy Mother’s room. While he
considers ‘the Bengal countryside...not particularly charming in December; somewhat
bare and eroded’ one senses him seeking solace by concentrating on an aspect of Ramakrishna’s character that would be very important to him. While touring Kamarpukur and Jayrambati he looks at the children of the two villages again and again - ‘these very slender, bright-eyed, rather mischievous, laughing children’ and says to himself: ‘One of those could have been [Ramakrishna]’ (HoR 29). The fact that he saw the village children, saw them laughing, saw the place where Ramakrishna had played the role of Shiva as a child, all contributed to arguably the most incisive sentence ever written about the mystic, when he described the personality of Ramakrishna as ‘the sublimation of the village child he once was’, in the biography’s first chapter, which appeared in the March/April 1959 issue of *Vedanta and the West*. After somewhat unconvincingly saying that ‘India is a marvellous country and a very romantic one’, he confesses towards the end of the essay, ‘I am very happy to be working on my book in these temperate Californian surroundings, and not in the heat of the tropics’ (HoR 29).

Isherwood’s dislike of India notwithstanding, he had come back from the subcontinent with a conception of Ramakrishna that was appearing more and more harmonious with his own most basic character traits and interests. Due to his reading of Saradananda and his visit to Kamarpukur he now saw the nineteenth-century Bengali mystic as one with whom he could connect at various levels. On 20 January 1963, speaking at the Vedanta Society in Hollywood, he tried to describe the mystic as he may have appeared to the eighteen-year-old Narendranath Dutta on their first encounter. With ill-concealed admiration and excitement he said:

....this boy encounters this extraordinary freak, this amazing character, *half-baby*, half-seer, often unconscious of his outward surroundings,
stumbling like a drunken man, coming down out of the great superconscious state to talk the clearest sense, in the humblest and most forceful language, about God, life and death. (VC 532, my emphasis)

Isherwood tried to communicate to his listeners that same sense of comic theatre infused with a deeply serious content which he found in his reading of the momentous Narendranath-Ramakrishna meeting. He tried to draw the listeners’ attention to the ‘extraordinary comedy of these encounters.’ Next he talked about the incident where Ramakrishna affords Narendranath a glimpse of the ‘great immensity of pure consciousness.’ When the boy is terrified by the vision and asks Ramakrishna to stop the great whirlpool of light, the man ‘roars with laughter and stops it, by a touch’ (VC 533).

Little did Isherwood know that he would have to go back to India again very soon. By September 1963 he was aware of the dreaded possible second trip to India. Thanking Gerald Hamilton for his birthday greetings Isherwood - who hated Hamilton anyway - complained about his current situation, once again, significantly, for us, linking his physical troubles with his dislike of India: ‘I have been desperately busy finishing two books, I am not at all well - something in my throat - and now I hear I will probably have to go to India at Xmas the last place in the world I want to be.’ It was only the previous day that Isherwood had agreed to go to India and had poured out his horror at himself into his journal, saying, ‘A passionate psychosomatic revolt is brewing in me against the Indian trip. I am almost capable of dying at Belur Math, out of sheer spite’ (GD 258). It is with this mindset that Isherwood set off for India, but this time without Don Bachardy
and with the Swami, on 18 December, arriving in Calcutta on 21st – two months after the completion of his first draft of *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*. Isherwood takes refuge in a technique he had used so often in his other Orientophobic book *Journey to a War* - he turns Calcutta into an unreal place. The people outside his car become ‘phantom people’ (GD 262). Play-acting and tea-tabled warfare soon make their appearances in the narrative that Isherwood penned in his journal. Speaking of the custom of bowing to others he writes: ‘I am playing it very broad. I bow down even to the most junior swamis. This is partly clowning, partly aggression - and how it embarrasses many of them! A few retaliate - I have to take a standing jump backwards, to avoid having them do it to me’ (GD 264).

He saw psychosomatic manifestations of ‘India horror’ in Prema, much as he saw it in the Swami too. His way of combating his own psychosomatic tendencies was to fashion what was around him according to the criteria he had perfected. He would bring into play humour, play-acting and the idea of the child-in-the-adult. He therefore noticed one ‘sturdy old swami’ who chanted with great enthusiasm. Isherwood the novelist got to work. ‘I could easily picture him as a young boy, just entering the monastery; he hadn’t really changed at all. He had taken his vows unquestioningly and never faltered. Such a comical old man, his nose nearly meeting his chin’ (GD 267).

