

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD



L i b e r a t i o n

Diaries 1970-1983

**Edited and Introduced by Katherine Bucknell
Preface by Edmund White**

LIBERATION
DIARIES, VOLUME THREE:
1970–1983

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Preface

Readers of novels often fall into the bad habit of being overly exacting about the characters' moral flaws. They apply to these fictional beings standards that no one they know in real life could possibly meet—nor could they themselves. They condemn a heroine, say, for not facing and condemning her lover's ethical cowardice on some fine point of inner struggle; both her failure and his would scarcely be perceptible in real life. Sometimes it almost feels as if readers, in discussing a book, are showing off, are eager to display a refinement that no one would bother with in the heat of actual experience. In real life everyone is too busy, too submerged in the murk of getting and spending, too greedy to survive and even to prevail to be able to make much out of moral niceties. In any event, friends are always too willing to forgive lapses that they scarcely notice and if they register are sure to share and be eager to pardon. Real life is so rough-and-tumble, so clamorous, a bit like an over-amplified rock band on drugs; only in the shaded purlieus of fiction do we catch the tinkling strains of moral elegance coming from another room.

I mention all this because reading the several thousand pages of Isherwood's complete journals is a instructive corrective to the prissiness of reading fiction. Isherwood, whom most of us would consider to be nearly saintly if we knew him personally, had faults that we'd say were unforgivable in a novel (he was careful to distance himself from these very faults in his autobiographical fiction). He was seriously anti-Semitic and a year never goes by in his journals that he doesn't attribute an enemy's or acquaintance's bad behaviour to his Jewishness. I suppose some people would argue that the British gentry are or at least *were* like that, or that he grew up in another epoch and should not be held to the standards of today. I don't think that that defense quite works. After all, Isherwood lived in Berlin in the late 1920s and early 1930s and experienced first-hand the rise of Hitler to power and witnessed directly the appalling effect of the Nazis on the lives of his Jewish friends. Later he lived in Los Angeles for four decades and worked closely with many Jews; his milieu would never have accepted his anti-Semitism had it been declared. Moreover, he knew perfectly well that every word he wrote, even in these journals, would eventually be published, so one can't even argue that he was simply sounding off in notes not meant for anyone else's eyes.

Then he is a dreadful hypochondriac and in spite of all his much-vaunted spirituality terrified of the least ailment. He worries obsessively about his weight and berates himself when he's a pound or two up on the scale, though he seldom weighs more than 150. He worries constantly (with good reason) about his drinking ("I do hate it so," he admits).

And then he can be quite nasty about women friends and their writing. When he travels down to Essex to see Dodie Beesley he reads her novel and says, 'It is *exactly* what I feared: one of those pattern-paws romances, a little kiss here, a little wistful regret there, one affair is broken off, another starts up in *Magazine* writing. What's wrong with it, actually? It's so pleased with itself, so fucking smug, so snugly cunt, the art of women who are delighted with themselves, who indulge themselves and who patronize their men. They *know* that there is nothing, there *can* be nothing outside of the furry rim

their cunts and their kitchens, their children and their clubs.” Then, in a reversal typical of Isherwood he writes, “. . . I am indulging in the luxury of being brutal about it because I know I will have to be polite about it to Dodie tomorrow—I also know that I shall *want* to be polite, because I do respect her and she is indeed so much wiser and subtler and better than this silly book.”

Oh, yes, he’s full of faults and yet I think any fair-minded reader who applies to Isherwood the very approximate demands of life and not the overly exacting standards of fiction will have to admit that he or she has seldom spent so much time with someone so generally admirable. To say so in no way mitigates the obnoxiousness of his real faults. But we should forgive him with the same liberality we apply to ourselves and our friends.

He loves his partner Don Bachardy with a constant devotion that is almost unparalleled in my experience. In the preceding volume, which covered the 1960s, Bachardy was endlessly quarrelsome and difficult. But in this volume, the last, which covers the final decade of Isherwood’s life, Bachardy has achieved a measure of worldly success as an artist and has escaped the confines of domesticity enough to enjoy plenty of sexual adventures—enough to catch up with all the sex Isherwood himself had enjoyed in his youth in England, Germany and America. In total contrast to the anger and spite of the 1960s, in this volume Don is endlessly playful and affectionate and kind, and Isherwood (who was thirty years older) is deliriously happy. His main regret about dying is that he must leave Don, though as a Hindu he must have imagined he’d join Don in a future life.

After he has lunch with a friend called Bob Register who is having problems with his love life, Isherwood writes: “So of course I handed out lots of admirable advice, which I would do well to follow, myself. Don’t try to make the relationship exclusive. Try to make your part of it so special that nobody can interfere with it even if he has an affair with your lover. Remember that physical tenderness is actually more important than the sex act itself.” We learn that Chris and Don no longer have sex but that they consider their relationship to be very physical; they sleep together and they are constantly touching each other. At a certain point Chris writes, “I’m glad people have had crushes on me, glad I used to be cute; it is a very sustaining feeling.” I remember the ancient Virgil Thomson once telling me in Key West that he, too, had had a lot of sexual allure and success in his day.

We seldom count a happy marriage as a real accomplishment and yet it so clearly is—it is virtually an *aesthetic* achievement. It requires the same sense of proportion, creativity, empathy, patience, perseverance, equanimity and generosity of spirit as does the making of a novel or play. Isherwood’s happy marriage with a tempestuous young man is, unlike the writing of a novel, a *collaborative* act (that way it’s more like preparing a play—and not incidentally Chris and Don were constantly working on film and theater scripts together). Anyone who has ever had a happy marriage knows that it is never stable, never finished; it changes every day and is always being created or at least celebrated anew. I suppose in that sense it is like cooking, something that requires a skill that can be acquired over time but that needs to be done every day from scratch. Isherwood understands the vagaries of love better than anyone and he feels (partly to Bachardy but largely to the gods) *gratitude*, the most appropriate of all the amorous emotions.

Another thing we admire about Isherwood is his seriousness and his curiosity. His reading lists reveal how far-flung his interests are and how deep they go. He is constantly reading demanding books that inform him about every aspect of the world past and present. At one moment, by no means atypical, he is reading Solzhenitsyn’s *The First Circle*, Trollope’s *The Eustace Diamonds* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. His curiosity about the people around him is equally far-reaching. He wants to know what everyone is up to. His old friends—especially David Hockney, Hockney’s erstwhile lover Peter Schlesinger, W.H. Auden, Tony Richardson, his neighbor Jo Masselink, and o

course the whole Vedanta crew starting with Swami—make nearly monthly, sometimes weekly or even daily appearances. When Isherwood travels to New York he sees the composer Virgil Thomson and when he goes to England he sees E.M. Forster and the beautiful ballet dancer Wayne Sleep (portrayed in a wonderful canvas by Hockney) and travels north to visit his strange, alcoholic brother Richard.

For me this book sometimes felt like old-home week since I know or knew Virgil and Hockney and Howard Schuman and Gloria Vanderbilt and Edward Albee and Dennis Altman and Lauren Bacall and Allen Ginsberg and Gore Vidal and Brian Bedford and Lesley Blanch and Paul Bowles and William Burroughs and Truman Capote and Aaron Copland and on and on. I never met Jim Charlton but towards the end of his life he sent me dozens of letters that were nearly incoherent. I drop all the names because I suppose I feel that I can testify that Isherwood is accurate in his depictions and almost too generous in his assessments.

We learn how important Forster was to Isherwood; at one point he even considers writing about both Swami and Forster and calling it *My Two Gurus* (of course what he did was to write about Swami alone in *My Guru and His Disciple*, a book I praised in the *Sunday New York Times Book Review*). He seems delighted when Forster tells him that Vanessa Bell “was much easier to get along with than her sister, and how Virginia would suddenly turn on you and attack you.” He admires Forster’s equanimity, his relationship with his policeman friend, Bob Buckingham, and Buckingham’s wife May.

Isherwood was extremely important to me but I was just a blip on his screen as I learned reading his book. He gave me a blurb for my 1980 book *States of Desire*, though he told me he hadn’t liked my earlier arty fiction. In those two novels he’d seen the bad influence of Nabokov, he claimed (*Lolita* he’d once dismissed as the best travel book anyone had written about America). I saw him and Don in New York and again in Los Angeles and I talked to him several times on the phone (he told me that he didn’t have the patience to answer letters but that he was happy to receive telephone calls). In the years that followed I would mention in interviews that Isherwood and Nabokov were the two writers who’d had the most influence on me, just as a few years later Michel Foucault in Paris became my last mentor—in spite of himself, since he didn’t believe in being or having a mentor. Perhaps it is my fault that Nabokov, Isherwood and Foucault, the three men who had the greatest intellectual impact on me would have had to scratch their heads to remember anything about me or even my name.

We learn so much in this book precisely because it is so detailed and daily. We hear about the earthquakes, mostly small and soon over. We learn how much Chris hates to travel. We hear about his money fears (at a certain moment he is triumphant because he has \$74,000 in savings). When he asks Don how he will respond to his death, Don assures him he’ll give him a great send-off. Chris refers to himself several times as a “ham” who loves to show off in public and please crowds. We realize through a few hints that he, Chris, still has a sex life with various young and less young men.

Isherwood had spent most of his life in the closet, as anyone of his generation and social class would have, but in this volume he is relieved when an English journalist, almost in passing, refers to him directly and without hedging as a homosexual. In *Kathleen and Frank*, his memoir about his parents which he wrote during the period covered by this volume, he comes out in print for the first time. To be sure, he’d written frequently about homosexuals previously, notably in the groundbreaking novel *A Single Man*, but only now in the 1970s was he “out” in his own right, clearly and openly, without any screen of fiction between him and the reader. In the seventies he took an interest in gay politics, attended a few gay events and gave talks to gay groups. At one point he admitted quite frankly that part of his original attraction to Vedanta lay in the fact that it accepted him as

homosexual.

Like any old man or woman he is surrounded by dying friends and family members. Isherwood unusually calm and undramatic about these deaths (including that of his brother Richard), but he never unfeeling. Perhaps because he thought so much about his own approaching death, he was able to take the death of his generation and of his elders in stride.

Even in old age Isherwood is still very much the working writer, sometimes collaborating with Bachardy (on a joint volume of texts and drawings called *October*, for instance), most often working alone. We learn that Bachardy had a true gift for naming things. Just as he'd thought up the title *Single Man* in the sixties, now *My Guru and His Disciple* and *Christopher and His Kind* were among the titles he suggested to Isherwood. Constantly Isherwood, like any writer, is lamenting his laziness and lack of progress, but somehow or other the old nag or "Dobbin" as he calls himself plods on toward the finish line. He is also hard at work on film scripts and theatrical adaptations of his various "properties," though he had nothing to do with *Cabaret*, the musical and movie that made him the most money and earned him the widest fame (nor did he much like *Cabaret*, though he was attracted to Michael York).

Isherwood had a personality that sparkled. When he entered a room everyone sat forward and smiled. He avoided all the accoutrements of the famous man. He asked questions and listened to answers. He refused to be complimented and if some earnest young admirer persisted, Isherwood broke into a whinny of laughter. His laugh could be deflating; once I called him from Key West to read him the end of Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* in which the author seizes his cross and walks bravely down into his grave. I was in tears but Chris thought it all so absurd that he laughed uncontrollably and I was puzzled then offended then (slightly) enlightened—I could just begin to see it was all pretty silly. When my ex, Keith McDermott, played in a theatrical adaptation of one of Chris's novels, I remember that all the Hindu monks in the play were endlessly laughing in ways a Christian divine would have considered beneath his dignity. Laughter for Chris could be deflating or just merry or impertinent—or divine, the very sound the planets make as they dance their eternal dance.

He was still startlingly handsome with his piercing eyes, shaggy eyebrows, straight nose and downturned mouth which was constantly turning up in a smile. He had a lot of charm but his charm did not stand in the way of his expressing strong opinions, especially about literature. How open writers are with one another is partly a question of nationality (the English are thick-skinned, the French thin-skinned, the Americans very thin-skinned) and generation (writers in the nineteenth century were much franker than twentieth-century writers). Isherwood came from a knock-about world of confident, upper-middle-class men and women from Oxford or Cambridge; they never minced words, any more than Martin Amis or Christopher Hitchens mince words now.

But of course he wasn't really one of his old London crowd. He'd been a pacifist and had moved to America on the brink of World War II, which had earned him the enmity of most of his countrymen—and of some Brits even to this day. He was openly gay; sophisticated heterosexuals treat gays as if they're a bad joke that's gone on too long. Tiresome. A bit silly. Tiresome and juvenile. And then, worst of all, he was a Hindu. That seemed a very "period" thing to be in Britain, something out of the dubious, not quite hygienic mysteries of Madame Blavatsky, a pure product of the 1890s. In America Hinduism was more puzzling than anything ("Why didn't he go directly on to Zen?" most of us wondered; Hinduism seemed to Zen what Jung seemed to Freud: seedy, not very rigorous, slightly embarrassing).

He was a wonderful host, and that's how I choose to recall him. Carefully dressed, he'd climb out of an easy chair and greet a friend warmly, show him around his house. I remember seeing a photo of the very young Don with Marilyn Monroe and Chris with Joan Crawford ("our dates," Chris emphasized). In his study he showed me a school picture of Auden and himself, something he kept close by. He mentioned Tennessee Williams ("We had an affair in the 1940s when we were both still rather presentable"). There were Hockneys to be seen and works by other artist friends and of course Don's studio to be visited. If we drove to a nearby restaurant for dinner Chris lay down in the back seat (Chris was driving Don mad with all my wincing, so if I lie down I don't see anything or complain"). It gratified me that even if I was a very marginal player in his drama, nevertheless he accorded me a measure of his warmth and cleverness and kindness, if only for an evening.

Edmund White

New York City

February 25, 2011

Introduction

In his novels and autobiographies, Isherwood typically traces one thread at a time—a single character or relationship, at most a milieu in cross-section over a short period. In the pages of his diaries, he weaves together, entry by entry, week by week, the surprisingly diverse areas of his life, every thread touching upon, reinforcing, and contrasting with every other thread, so that the rich cloth of his own life also portrays the fleeting sensibility of his time. The pages teem with personalities, but even as Isherwood becomes an icon of the gay liberation movement and a sought-after participant in the celebrity culture which burgeoned in the 1970s, he continues to tell us as much about his housekeeper, his doctor, the boy trimming his hedge, or his weird and reclusive brother in the north of England as he does about David Bowie or John Travolta, Elton John or Jon Voight. Isherwood was fond of a great many people. He was a practiced, self-conscious charmer who worked hard to draw others to him. Some of his acquaintances and friends have been surprised and upset by what he wrote about them in his diaries, concluding that he withheld from them in life his true opinion recorded secretly. But what he wrote in the diaries is not what he *secretly* thought, it is what he *also* thought, on the particular day when he wrote it. It is part of a complete portrait that is perhaps never even completable. To him, every human individual was comprised of many traits; he found the so-called bad traits just as interesting and sometimes more attractive than the so-called good traits. Here is what he wrote about the woman his doctor he selected in his old age to see him out of the world: “She’s a nonstop talker, an egomaniac, a show-biz snob, and extremely sympathetic. Don’s in favor of her, too.”¹ And he criticized nobody more harshly in his diaries than he criticized himself and his companion, the American painter Don Bachardy, whose physical glamour and creative vitality transfigured Isherwood’s last thirty-three years.