He was soon to be in familiar childhood territory - the theatre - when, on the afternoon of 29 December, after the inauguration of the week-long Parliament of Religions at Park Circus Maidan in south Calcutta, the Swami took Isherwood to the 75-year-old Star Theatre in the northern part of the city, where Girish Ghosh had acted in many self-written plays. Isherwood watched some of the play that was being performed
that evening and later wrote in his journal, finding a point of connection, of reference, with this alien race:

> Without understanding a word, I felt I could never tire of the actors’ intonations and gestures, their delight in their own vitality. Bengalis seem born for the drama. I felt I was getting glimpses of the kind of fun Ramakrishna and Girish had together, during one of Girish’s drunken visits. (GD 270)

In his subsequently-published diaries he is seen to have written about the play, ‘Sheer Dickens’ (*The Sixties*, 316). In an interview given years later speaking about this alien race again he said, ‘The Bengalis, anyway, are so absolutely non-Nordic, very lively and bright and mercurial, and if they weep, it’s not for long; much more like the Italians’ - an observation that may very well have been based on his experiences in Calcutta and around West Bengal at this time (Scobie, *Paris Review* 217). Hardly surprising therefore that on 1 January 1964, temporarily overcoming ‘gusts of furious resentment - against India, against the senior swamis of the Math, against Swami himself even’ Isherwood made a speech comparing himself to Girish Ghosh (GD 271). Although in the course of that speech he said that he had neither the thespian’s devotion nor his capacity for drink, he could very well have added that he did share Girish Ghosh’s love of the theatre (GD 274). But what is of equal, if not more, importance about the speech, delivered that January evening at Park Circus Maidan, is here finally Isherwood articulated what had been taking shape inside him for years and what was galvanised by the visit to the Star Theatre. In the introductory part of his address he had said that he considered himself
‘neither primarily a Hindu nor a Vedantist but a devotee of Shri Ramakrishna.’

He said: ‘I loved Ramakrishna very much when I read of how G.C. Ghosh arrived in the middle of the night at Dakshineshwar exceedingly drunk and insisted on dancing with Shri Ramakrishna and how Shri Ramakrishna far from being shocked, far from reproving him, danced with him...’ Later in the speech he spoke of how Ramakrishna had ‘again and again treated Girish with utmost indulgence and humour and affection’(my emphasis). It is not impossible that at the back of his mind were images of Ramakrishna as a child playing the role of Shiva, of the ‘extraordinary comedy’ of Ramakrishna’s first meetings with Narendranath and of an oil painting backstage at the Star Theatre. So, in a sentence that, to me, marks Isherwood’s final, whole-hearted acceptance of the mystic, he declared: ‘Shri Ramakrishna is, of course, among his many aspects unquestionably the patron saint of the theatre and indeed of all the arts’ (PoR 379, my emphasis). In his biography of the mystic Isherwood writes, ‘By giving his approval to Girish’s art and encouraging him to continue practising it, Ramakrishna became, as it were, the patron saint of the drama in Bengal’ (RD 254). By calling Ramakrishna, and with total justification, the patron saint of the theatre, not only was he paying his respect to those actors and actresses he had seen backstage at the Star Theatre, bowing to an oil painting of the saint before braving the footlights, and drawing on all that he had read, experienced and felt through intuition about the man, but he was also establishing a strong and direct link of continuity between Isherwood the Sarah Bernhardt admirer and Isherwood the Ramakrishna devotee. It was as though Isherwood’s coming to Vedantism was the most natural next step his life could have taken. For somebody so much in love with the idea of the theatre what better philosophy than one which is based on the view that ‘an
incarnation is all the time fully conscious of his divinity, so that whatever he does is only a kind of play-acting (a lila), as Isherwood writes in the chapter entitled ‘The Vision of Kali’ in the biography, a chapter first published in *Vedanta and the West* in the January/February 1960 issue? What more appropriate religion than Hinduism, which allowed him to use, while explaining the exact meaning of the term ‘avatar’ - in Chapter 8, first published in the aforementioned journal’s July/August 1960 issue - a quotation of a personality as unlikely as Oscar Wilde when he quoted the line ‘Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future’? (RD 94)