Throughout his writing life, Isherwood urged himself to work at his diary more often. In 1977, he wrote, “isolated diary entries are almost worthless . . . the more I read the later diaries, the more I see how worthwhile diary keeping is.”² He tracked his weight, his sleeping patterns, his trips to the gym, his illnesses and injuries; he recorded chance encounters, fragments of dialogue, and jokes, along with the more obviously important progress of his books and film scripts, his private life and his friendships, his teaching and public appearances. Thomas Mann once wrote that “only the exhaustive is truly interesting”;³ for Isherwood a more accurate phrase might be only the exhaustive is truly illuminating. He wanted to make a record of the whole human creature in context, in its natural habitat, so that he could consider and analyse its habits and commitments, its rituals and choices. He used his diaries as raw material for his novels and autobiographies, but also as a place to evaluate his life and decide whether to change his course. As a follower of Ramakrishna, he meditated almost every day for nearly fifty years, training himself to withdraw from his ego and study it from the outside; this complemented his diary writing, further developing his detachment and making his powers of observation the more acute.

But he was also looking for something more. He was a follower of Freud, too, and above all Jung

and he believed that he could edge the unconscious, the rich inner life, out into the open if he took note of everything it was delivering into the conscious arena. He kept a constant watch at the threshold between the inner and the outer worlds, impatient for new pieces of information, monitoring the revealing accretions of facial expression, posture, gesture, dress, casual gossip, dreams, all of which form the backdrop for premeditated speech and deliberate action. He jotted down coincidences, synchronicities, and numinous dates, trawling among them for clues to a hidden trajectory, a unrecognized mythology. Any stray detail could be the all-important detail that might unlock hidden meaning. His appetite for this hidden meaning increased as he grew older because he began to look upon the threshold separating the conscious and the unconscious mind as the very threshold which was separating him from death. Over his disciplines of observation and assessment hovered an ultimate goal: absolute knowledge might bring absolute liberation.

At the end of the 1960s, Isherwood and Bachardy began to work together writing plays and movie scripts. Collaborating brought them enormous pleasure, but in order to make money they had to keep several proposals going at one time. As this diary makes clear, they were well aware that whatever work they put in might eventually come to nothing because every project waited for the interest of a studio boss or a theatrical backer who could finance it, and then for a director and actors—preferably stars—who were equally committed and could make themselves available all at the same time. The diary charts how they and a number of their friends—writers like Ben Masselink, Jim Bridges, Ivan Moffat, Gavin Lambert, Gore Vidal, Tennessee Williams, directors like Tony Richardson, John Schlesinger, John Boorman—had to adapt their talents constantly according to changing tastes and changing social values, and new technology. Throughout the 1970s, formats also changed more quickly than ever before, sometimes for unpredictable commercial reasons, as story-telling possibilities diversified from feature films into television, including live T.V. drama, T.V. serials, and made-for-T.V. films, and videotapes.

While Isherwood was working on his books and Bachardy painting or drawing every day, they remained alert to script writing opportunities. These came haphazardly, as individualized whims of the popular culture of the day, someone else's idea of what would sell. One of the few projects which they themselves originated, making a play out of Isherwood's novel *A Meeting by the River*, occupied them off and on for a number of years. It had some success in small staging, but made a resounding flop on Broadway in 1979. Actors, directors, and agents were mercilessly sketched by Isherwood in his diaries as he and Bachardy struggled to get the play put on. During the spring of 1970, Isherwood spent a month alone in England, waiting around for occasional meetings about a production that never happened; he endured this lonely episode of anticipation and disillusionment by socializing extravagantly and by making a vivid record of swinging London in his diary.

Such episodes amount to a kind of cautionary tale. In fact, Isherwood was almost indifferent to the ultimate fate of the stage and screen writing he did with Bachardy. A novel was entirely his to control, but plays and screenplays depended on the input of countless other people. As a longtime Hollywood writer, once he had sold his contribution, he tried to forget about it. In 1973, when he and Bachardy watched the television film of their "Frankenstein: The True Story," they were both horrified at what had been done with their work, yet he wrote: "the life we have together makes all such disasters unimportant, even funny. . . ."4

Never the less, their script went on to win Best Scenario at the International Festival of Fantastic and Scientific Films in 1976. In fact, the gothic fantasy was an ideal subject for them, and the version reflects their life together in a number of revealing ways. They made Frankenstein's creature

beautiful, thus uncovering the Pygmalion myth latent in Mary Shelley's story and recasting it as a coded tale for their tribe. Their "monster" is presented as a suitable love object, and he stands for the "monstrous" homosexual—as George feels certain his neighbors see him in *A Single Man*—who in 1973 when "Frankenstein: The True Story" was broadcast in the U.S. would still have been a shocking subject for television. But their monster's beauty is betrayed by his makers. The creative process is reversed through a scientific error, and he begins to show on his face and body the moral decay of Dr. Frankenstein and his assistant Henry Clerval—as if he were the portrait and they the living original in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Plenty have looked upon Bachardy as Isherwood's creature. Certainly he was a great beauty whom Isherwood met him on the beach in Santa Monica in the early 1950s; he was preternaturally intelligent, strangely innocent for all his apparent sexual precocity, and still genuinely unformed. Isherwood once wrote that what he most adored about the very young Bachardy was that, "He is so desperately alive";⁵ in a grimly funny sense, this is exactly the problem with Frankenstein's creature. But although Isherwood took Bachardy travelling, encouraged him to read, to converse, to go to college, to go to art school, to pursue his talent to the maximum, he could not make him happy. And so the creative process reversed, and moral ugliness began to show in the perfect boy. In their script the struggles of Frankenstein's creature hilariously exaggerate Bachardy's predicament; and the sleazy Edwardian charm of Dr. Polidori—the mad, malevolent scientist they added to the story and named after Byron's real life physician, John Polidori—mocks Isherwood's own. Indeed, Polidori and most of their characters seem to have walked out of the pre-Monty Python fantasy world which Isherwood invented with his boyhood friend Edward Upward in the 1920s and which they called Mortmere.

Isherwood was mildly contemptuous of the Universal executives and their enthusiasm for "Frankenstein." "When people say it is a 'classic,'" he wrote, "they really mean only that the maker is a classic, as long as Boris Karloff wears it."⁶ Nevertheless, he was flattered to be wanted by the striving world of commercial television, and it was easy for him to share in their nostalgia for the lost atmosphere of his own cinema-besotted childhood. "It pleases my vanity that I am still employable and that my wits are still quick enough to play these nursery games."⁷ Outsiders suspected Bachardy's contribution, much as they had suspected the relationship since it began. In one studio meeting, an executive seemed to Isherwood to be "astonished to hear that Don had *any* opinion of his own. No doubt Don is being soundly bitched already as a boyfriend . . . brought along for the ride."⁸ Isherwood found the rudeness toward Bachardy close to unbearable, and neither he nor Bachardy had any illusions about the authenticity or indeed the difficulty of their collaboration. The diary reveals that they both felt impatient with Bachardy's inexperience as a scriptwriter: "Don is upset because he feels he is a drag on me. Actually he is and he isn't. . . . without him I wouldn't work on the fucking thing at all. And he does very often have good and even brilliant ideas."⁹ As they thrashed about trying to bring their story to a close, Isherwood records proof of this:

. . . we have made one tremendous breakthrough, entirely due to Don. He has had the brilliant idea that the Creature shall carry Polidor[i] up the mast and that they shall both be struck by the same bolt of lightning—killing Polidor[i] and invigorating the Creature! This is a perfect example of cinematic symbolism. For, as Don at once pointed out, it was always Polidor[i] who hated electricity and Henry (now part of the Creature) who believed in it.¹⁰

Polidori is past his prime, and his hands have been eaten away to mere claws by an accident with his chemicals, symbolizing his moral deformity—his craze for power. But because of his hands, Polidori

the monomaniac, cannot work alone. As it happens, Isherwood was suffering from Dupuytren's Contracture, which was deforming and disabling his own left hand. He had been having trouble typing for some time, and so, experienced, bossy and power hungry though Isherwood was, Bachardy typed everything when they worked together. In September 1971, just after the "Frankenstein" script was finished, Isherwood had surgery to alleviate the condition.

The image of the aging scientist electrocuted by the very bolt which rejuvenates the Creature also makes fun of the changing dynamic in the sexual relationship between Isherwood and Bachardy, and Bachardy now had more partners and Isherwood fewer. And it resonates with the fact that Bachardy's career was taking off. About a year before writing "Frankenstein," in September 1970, he was the only portrait artist included in a group show organized by Billy Al Bengston and hung in Bengston's studio. The other artists were Ed Moses, Larry Bell, Joe Goode, Tony Berlant, Ed Ruscha, Ron Davis, Ken Price, and Peter Alexander. These were some of the most exciting and successful American painters, printmakers, and sculptors of Bachardy's generation, mostly Californians. A few of them became friends, and their names appear more and more in Isherwood's diary from 1970 onward as Bachardy introduced them into Isherwood's life. Bachardy recalls that they were a somewhat macho group, in which being gay was barely acceptable, although it helped that Isherwood was an older, established writer.¹¹ Such a nuance demonstrates that Bachardy was admired by the best of his contemporaries for the quality of his work—in spite of being somebody's attractive young boyfriend rather than because of it.

Around this time, Bachardy was also taken on by a new dealer, Nicholas Wilder. During the 1970s Wilder was to become the most influential contemporary art dealer in Los Angeles. He discovered and promoted a number of West Coast artists and showed Hockney, Helen Frankenthaler, Barney Newman, and Cy Twombly. Wilder offered Bachardy an exhibition of his black and white portraits, drawings, and Bachardy decided to show Wilder his recent color portraits, which nobody but Isherwood and Bachardy's previous dealer, Irving Blum, had seen: large-scale, head-and-shoulders images painted on paper in limpid water-based acrylics.¹² According to Isherwood:

Don was very dubious about the paintings, afraid that Nick would be put off by them—which was only natural, after the negative reactions of Irving Blum. But I argued that a dealer is like a lawyer; you can't afford to have secrets from him if you want him to represent you, and Don agreed and we finally picked out about a dozen paintings—that's to say mostly the blotty watercolors.

Well, to Don's amazement and to my much smaller amazement but huge joy and relief, Nick loved the watercolors and was altogether impressed by Don's versatility and said that he wanted to give Don a show in which the whole front room of the gallery is full of watercolors with a few drawings in the back room. And, when we met Nick again, yesterday evening, at the opening of the show of Charles Hill's work, Nick told Don that he had nearly called him that afternoon, because he can't get your painting out of my mind."¹³

Only two of the paintings sold, yet Bachardy considers the exhibition was his successful public launch as a painter.¹⁴

Bachardy's growing self-confidence added to Isherwood's contentment. In December 1970 Isherwood describes their life together as "my idea of the 'earthly paradise.'"¹⁵ He longed to write about the mysterious beauty of their relationship. In March 1971, he had begun a notebook about himself and Bachardy in their secret animal identities—Bachardy as the vulnerable and irresistible "Kitty" with unpredictable claws, Isherwood as the stubborn workhorse "Dobbin"—but he felt the

any such project about their attachment was impossible:

I shall never, as long as we are together, be able to fully feel or describe to myself all that our love means; it is much much too close to me. Don tells me from time to time that I should write about it but how? Even my attempt to keep a diary of the Animals has failed. I can't see any of the things objectively. Any more than I can really grasp what Swami means and has meant to me, in an entirely different way.¹⁶

The following summer he observed, "the objection is, as always, that I feel it is a kind of sacrilege to write about the Animals at all, except privately."¹⁷

Only in his diaries was he able to record scraps of detail about himself and Bachardy. On Christmas Eve 1973, driving to a Palm Springs house party hosted by John Schlesinger, they talked at length of the form into which their relationship was settling and of Bachardy's present attitude toward various aspects of his life. Isherwood's account of their conversation implies they no longer had sex with one another and that, by mutual agreement, Bachardy looked for that with others:

I asked how he feels about his meditation and he said that it is now definitely part of his life but that he doesn't at all share my reliance on Swami as a guru. "If anybody's my guru, you are." Well, that's okay, as long as he merely believes in my belief in Swami. Then I asked him about sex. He said that he doesn't mind our not having sex together any more; he agreed with me that our relationship is still very physical. The difficulty is that what he now wants is a sex object, not a big relationship, because he's got that with me. But no attractive boy wants to be a sex object; he wants to be a big relationship. I suppose I knew all this, kind of. But it was good to talk about it. Our long drives in the car are now almost our only opportunities to have real talks. As Don himself says, he is obsessed by time and always feels in a hurry, unless he is actually getting on with doing something. He says that there are now quite often moments, while he is drawing, when he feels that this is the one thing he really wants to do and experiences a great joy that he is actually doing it. But, even during the drawing, he says that he also feels harassed because he isn't drawing as quickly and economically as he could wish.¹⁸

They still slept together, and Bachardy recalls that this kept them physically close. Sex had dwindled only because it no longer seemed necessary. In fact, they did have sex on several occasions after this conversation, "as an instinctive means of reassuring ourselves that it was still plausible, that nothing had basically changed between us."¹⁹ But the passionate sexual jealousy and conflicts of the 1960s were behind them, and other aspects of their relationship had become relatively more important. They identified more and more closely with one another until, as Isherwood wrote in 1977, "we are no longer entirely separate people."²⁰ Isherwood twice records in the diary that they could not tell their speaking voices apart, for instance, when they were revising their script of *A Meeting by the River*, "A weird discovery we have both made: since using the tape recorder to record our discussion of the play, we have both realized that we cannot be certain which of our voices is which!"²¹

But into the Animals' "golden age," as Bachardy once called it,²² death was creeping. Isherwood was a year older than Bachardy's father. Fit and boyish as he was, his very body revealed the future bearing down on both of them; time together was short. Bachardy had the greater darkness to face, and he saw it clearly. Life with an old man, followed by the death of the old man. He says that he tried not

think about it.²³ Bachardy was more restless and more impatient than Isherwood by temperament, and whatever natural anxiety he possessed about the passage of time must have been exacerbated by living as he had done since youth, with a man thirty years his senior. If, as he told Isherwood during the drive to Palm Springs, the activity of drawing or painting lifted Bachardy out of time and freed him, at least a little, from this obsessive anxiety, nevertheless, his perception of what was to come is painfully evident in his work. He says that people praise his portraits generously as long as they are of somebody else. When they see their own faces emerge under his hand, they are often silent because they are shocked at how starkly the portraits reveal their advancing age.²⁴

But of course, Isherwood also felt the passage of time, and in his diary he frequently mentions the poignancy this cast over his contentment: “the joy of waking with [Don] in the basket—the painful but joyful tenderness—painful only because I am always so aware that it can’t last forever or even for very long, Kitty and Old Drub will have to say goodbye.”²⁵ He knew that he was growing increasingly dependent on Bachardy, who drove him more and more often in the car and performed an ever greater share of domestic and social chores, and, as always, he recognized how difficult their situation was for Bachardy:

Some of the inner rage he feels against me is because of the fact that I am going to leave him. He feels that this is a trick which I shall play on him—have, indeed, already played, by involving us so closely with each other. Any sign I show of illness, even of fatigue, makes him intensely nervous; he behaves as if it were a kind of bitchery on my part.²⁶

And Isherwood’s own friends were dying. Laughton in 1962 and Huxley in 1963 died before the time. Anyway, they were much older than Isherwood. So were Forster and Gerald Hamilton who died in 1970, and Stravinsky and Gerald Heard who died in 1971. But 1973 took contemporaries and friends of his youth—William Plomer; Jean Ross, who was the real-life original of Sally Bowles; and Auden, his closest English friend, whom he followed to Berlin in 1929, with whom he collaborated on three plays during the 1930s, and with whom he emigrated to America in January 1939:

Wystan died yesterday—or anyhow sometime during the night of September 28–29. . . . This is still so uncanny. I believe it, I guess, but it seems utterly against nature. Not because I thought Wystan was so tough as all that. He seemed to have been ruining his health for years. And then, whatever he may have said, he was awfully lonely—isolated is what I mean—he made a wall around himself, for most people, by his behavior and his prejudices and demands. Perhaps he deeply wanted to go. His death seems uncanny to me because he was one of the guarantees that *I* won’t die—at least not yet. I think most of us, if we live long enough, have such guarantee figures. On the other hand, the fact that he has gone first makes the prospect of death easier to face. He has shown me the way. . . .