However, it also needs to be mentioned that for his thinking of Ramakrishna as the patron saint of theatre he may very well have been indebted to a lady named Mallika Gupta. Mallika Gupta, born American but married to a Bengali and settled in Calcutta, had written an article entitled, ‘Ramakrishna: “Patron Saint” of the Bengali Theatre’ in the March/April 1963 issue of *Vedanta and the West*. In this rather short article she not only spoke about the relationship between Girish Ghosh and Ramakrishna but also laid special emphasis on Ramakrishna’s own considerable penchant for play-acting as evinced, for example, from accounts of his imitating ‘the kirtan singer waving her long handkerchief and giving side-long glances, while in the midst of her devotional song, to acknowledge the late arrival of one of her special admirers’ (Gupta 45). Similarly Mrs. Gupta makes it a point to mention Ramakrishna’s appreciation of the cross-dressing that the actress Nati Binodini had to resort to in order to pay a visit to Ramakrishna once. She had come to see him dressed as a young man in European dress. This seems to be of a piece with Ramakrishna’s child-hood and even adult forays into the world of transvestism, sometimes to fool a local zamindar, sometimes to experience what it must
be to be Radha, Krishna’s spiritual consort. Wrote Mrs. Gupta of him, ‘He admired the
girl for her perfect disguise and also for the devotion which prompted her to do such a
thing’ (Gupta 50). Towards the end of the article she writes, ‘In all theatre auditoriums,
lobbies, and “green rooms” there are either photographs, statues, mural paintings or
sculptured likenesses of Ramakrishna’ (MG 50). Therefore when the chapter ‘Some
Great Devotees’ is published in Vedanta and the West in the September/October 1963
issue – two issues after the publication of the Mallika Gupta article Isherwood calls
Ramakrishna ‘the patron saint of the drama in Bengal.’ In 1964 he did the final draft of
the biography and Ramakrishna and His Disciples was published in England on 8 April
1965.

Isherwood’s transcription of a pocket diary that he kept during the 1963-64 trip to
Bengal was published as part of the penultimate volume of his diaries in 2010 titled The
Sixties: Diaries 1960-1969. From that transcription a more complex and less negative
picture of India emerges. Belur Math is ‘far more delightful’ than he remembered it (303).
The ‘factory chimneys are old-fashioned and not ugly’ (304). He still feels ‘isolated’ and
an ‘unrelatedness’ (304, 306) but approves of the Bengali hymns sung to Christ on
Christmas Eve because the hymns ‘had the merit of taking Jesus right out of the
Episcopalian church and putting him back in the middle of Asia, where he belongs’ (307-
8). He develops great fondness for Swami Aranyananda because the monk is ‘really one
of the handsomest boys I have seen in this part of the world’ (310). He also takes a liking
to a young man named ‘Shashi Kanto’ (although the name should correctly be written as
one word) who has a ‘long sensitive affectionate nose and dark soft velvet eyes’ (318).
About the play, Tapasi, that he watched at Star Theatre, he wrote, ‘But the acting was so
lively and enjoyable’ (316). He is ‘hugely impressed’ by a project of the Ramakrishna Order in the outskirts of the city, in Narendrapur, and makes it a point to record his admiration for the monk in charge of that project: Swami Lokeswarananda (320). In the light of the published diaries from the 1960s, it may be said that Isherwood’s attitude towards may seem racist, but was in fact far more complicated than that. He was not impervious to anything good in India, and seems to have made a sincere effort to like the country more than he did during his previous visit to the sub-continent. His occasional spelling mistakes notwithstanding (he also spells Jadavpur University erroneously as ‘Javadpur’ University) there can be noticed a softening of the dislike of India which he had preserved from the 1930s.