An odd thing: That night he died—or rather, in the afternoon here, which might have been the exact time of his death in Vienna—I started a sore throat, the first I’ve had in a long long while, and it got so bad during *our* nighttime that I couldn’t swallow. And today, despite doses of penicillin, I still have a fever and headache and feel lousy. This makes me glad. I like to believe that he sent me a message which got through to me.²⁷

Did the message admonish Isherwood, like sore throats triggered by encounters with Auden in the 1920s, to be true to his inner nature, and to tell the truth in his writing? In his early auto biography *Lions and Shadows*, Isherwood writes of the Auden character, Hugh Weston, “I caught a bad cold

every time we met: indeed the mere sight of a postcard announcing his arrival would be sufficient to send up my temperature and inflame my tonsils.”²⁸ Isherwood was now struggling to get started with the book that was to become *Christopher and His Kind*. Auden’s death not only warned him that he had better hurry, it also freed him to handle the material without anxiety that he might bruise Auden’s feelings or invade his well-guarded privacy. In his lifetime, Auden never publicly acknowledged he was a homosexual, and he told friends he wanted no biography. Isherwood was among the few who could tell Auden’s story—or his own story for that matter—and he knew this. As he wrote in his diary when *Christopher and His Kind* was nearly finished: “I am writing little bits about Wystan in my book. . . . I can’t help feeling, wishes or no wishes, it is better if those who knew Wystan write now instead of leaving it to those who didn’t know him, a generation or two later.”²⁹

About a month after Auden’s death, Isherwood saw that *Christopher and His Kind* must above all explain why he himself left England—to find somewhere that he could live as a homosexual. To his countrymen, to the press, Isherwood’s departure in 1939 had long been seen as the turning point in his career and the decision on which both he and Auden had been publicly and harshly judged as world-shirkers. But their emigration began years earlier, and it was a departure in their friendship just as much as it was a departure from their native land:

. . . I want to have this book start with our departure for America. But I have now realized that I can only put our departure in perspective if I begin with Germany—why I went there—“to find my sexual homeland”—and go on to tell about my wanderings with Heinz and his arrest and the complicated resentment which grew up out of it, against Kathleen and England, Kathleen and England. . . . I feel that it must start with my going to Berlin—not with my first trip out there to see Wystan, or with my visit to Wystan in the Harz Mountains that summer, but with my real emigration sometime later in the year. . . .³⁰

The book had to be a personal statement that he was a homosexual, and it had to show how this fact had shaped his life—how he had had to go abroad alone to Berlin to explore his sexuality freely, how once he had found a boy he loved, British immigration officials had denied the boy entry back into England and thereby forced Isherwood to go abroad to live with him until Hitler’s rise made even the itinerant life impossible. Reluctant as he was to join any group, Isherwood accepted gay liberation for his own cause. But he was slow to engage with it because he feared to attract attention to himself as a member of Swami Prabhavananda’s congregation. In the summer of 1970, he was invited to address the National Students Gay Liberation Conference, and he wrote in his diary:

I feel quite strongly tempted to accept this invitation (as indeed I’ve often wanted in the past to accept others like it). I highly enjoy the role of “the rebels’ only uncle” (not that I would be, though at the time—for there are scores of others—and Ginsberg their chief) and, all vanity aside, I do feel unreservedly *with* them, which is more than I can say for ninety percent of the movements I support. But something prevents me from accepting. Oddly enough, it all boils down to not embarrassing Swami by making a spectacle of myself which would shock his congregation and the women at Vedanta Place! I can admit this because I am perfectly certain there’s no other motive. I am far too wisely and worldly-wise to suppose that I’d be injuring my own “reputation” by doing this. Quite the reverse; this is probably the last opportunity I’ll ever have of becoming, with very little effort, a “national celebrity.” And I hope I’m not such a crawling hypocrite as to pretend I wouldn’t quite enjoy that, even at my age!³¹

For Swami, there was more at risk than awkward feelings. The Vedanta Society of Southern California was his life work; he was growing older, and it was unclear how the society would continue after he died. Nobody around him possessed his subtle understanding of how to make Vedanta accessible and plausible for Westerners. His separate insights about the personal character and temperament of each of his followers allowed him to recognize and love them as individuals; he applied no strict set of rules day to day, yet he never deviated from his own assured spiritual path. Many who tried to help him had far less patience and far less flexibility of mind. A few were again him. Some objected to the fact that he allowed the nuns to keep house alongside the monks in Hollywood. In India, women joined a separate order, the Sarada Math, but in Southern California, two institutions were implausible because the few hundred devotees were not enough to populate them. Vedanta took root in Southern California through the generosity of women, and there were generally more women than men in the congregation. Swami recognized that the order could not succeed in contemporary Californian culture unless it offered the same spiritual opportunities to women as to men. Only a few of his colleagues and superiors at Belur Math had been to the U.S., and most had not spent long there; they relied on his reports. But anything which might suggest to them that his style of leadership was giving rise to sexual impropriety threatened all that he had achieved. In 1971, Isherwood recorded:

[Swami] says of Belur Math, “They are waiting for me to die”; in other words, they won’t send him an assistant because, after he is dead, they can send one who’ll do exactly what they want. And what do they want? Apparently to do away with nuns in the U.S. Swami takes all this quite calmly, seemingly to find it mildly amusing. But now he says he will seriously consider training some of the monks to give lectures. He remembers that Vivekananda said once that Vedanta societies should be run by Americans.³²

Five years later, Swami made clear to Isherwood that he was consciously holding on to life until someone he trusted was sent to replace him:

. . . Swami had another spiritual experience. . . . This time it was a vision during sleep. He was feeding Holy Mother and he began to weep. “I could have wept myself to death,” he said. “When the doctor examined me, he said ‘You have had a shock.’ It was like a heart attack. . . . When I wish to die, I can die. Whenever I wish. But I don’t want to die yet—not until this place is saved.”³³

His love of Swami and his respect for the circumstances in which Swami was performing his life mission had guided Isherwood when he decided not to write in *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* about Ramakrishna’s cross-dressing,³⁴ an episode which fascinated and inspired him and which was easily misunderstood. And even after Swami’s death, when he used passages from his diary in *My Guru and His Disciple*, he altered details that might distress members of Swami’s congregation or expose the Hollywood Vedanta Society to criticism or misunderstanding at the Math. For example, his description of the 1963 departure of a group from Hollywood for the *sannyas* ceremony at the Math of two American monks, Prema and Krishna, and for the simultaneous centenary celebrations for Vivekananda, reads like this in his diary:

It is no annihilating condemnation of the devotees—about fifty of whom had come to the airport

see us off—to say that they would have felt somehow fulfilled if our plane had burst into flames on take-off, before their eyes. They had built up such an emotional pressure that no other kind of orgasm could have quite relieved it. The parting was like a funeral which is so boring and hammy and dragged out that you are glad to be one of the corpses. Anything rather than have to go home with the other mourners afterwards!

Swami wouldn't leave until Franklin [Knight] arrived; he had to park the car which brought the boys from Trabuco. The fact that it was he who arrived last seemed to dramatize his role as The Guilty One, and his farewell from Swami was a sort of public act of forgiveness. He was terribly embarrassed, with all of us watching—especially all those [women] who knew what he did.

So we got into the plane at last and it took off. Swami said, “To think that all this is Brahman and nobody realizes it!” I sat squeezed between him and Krishna; the Japan Air Line seats are as close together as ever. Despite my holy environment, I couldn't help dwelling on the delicious doings on the couch, yesterday afternoon. I didn't even feel ashamed that I was doing so. It was beautiful.³⁵

In *My Guru and His Disciple*, Isherwood condensed the passage for good literary reasons, but dropping sentences which might have caused offence—Franklin Knight reportedly behaved inappropriately toward a woman outside the congregation—he also muted its vigor and its hyperbolic wit, losing the potent atmosphere and the comedy of the original. He even changed the sensual and sentimental convictions of the last three sentences into a relatively hollow pseudo-political statement:

December 18–10. About fifty people came to the airport to see us off. The parting was like a funeral which is so boring and hammy that you are glad to be one of the corpses. Anything rather than have to go home with the other mourners afterwards!

We got onto the plane at last and it took off. Swami said, “To think that all this is Brahman and nobody realizes it!” I sat squeezed between him and George; the Japan Air Lines seats are as tightly packed as ever. Despite my holy environment, I couldn't help dwelling on yesterday afternoon's delicious sex adventure. I even did so rather defiantly.³⁶

He made no such concessions in writing *Christopher and His Kind*; even though he wrote it half a decade earlier, he didn't have to. He met Swami only in 1939, so he was free to be as candid as he liked about his life before that. And by the time he completed his final draft in May 1976, Swami Swahananda was already taking over from Prabhavananda at the Hollywood Vedanta Society. Prabhavananda died in July 1976, and *Christopher and His Kind* was published in the U.S. in November and the following March 1977 in the U.K. Swami was never to know that the book carried Isherwood into the heart of the gay political movement. The publicity was massive, both for and against it, the tours exhausting, and Isherwood's sense of fulfillment very great. Just before Christmas 1976, Isherwood wrote:

San Francisco was drastic and New York even more so. Both were reassuring, because I found I could hold my own in the rat race. Indeed, I often surprised myself and Don because I was so quiet on the uptake during interviews. . . . But I couldn't possibly have gotten through the New York trip without Don, who was sustaining me throughout. I have *never* known him to be more marvellous and angelic.

Perhaps the most moving experience was going down to the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop in the village and signing copies of my book, with a line of people, mostly quite young, stretching a

the way down Christopher Street and around the corner. I had such a feeling that this is my tribe and I loved them.³⁷

Isherwood was a national celebrity after all, not as Herr Issyvoo, the narrative device distorted Broadway and the movies into a popular bisexual mannequin, but in his own right, as the homosexual writer he had gradually brought into the open during his years in California. Even his rivalrous friend Gore Vidal acknowledged his fame, with the half-mocking line, “They’re beginning to believe that Christopher Street was named after you.”³⁸

Isherwood’s hard-won happiness with Bachardy was also celebrated, and it was to become a model of gay partnership among his ever expanding gay following—admired, envied, gossiped about, emulated. He went on reporting what he could about it in his diaries, and eventually Bachardy was to take over and continue the task, in his own diaries and above all in his paintings, producing perhaps his finest portraits ever during the last months of Isherwood’s life. When Isherwood was too ill to do anything else, he could still sit for Bachardy, and he wanted to. So Bachardy painted him every day, at what proved to be his deathbed. He collected many of the portraits in a book, *Last Drawings of Christopher Isherwood* (1990), including nudes with their swags of given-out flesh and, over and over again, the haunted face of a creature stunned by the approach of the long-expected reality, the pain and darkness. The eyes question, even plead for mercy, but the spare, black acrylic lines—as if the brush itself were wearing mourning—are irrefutable. In late 1985, Bachardy began to notice that Isherwood seemed too ill to care about or comment on their shared project and he stopped showing him the daily results; whereupon Isherwood, with pictures drying on the floor around their bed on which he lay, said, “I like the ones of him dying.”³⁹ Even after Isherwood died on January 4, 1986, Bachardy went on painting the beloved body, getting to grips with life and death, just as Isherwood had endeavoured to do through his relationship with Swami and in his diary through so many preceding years. Bachardy concludes in his introduction to the *Last Drawings*, “I was able to identify with him to such an extent that . . . [i]t began to seem as if dying was something which we were doing together.”⁴⁰ Thus, the two longtime transgressors went together over the most awful threshold and made it into a work of art, illuminating their vigil, exposing every detail.

Swami was an outpost of the Ramakrishna Order, working to fulfil the order’s mission in a foreign culture, and relying on intermittent communication with colleagues in India whose day-to-day experiences moved them each moment along a separate trajectory, further and further from mutual understanding. Isherwood understood this because he was in the same situation with old friends and colleagues in England, with whom the finer filaments of intellectual and emotional harmony had long been severed. Even with Auden, once his closest friend, there were huge gaps. Brooding on their lives after Auden’s death, he wrote:

All yesterday and again this morning I have been looking through Wystan’s letters and manuscripts—that tiny writing which I find I can, almost incredibly, decipher. He is so much in my thoughts. I seem to see the whole of his life, and it is so honest, so full of love and so dedicated, all of a piece. What surprises me is the unhesitating way he declared, to the BBC interviewers, that he came to the U.S. not intending to return to England. Unless my memory deceives me altogether, he was very doubtful what he should do when the war broke out. He loved me very much and I behaved rather badly to him, a lot of the time. Again and again, in the later letters, he begs me to come and spend some time alone with him. Why didn’t I? Because I was involved with some lover or film job

whatnot. Maybe this is why he said—perhaps with more bitterness than I realized—that he couldn't understand my capacity for making friends with my inferiors!⁴¹

Auden first decided to settle in New York when he and Isherwood visited there in July 1938, and he had told his brother as early as August 1938 that he intended to move to America permanently and to become a citizen.⁴² The outbreak of World War II tempted him to change his mind, but he did not. Isherwood judged both his and Auden's youthful behavior strictly, and also their subsequent rationalizations about it. In one of his diary entries, he records a sudden insight about himself: that once he had settled in southern California, he had deliberately tried to cut off any possibility of returning to England by sending home an offensive letter which he knew would be made public:

. . . the letter I wrote to Gerald Hamilton in 1939, attacking the war propaganda made by Erika and Klaus Mann and others, was really a device, to get myself regarded as an enemy in England and therefore make it impossible for me to "repent" and return. That was why I chose Gerald Hamilton to send my letter to—I knew he would broadcast it.⁴⁴

Isherwood's observation is tidy with hindsight, but it is no self-reinvention. The letter had been raw and defiant, and he knew Hamilton was indiscreet. It was quoted in the *Daily Express* in November 1939, launching the worst of the public criticism of his and of Auden's decision to remain in America after the war started.