Given his love for anything anti-establishment, it is hardly surprising that Isherwood tries to emphasize Gadadhar Chattopadhyay’s rebellious nature as much as possible. Hence we are told, ‘he had a curious streak of obstinacy in him...he absolutely refused to remember any of the rules of arithmetic. And whatever he was forbidden to do - flatly and without explanation - he would do immediately’ (RD 27). After his arrival at Dakshineshwar Gadadhar’s obsessive meditations and austerities raise eyebrows. His voice loaded with anti-establishment sarcasm Isherwood writes, ‘Their head priest was taking his religion more seriously than they thought decent’ (RD 59).

Gadadhar’s love of the theatre comes soon afterwards. ‘Throughout his life’, writes Isherwood, ‘Gadadhar was apt to be moved to ecstasy by watching performances of religious dramas. And, quite aside from this, he took lifelong pleasure in mimicry, clowning and comic play-acting’ (RD 35). These two statements are lodged between
descriptions of two incidents from the mystic’s childhood - his playing the role of Shiva and his entering the women’s quarters of Durgadas Pyne’s house dressed as a poor weaver-woman.

The Durgadas Pyne incident also ties up neatly with an aspect of Ramakrishna that Isherwood tries, but not to his satisfaction, to explore in the biography - Ramakrishna’s sexual ambivalence. Isherwood carefully avoids any speculation about the nature of the mystic’s sexual orientation - which becomes a question of all-consuming interest to Jeffrey J. Kripal in his book *Kali’s Child - The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (1995) - and instead steers the discussion to an artistic plain saying that ‘the truth is that this extraordinary being had such a wide range of characteristics that he seemed to be quite a different person at different times; now predominantly masculine, now feminine’ (RD 113). By saying this Isherwood makes Ramakrishna’s ‘inclination to assume the character of a woman’ (RD 112) nothing more than a dip into his repertoire of roles which just happened to be of either gender. So, even in side-stepping a potential discussion of the mystic’s sexual make-up the biographer keeps intact one crucial aspect of the mystic’s personality - the play-actor in him. This somewhat inconclusive conclusion does not prevent Isherwood from going on to say later that ‘the love which Ramakrishna [felt] for Rakhal seems to have been motherly rather than fatherly.’ In direct reversal of roles between himself and Bhairavi, ‘he identified himself with Yashoda.’ Here one notices yet again the evocation of the child-parent structure that Isherwood discerned in nearly every relationship that he examined and wrote about. By saying that Ramakrishna identified with Yashoda, Krishna’s foster mother, Isherwood is accomplishing a remarkable sleight-of-hand. He is not only
invoking the child-parent structure as he is always wont to do, but he is also gesturing towards the gender non-conformity of Ramakrishna by refusing to assign him the role of the male parent.

Isherwood cannot call this play-acting anymore. He says that this relationship was ‘more than a re-enactment’, but was more of a ‘recreation’, a continuation essentially, ‘of a relationship which existed in the past and continues to exist eternally’ (RD 179). So, this feminine aspect of Ramakrishna went far deeper than mere play-acting. It was probably, as Kripal says while talking about the nature of maya in the quotation that follows, cosmic play-acting, and thus of much more psychological interest even than Isherwood is allowed to declare.

Play-acting or theatre continues to loom large over perhaps the most important document of Ramakrishna’s preachings - Mahendra Nath Gupta’s *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Jeffrey J. Kripal points this out in the appendix to his aforementioned book. Speaking of the Bengali original of the *Gospel*, he says: ‘Perhaps, then, the best metaphor to describe the Kathamrta’s evolution is not the tape-recorded interview...but the historical play’. Kripal points to the genre’s popularity in nineteenth-century Calcutta, Ramakrishna’s love of the theatre, the mystic’s association with the aforementioned Girish Ghosh, and says that such a metaphor would be ‘an apt one.’ He reinforces the argument by saying, ‘[E]ven the text’s appearance (with speakers, dates, stage directions, and moods all described) suggests a play script.’ Kripal points to Ramakrishna’s ‘drawing on a long and complex Vaisnava tradition of religious “play-acting,”’ and the mystic’s frequent admission ‘that he saw no difference between the true and the imitation’ to bolster his argument. Kripal points out the parallels between theatre
and what is regarded as reality. He says that for Ramakrishna ‘artistic creation and reality were interchangeable. Just as an actor after acting a woman’s part for some time takes on the gestures and moods of a woman, so too, if one thinks of God long enough, one obtains God’s very “being.”’ Kripal ends the appendix by saying:

It is also clear that, much like an actor editing his own recorded performance, Ramakrishna knew that M was recording his teachings and actions and often stopped to correct M’s record or emphasize some important point. M’s text, then, can be read as a play that was written to capture its audience with a vision of a man whose acts revealed reality and whose reality was expressed through acts. (Kripal 331)

An important part of these ‘acts’ was, of course, humour. The biographer spares no effort to drive home this point. He does so at every conceivable opportunity. About Gadadhar’s attitude to the British, Isherwood writes, ‘We find no bitterness in Gadadhar, at any time in his life, when he referred to the British - only a playful humour.’ Isherwood cites as example, Ramakrishna’s words on the power of ‘self-suggestion’ - an idea, incidentally, which takes us back all the way to Isherwood of the 1920s, because in his debut novel All the Conspirators (1928) there is mention of ‘Auto Suggestion’ - when the mystic joked, ‘If even a sickly man puts on high boots, he begins to whistle and climb the stairs like an Englishman, jumping from one step to the next’ (RD 40). Ramakrishna is shown describing his mother’s 1858 attempt to ‘cure’ him ‘with characteristic humour’ (RD 80). Needless to mention that when the time comes to present the first encounter between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, in keeping with what he had said on earlier
occasions when he spoke about this incident, Isherwood finds comedy in it. He says, ‘No outside observer could possibly have understood the subtlety and comedy of the relationship between these two infinitely strange beings’ (RD 202, my emphasis). Later in the story we are shown Ramakrishna poking ‘affectionate fun’ at Balaram Bose’s miserliness (RD 242), Keshab Sen laughing again and again in appreciation of Ramakrishna’s jocular comparison of acquiring spiritual knowledge to a patient getting admitted in a hospital (RD 244), and we are told, ‘Throughout the rest of his life, Ramakrishna would speak often of Keshab - sometimes critically or humorously, but always with profound affection’ (RD 245, my emphasis). When Isherwood quotes lengthy passages from Mahendra Nath Gupta’s *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* there is a noticeable frequency of sections where Ramakrishna says something and ‘Everybody laughs’ or ‘All laugh’ (RD 268, 269, 272, and 274) underscoring the importance of humour in the mystic’s preaching. Also, inevitably, Vivekananda’s ‘serio-comic style’ does not go unnoticed, as when Isherwood quotes from Swamiji’s letter to an American lady, ‘Kali worship is my especial fad’ (RD 215).

The third component of Ramakrishna’s character that ensures Isherwood’s interest in him is his childlike demeanor. On his first sight of Gadadhar, Mathur is ‘drawn to this youth...moving about the gardens with an air of radiant innocence, like a young child’ (RD 54). According to Isherwood, the personality that Ramakrishna was assuming more and more was that of ‘a child of the Divine Mother. Childlike, he now obeyed the will of the Mother in everything, no matter how trivial, and was utterly careless of what the world might think of his behaviour’ (RD 66). The child-parent construct now becomes palimpsested on the devotee-divinity relationship. About the Bhairavi episode in
Ramakrishna’s life is said, ‘She now began to establish between them the relationship of Mother and Child - seeing herself as Yashoda, the foster mother of Krishna, and him as the Baby Gopala’ (RD 93). Here, the child-parent construct is palimpsested on the pupil-teacher relationship. In both cases, the child-parent construct endures, as it has since the beginning of Isherwood’s writing career. Isherwood quotes Vaikuntha Nath Sanyal on events of the morning after Vivekananda accepted the worship of God with form. Ramakrishna’s child-like delight in that event shines through the narrative, especially when Vaikuntha Nath writes, ‘And then the Master smiled with joy and said, “Narendra has accepted Kali. That’s very good, isn’t it?”’ Seeing that he was as happy as a child about this, I answered, “Yes, sir, it is very good”’ (RD 215, my emphasis).

Not only Ramakrishna but various other players in this story are shown to have child-like qualities. Mathur, for instance, sometimes ‘could behave on occasion like an irresponsible boy, but not always an innocent one.’ As example he cites the story of Mathur running to Ramakrishna panic-stricken and, more importantly for us, ‘boylike’ when he found himself in danger of prosecution by a rival landowner against whose servants Mathur had incited his own servants to start a gang-fight (RD 129).