As Isherwood dug into the motives for his past actions and became increasingly candid about his generation, former friends in England seemed to understand him less and less. Some admired him for coming out as a homosexual, but they were bewildered and critical when he came out with other truths. In 1973, he asked John Lehmann not to publish their correspondence because when he reread his letters to Lehmann, Isherwood found that they said only what he had presumed Lehmann had wanted to hear at the time: "They are dull, mechanical, false. Don was horrified by their insincerity when he read them—he hadn't believed that even old Dobbin could be capable of such falseness."⁴⁵ He stood by the long-established friendship, but when Lehmann pressed for an explanation, Isherwood was evasive:

Once started, I might have found myself cutting much deeper and telling John *why* my letters to him during the war were so false—namely because I knew he wasn't on my side, I knew he didn't believe I was serious about Vedanta or pacifism and I knew he would disapprove, on principle, of any book I wrote while I was living in America. I was false because I didn't want to admit how deeply I resented his fatherly tone of forgiveness of my betrayal of him and England—"England" being, in fact, his magazine. . . . The stupid thing is that I'm fond of him in a way, and that I've often defended him, even. I think, as everybody in London thinks, that he's an ass and that he has almost no talent. But I am fond of him, which is more than most people are.⁴⁶

In fact, it had been many years since Lehmann and others had understood who Isherwood was or what he believed. Although some of Isherwood's most beautiful writing in his diaries is about his childhood home in the north of England and about his visits there to his brother Richard, and although he chronicled the London social scene with energy whenever he visited, he never felt comfortable in England for any length of time. When he had returned to live there with Bachardy in 1961, he wrote:

I realize now, on this trip, that my longing to be away from England had really nothing to do with a mother complex or any other facile psychoanalytical explanation. No, here is something that stifles and confines me. I wish I could define it. Maybe the island is just too damned small. I feel unfree, cramped. I long for California.⁴⁷

He preferred California and its beaches even to Manhattan. The casualness and undress of Californian life freed him from any preconceptions about identity or social class—minimal clothing revealed little about status; names were pared away to a syllable or two and titles dropped; speech was relaxed towards a uniform drawl. The British theater critic Ken Tynan, who had known Isherwood since 1956 in London and who settled in Los Angeles for a time during the 1970s, remarked in his diary on “the classlessness that [Isherwood] shares with almost no other British writer of his generation. (I’ve seen him in cabmen’s pull-ups and grand mansions, with no change of manner or accent.)”⁴⁸ Like Whitman or Kerouac, Isherwood had a promiscuous curiosity about his fellow men, and he knew he could find out more about them if he met them on an equal footing.

Perhaps the widest gulf between Isherwood and his English friends was religious. When he had nearly completed *My Guru and His Disciple*, he found that he could not summarize for publication the beliefs on which he meditated every day because he feared derision back in England. In the past, Isherwood had been silenced and even made ill when he was unsure of what he wanted to say and whether he was justified in saying it. In the 1920s, it was “the liar’s quinsy”;⁴⁹ in the early 1960s, when his relationship with Bachardy profoundly wobbled, undermining his religious certainty and throwing him into conflict with Swami, he lost his voice for reading aloud in the Hollywood temple, and in India, where he was obliged to lecture to hundreds at Vivekananda’s centenary celebration, he took to his bed with fever and stomach troubles. But by the late 1970s, his books had made clear who he was, and there was now no risk of hypocrisy in saying what he believed:

What is holding me up? . . . surely I can make *some* statement?

This block which I feel is actually challenging, fascinating. It must have a reason, it must be telling me something.

Am I perhaps inhibited by a sense of the mocking agnostics all around me—ranging from assholes like Lehmann to intelligent bigots like Edward? Yes, of course I am. In a sense, they are my most important audience. Everything I write is written with a consciousness of the opposition and an answer to its prejudices. . . . I must state my beliefs and be quite quite intransigent about them. I must also state my doubts, but without exaggerating them. . . .

The doubts, the fears, the backslidings, the sense of alienation from Swami’s presence, all these are easily—too easily—described. One mustn’t overemphasize them. What’s much more important is a sense of exhilaration, remembering, “I have seen it,” “I have been there.”⁵⁰

In fact, Isherwood’s initiation into Vedanta was no more mystical or irrational than Edward Upward’s conversion to communism. Upward’s autobiographical trilogy, *The Spiral Ascent*, shows that he followed his ideology inflexibly, sometimes at the cost of his writing and his personal happiness, and blinding himself to the crimes of Stalin. Auden also turned to religion, adopting again in the early 1940s the high Anglican faith of his upbringing. Why couldn’t Upward or Auden take Isherwood’s Hinduism seriously? In the historical drama of *their* 1930s, intellectual debate focused on Marxism, fascism, nationalism, socialism, even Freudianism and eventually Christianity. When Vedanta, Isherwood’s *deus ex machina*, appeared from outside this cultural narrative, they simply

rubbed their eyes in disbelief. They could not recognize it, and they made little effort to learn more about it.

Auden's personal myth proved to be the myth of the return, a circling back to the abandoned Christian beliefs of his childhood and even, at the very end of his life, a physical return to live in Christ Church, Oxford. Auden rediscovered his roots, and made much of their familiarity and exact fit. Isherwood kept progressing away from his roots, which is not a satisfying myth to those he left behind. If the hero of the quest never returns, how is anyone to know whether he really found the grail? Even Auden, convinced that Isherwood had a gift for befriending his inferiors, presumed that Swami was one of them. For one thing, Swami did not appear to Auden to be grim enough. The Anglican Church told Auden that as a homosexual he was a sinner; without repentance and without God's grace, he would go to hell. In Vedanta there is no hell, no place where one dwells eternally as a result of committing sins. Indeed, there are no sins, only errors. About his sexuality, Isherwood recalled in his diary, "right at the start of our relationship, I told Swami I had a boyfriend (and . . . he replied, 'Try to think of him as Krishna') because my personal approach to Vedanta was, among other things, the approach of a homosexual looking for a religion which will accept him. . . ."51 To Swami, all sex was a worldly appetite which spiritual aspirants should try to overcome on the path to liberation, but it made no difference whether the sexual object was the same or the opposite sex. Moreover, as Isherwood realized when he was writing *My Guru and His Disciple*:

. . . this book differs in kind from books on other subjects because there is no failure in the spiritual life. . . . I can't say that my life has been a failure, as far as my attempts to follow Prabhavananda go, because every step is an absolute accomplishment.⁵²

As these diaries affirm, Isherwood's vision is essentially a comic one, and it is based on love. His English friends were cynical about love. But love is what both Isherwood and Auden set out to find when they left England for America. Isherwood found not only love but also happiness. Auden proclaimed that if you had sex with your beloved, the vision of Eros (as he called it) would necessarily fade.⁵³ His failure to find long-term reciprocal love provided him with plentiful material for austere lyrics about unrequited longing and love betrayed. In Isherwood's case, the vision stayed. In 1977, he wrote about Bachardy: "Our relationship is indescribable— though I guess I must try to describe it someday. It has moments which seem to blend the highest camp with the highest love with the highest fun and delight."⁵⁴ Happiness and religious joy are hard to write about; Dante is often excused for being boring in the *Paradiso* and most readers prefer the *Inferno*, just as they prefer Milton's *Paradise Lost* to *Paradise Regained*. In his diaries, Isherwood records plenty of hell with his heaven, but even so, happiness can also provoke envy and resentment and criticism. He knew that his life might seem schmaltzy to others, a Hollywood tale, too good to be true, and so he avoided exposing it or he cast it as camp. Just before publishing *My Guru and His Disciple*, he worried whether his readers would grasp what he was doing:

I keep wondering how people will receive the book. I have almost no idea. Sometimes I think, after all, the material itself is so remarkable that some people must find it fascinating. But I think many others will be repelled by the weepy devotional tone of certain passages. Also by a very private kind of camp, which sometimes expresses itself in stock religious phrases which aren't meant to be taken literally—though how is the reader to know that?⁵⁵