Even humour is not kept the monopoly of Ramakrishna. Narendranath Dutta’s father, Vishwanath, is said to have ‘never got angry and shouted at his children, but found semi-comic ways of reproving them which they remembered for a long time afterwards’ (RD 187).

Writing the biography also gave Isherwood an opportunity to indulge in an activity he had so grown to love from his school days - the proto-politically-correct
exercise of Empire-bashing or England-bashing. But even here, the tone is kept humorous. Hence we have such paragraphs as:

The Bengal villager would not understand the Westerner’s reaction to his method of garbage-disposal. Where else are you to put it if not on the street? That, surely, is better than keeping it inside the house? If he could see the chamber-pots in old-fashioned English cottages, he might well be shocked. And he would certainly be disgusted to learn that the cottagers usually took only one bath a week and wore the same clothes for a week before they washed them. As for the bareness of his own house, he would prefer it to the clutter of their parlours; crammed with useless furniture and dust-catching draperies - yet without a single shrine! He would perhaps advise them to try cow-dung on their floors; it is an excellent antiseptic.

(RD 4-5)

Further on:

The British in India at that period must have seemed strange, paradoxical beings to any detached observer. They were imperialists with bad consciences. They were builders...who were nevertheless ceaselessly engaged in the piecemeal conquest of a nation. For the Indians, who did not want them, they sacrificed their health and their lives, going back to England prematurely aged, yellow-faced, on crutches, to die.... Many were deeply devout and felt that they had accepted voluntary exile in this savage and unhealthy land in order to do God’s work among the benighted. What
almost none of them seem to have been aware of was that they were in the most religious country in the world. (RD 39)

What must not be lost sight of is that Isherwood himself had a bad conscience when he wrote this. Empire-bashing was serving the dual purpose of once again getting his own back at the country he had left and also of assuaging his own guilt at disliking Bengal, and by extension India, on his two trips to the country which he himself doubtless also regarded to some extent as being ‘savage and unhealthy.’

While there can be very little doubt that continual censorship and vetoing by Belur Math ensured that Isherwood never got to write about Ramakrishna the way he would most have liked to, it also cannot be denied that the story he had been given to write was porous enough to allow for numerous points of entry for the King-and-Country-hating, theatre-loving, humorous, ‘infantile’ British biographer.20

As we can gather from what was originally meant to be his introduction to Ramakrishna and his Disciples, and was separately published as An Approach to Vedanta, written in 1958, the idea of sainthood was not one he was totally opposed to or found totally uninspiring. He speaks of his adoption of the ideal of the Artist in the mid-20’s. According to this conception the Artist stands alone in his superiority of the ability of perception. ‘He is presented as a holy figure - a martyr and in his own way a saint’ (AV 11, my emphasis). But once he became a Vedantist he started to find everybody saintly. When he met Sybil Thorndyke on 31 December, 1956 he found her more wonderful than he had expected and wrote in his journal the next day, ‘She is a sort of saint - if only because, as an actress, she still doesn’t seem to give a damn what sort of an
impression she creates’ (D 672). Isherwood once noticed a ten-year-old boy, probably named Jonathan, who regularly came to lectures at the Santa Barbara Mission. ‘He has something extraordinary in his smile. Maybe he’s a junior saint’ (D 684). On 18 June 1957 he wrote that he believed it when Huxley – at Stravinsky’s seventy-fifth birthday concert – called the composer ‘a saint of music’ (D 704). When he looked into the interior of Dorothy Brett’s cottage at Taos, he thought it was ‘such an innocent interior – like the home of a saint’ (D 712). On 23 August 1957, we find him describing Krishna, also known as George, as someone ‘so radioactive with love that he’s the only person around whom one could dream of calling a saint’ (D 717). This, in 1977, about Auden’s mother: ‘I thought his mother, in other circumstances, might have become a nun, even a saint’ (Scobie, ‘The Youth’ 29). For a man who is constantly finding the saintly everywhere it is only a matter of time before he starts to find it in himself as well.

However, this being Isherwood he would not say quite so blatantly that he was saintly. He would bring performance into it. Hence describing his social service visits to Long Beach Hospital he says, ‘But Christopher couldn’t resist milking a little melodrama from the situation. He pointedly didn’t wear a hospital gown and did sit on beds.’ When he was behaving in this way, he was ‘posing as a fearless Francis of Assisi’ (LY 240).

A Vedantic viewpoint became second nature to Isherwood. It was easy for him to apply Vedantic terms of reference to subjects not obviously so. He once spoke about the effect the West Coast had on him, and tellingly he singled out a quality of California that is perfectly in keeping with the Isherwood we have seen so far. He said,

In a way this country is fundamentally desert country. It has been adapted and planted and settled, but there is always a mirage about it. I
like that. As a devotee of Hindu philosophy, to me it’s very much like the Hindu account of the universe as being a kind of projection, or Maya.

(Hart 450)

On 26 August 1971 Isherwood started writing an account of his years 1945 to 1951 from the diary entries he had of that period of his life. This is the first time that he writes about the time after he had met and had become the disciple of Swami Prabhavananda. However since the motive for the book was not so much to highlight his relationship with the Swami but to be more frank about the life he was leading in California then, there is not much about the Swami worth commenting on. Two years after the death of Swami Prabhavananda in 1975, Isherwood was beginning to think seriously about writing about their relationship. He told Peter Burton that their relationship was an ‘Anglo-Indian confrontation’:

Although I was a strong anti-Imperialist I was nevertheless child of Imperial Britain ... and I had inherited guilt towards India and all those other places. Now the Swami, before he became a monk, had belonged to a terrorist organisation against the British. So we were really confrontees, and this of course, led as it so often does to a strong mutual liking. (Burton 58)

He continued to speak of the confrontational and the ‘funny’ element when his account of the relationship, *My Guru and His Disciple*, was published in 1980. He told Douglas Young, ‘The new book...is novelistic in form. A comedy. An interplay of two
individuals which could easily have been turned into fiction’ (Young 9). In other words, this could very well have been another re-working of the theme of *A Meeting by the River*, only told with a different agenda. But what should not be overlooked is the constant emphasis on the comic element. In case of the novel Isherwood believes it did not succeed because the comic element was not brought out well enough, and in case of the autobiography he clearly states that it is meant to be a comedy.

In *My Guru and his Disciple* Swami Prabhavananda becomes a character like any of Isherwood’s other characters, imbued with typically Isherwoodian traits. It goes without saying that since the Swami is to be presented sympathetically he is to have a sense of humour, a well-developed sense of theatre and a sense of being an overgrown child - traits marked in every major character since Isherwood’s earliest creations. Mention has already been made of the Swami’s perceived boyishness in the eyes of Isherwood. He attributes the Swami’s early difficulties in public-speaking to ‘beginner’s stage fright’ (GD 34). He notices that the Swami ‘has a taste for very elegant, pointed shoes’ (GD 48). Here it may be mentioned that this observation establishes a sartorial link with perhaps the first guru of Isherwood’s life: we read about ‘Mr. Holmes’ in *Lions and Shadows* that he wore ‘small neat brown shoes’ (LS 7). If the Swami is to put up a credible performance he should have much that is unique about him. In this connection his speech mannerisms, his accented English becomes convenient in drawing his character. Hence he says, ‘Eternal youth’ instead of ‘Eternal youth’ (GD 86). He calls Isherwood ‘Krees’ instead of ‘Chris’ (GD 102). Richard, one of the lodgers at the Brahmananda Cottage, finds it easy to mimic the Swami when in reply to a play-acted
question about the difficulty of meditating amid the cares of the world, he says, ‘Aw wairl, jarst try to think of Gard okezzhionally’ (GD 108). The Swami reminds Isherwood of actors at the strangest times. For instance, when the Swami once launched into gossip about the progress or lack thereof at the various Vedanta Centres around the U.S. Isherwood finds him ‘funny and charming in a hard-boiled way, like a veteran actor reminiscing about show biz’ (GD 312). For Isherwood it was difficult to believe that the Swami could ever really be angry. Hence he writes, ‘When Swami lost his temper, I found his performance altogether convincing’ (GD 111). Whether or not the Swami’s performance of anger seems much too genuine to be a performance one aspect of the monk that is equally important to Isherwood is his sense of humour. We are told that when the Swami heard about Richard’s mimicking of him he was ‘delighted’ (GD 108). Similarly, once, at a puja, when he was about to ‘asperse the assembled devotees…he burst out laughing and exclaimed, “You look so funny sitting there!”’ His laughter shattered the gravity of this ancient ritual and made it now and new’ (GD 241). Till the end of his life the Swami, Isherwood is keen to stress, never quite lost that ability to smile. When on June 1 1976 the Swami was taken out of the intensive care unit but kept under cardiac observation Isherwood sees it all as ‘a rehearsal of dying.’ The Swami’s face is occasionally seen to have ‘a wondering blissful smile on it’ (GD 331). The Swami experienced what he would probably call ‘ananda mrtu’ or ‘blissful death’ just after midnight on 4 July 1976. Keeping in mind all that has been discussed in this chapter it is only to be expected that the Swami would conform not only to the prototype of the Isherwood character but would also, by virtue of those same characteristic personality features, be the embodiment of ‘the illumined soul’, the yogi who has been able to effect
his own union with the Brahman. By that time the ‘yogi’ had become for Isherwood someone who had to be child-like, had to have a sense of comedy because without those two features spiritual development would not be possible.

1 Christopher Isherwood, letter to E. M. Forster, 8 July (1933), Modern Archive Centre, King’s College, U of Cambridge.

2 Christopher Isherwood, letter to E.M. Forster, 29 April (1939), Modern Archive Centre, King’s College, U of Cambridge.

3 Christopher Isherwood, letter to John Lehmann, 7 July (1939), Beinecke Lib., Yale U.


5 Christopher Isherwood, letter to John Lehmann, 19 September (1942), Beinecke Lib., Yale U.

6 Christopher Isherwood, letter to Peter Gamble, 17 April (1940), Christopher Isherwood Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, U of Texas at Austin.

7 In response to my observation that Isherwood ultimately acknowledged to some extent that his artistic talent came from Kathleen and Frank, Mr. Bachardy agreed and said, ‘…Well, taking him to see Sarah Bernhardt! That made a great impression on him - something Chris never forgot.’ Niladri Chatterjee, ‘Portrait of the Artist as Companion: Interviews with Don Bachardy.’ The Isherwood Century, 104.

8 Christopher Isherwood, ‘What Vedanta Means To Me,’ Vedanta and the West (September/October 1951, Vol. XIV, No. 5) p. 158. All subsequent references in the text as WV.

9 Christopher Isherwood, ‘Vivekananda’s Centenary,’ Vivekananda Centenary Memorial Volume ed. R.C. Mazumdar, (Calcutta, 1963) 532. All subsequent references in the text as VC.

10 Christopher Isherwood, ‘Letters of Swami Vivekananda’, Vedanta and the West (No. 194, 1968) p. 19. All subsequent references of the text as LSV.

11 Christopher I sherwood, letter to John Lehmann, 21 June (1944), Beinecke Lib., Yale University.


14 Christopher Isherwood, ‘Who Is Ramakrishna?’, Vedanta and the West, (July/August 1957, Vol. XX No. 4) 14. All subsequent references in the text as WiR.

15 Christopher Isherwood, ‘The Home of Ramakrishna’, Vedanta and the West (July/August 1958 Vol. XXI No. 4) 21. All subsequent references in the text as HoR.

16 Christopher Isherwood, letter to Gerald Hamilton, 26 September 1963. Christopher Isherwood Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, U of Texas at Austin.

17 ‘Swami is quite capable of getting sick in order to work on someone’s feelings; though I doubt if he realises this about himself’ (GD 278).

18 Christopher Isherwood, ‘Presidential Address At the Evening Session on 1.1.64’, Parliament of Religions, pub. Swami Sambuddhananda (Calcutta, 1965) 378. All subsequent references in the text as PoR.

19 Christopher Isherwood, ‘Some Great Devotees’, Vedanta and the West (No. 163, September/October 1963) p. 43.

20 It is Magnus Hirshfeld who classified Isherwood as ‘infantile’ (CK 28).