In 1962, the American philosopher and critic Susan Sontag wrote, “Camp is esoteric—something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques. Apart from a lazy two-page sketch in Christopher Isherwood’s novel *The World in the Evening* (1954) it has hardly broken into print.”⁵⁶ Since then, camp has broken not only into print, but into song, film, T.V., and merchandising for children. It is no longer an esoteric or private code, and yet Isherwood’s use of camp to express religious feelings does remain private and unexplained. Sontag doesn’t address it; Isherwood himself in *The World in the Evening* had only touched on a connection between religion and camp when she sketched her “Notes on ‘Camp.’” In *The World in the Evening*, Charles Kennedy—modelled on Lincoln Kirstein, a likely influence on Isherwood’s own understanding of camp—contrasts camp with Quaker plainness, explaining to Stephen Monk that “a swishy little boy with peroxidized hair, dressed in a picture hat and a feather boa, pretending to be Marlene Dietrich” is Low Camp. On the other hand:

High Camp is the whole emotional basis of the Ballet, for example, and of course Baroque art. . . . true High Camp has an underlying seriousness. You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun out of it. You’re expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance. Baroque art is largely camp about religion. The Ballet is camp about love. . . .”⁵⁷

Camp was a central resource in Isherwood’s writing. And he balanced it with “tea-tabling,” a kind of understatement which he and Edward Upward discovered in youth in the novels of E.M. Forster and which Alan Chalmers, the Upward character, explains in *Lions and Shadows*:

The whole of Forster’s technique is based upon the tea-table: instead of trying to screw all his scenes up to the highest possible pitch, he tones them down until they sound like mother’s meeting gossip . . . In fact, there’s actually less emphasis placed on the big scenes than on the unimportant ones . . . It’s a completely new kind of accentuation—like a person talking a different language.

Armed with these methods of highlighting and lowlighting, Isherwood was like an electric technician with a complex set of dimmer switches. He could achieve fresh effects of great variety even with the most familiar materials.

His later style is far from baroque. In *My Guru and His Disciple* it is remarkably unshowy. It is intimate, frank, self-deprecating, and, in fact, its very plainness is like a disguise, camouflage even for the remarkable thing it undertakes to reveal, the life of religious devotion. Its understated quality, achieved through the tea-table technique, requires us to lean in, to look more closely, to listen more carefully. Baroque art was produced by institutionalized religion. The force and wealth of the Catholic Church, the state, the national culture was behind it. Isherwood’s camp is a guerrilla effort. It is deployed on behalf of a minority, and it must do two things at once—edge into the light something marginal, unacceptable, beyond the pale of the culture, and protect that very thing from attack. It must be both expressive and guarded, articulate and secretive.

In his earlier work, Isherwood deploys camp just as Sontag observed, as the private code and badge of identity for the main urban clique she had in mind, homosexuals. Take *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*. How could anyone “in the know” avoid reading Mr. Norris as a homosexual like his real life origin Gerald Hamilton? Consider his plump white hands, his wig, his over-large bottle of scent, his fretful anxiety—the exaggerated attributes of a woman of a certain age. Norris’s young girlfriends with the whips offer an overt “perversion” which fulfils readers’ expectation but also throws them off the

track. Like a schoolboy trying out a big philosophical idea and following it with a dirty joke, Isherwood's narrative exaggerates to precisely the degree which permits it to claim, implicitly, it was all a joke. The author didn't really mean it; readers never really saw what they thought they saw. It is a small surprise attack from which he can pull back quickly.

Isherwood used camp to write about dangerous subjects, subjects which his audience would find morally, philosophically repugnant, subjects about which he could not risk talking straight. He used camp, with its lighthearted playfulness, to tempt the audience in, to suggest that what he was saying was unimportant, not serious, and that there was no risk in being exposed to it. He used it to write about what was nearest his heart. Once he was out as a homosexual, he used camp to write about the growing band of disciples who believed that Ramakrishna was an incarnation of God and could inspire them to spiritual liberation.

It was genuinely scary for Isherwood to come out as a Hindu, and his doubts heightened his vulnerability. His diaries reveal how difficult it was for him to argue on behalf of something he himself was continuously working to believe in. The moment of exhilarated certainty, the vision, is difficult to capture and easy to dismiss. Yet, in his diaries, Isherwood's religious life becomes convincing because acts of devotion are repeated again and again and again. Moments of vision and certainty regularly recur and increase in intensity as his love for Bachardy, Swami, and Ramakrishna are gradually manifested over time. This kind of repetition doesn't work in fiction, which calls for turning points, climaxes, denouements. And a simple statement, a summary of beliefs, cannot convince because it is intellectual and does not engage the emotions. Camp addresses the emotions, releases laughter and joy, and thereby disarms the reader.

Remarkably, Isherwood never mentions AIDS in these diaries. He was not aware of the disease which he was still well enough to write. Thus, his account of gay liberation has an almost innocent feeling of gradual and certain triumph, and it fulfils an expectation of social change with which he had been living ever since the 1930s: the Marxist dialectic still—finally—applies personally to him and everyone like him. Homosexuals prepared to bring their private lives into the political arena, at the expense, for a time, of romance and even dignity, could at last participate in the revolution:

A bit of paper has been lying on my desk for months. On it I have written: "For the homosexual, as long as he lives under the heterosexual dictatorship, the act of love must be, to some extent, an act of defiance, a political act. This, of course, makes him feel apologetic and slightly ridiculous. That can't be helped. The alternative is for him to feel that he is yielding to the compulsion of a vice, and that he is therefore dirty and low. That is how the dictatorship wants him to feel." I have copied this here so I can throw the paper away. It isn't clearly expressed but it means something important to me."⁵⁸

The blossoming which Isherwood portrays of the London gay scene, in contrast to Los Angeles, is dandified and softened by an atmosphere of aristocratic aestheticism; Lord Byron in ruffled lines hovers in its background. Of a party in London he might tell us that the boys wore shiny eye shadow and silk trousers in appealing pastel hues and kissed on the lips at parting; in Santa Monica, he tells of meetings, parades, leaflets, and accommodating himself to people he must work with regardless of whether he finds it easy to be friends with them. Reading such passages now is like reading about the last summer parties before the Great War.

There are only a few hints at the beginning of the 1980s that the increasingly hectic sexual activity

and drug-taking of some of Isherwood's circle might be starting to wear them out. Tony Richardson, for instance, seems to grow tired. And in September 1981, Isherwood records that one young friend has a sore throat, "Poor angel, he really is a martyr to V.D." In the very next entry, another phones to warn that he has hepatitis; so Isherwood and Bachardy both get gammaglobulin shots because the boy had kissed Isherwood at a party.⁵⁹ In 1983, a boy who sits for Bachardy is suffering from cancer: "I carried on about the treatments he'd had for cancer and created a quite powerful death gloom, which he thickened by showing us two lesions on his legs."⁶⁰ Later the boy died after being ill for about two years; he proved to be the first AIDS fatality Isherwood and Bachardy knew. Many of their friends were to die of AIDS thereafter, but Isherwood never wrote about their deaths or about the epidemic.

The disease of his generation, and the one he most feared, was cancer. In April 1981, he wrote "Loss of hair. Loss of taste and consequent loss of weight—down to 147 and ½—no big deal, this." But it was a big deal; the beautiful life he had forged with Bachardy could survive anything but "this." That autumn, Isherwood was diagnosed with prostate cancer. And he used the diary, as ever, to try to understand what he felt about it:

Well, the moment has come when I must recognize and discuss the situation with myself, which means, as usual, writing it down and looking at it in black and white. I have got some sort of malignancy, a tumor, and that's what's behind all this pain. They will treat it, of course. . . . I shall get used to the idea, subject to fits of blind panic. . . .

What I have to face is dying. . . .

I pray and pray to Swami—to show himself to me, no matter how—as we've been promised that he will, before death. . . .

I get fits of being very very scared. . . .

Don says that I should work, and he is absolutely right. I remember how wonderful Aldous Huxley was, working right to the end. I have promised Don that I'll get on with my book.

The love between me and Don has never been stronger, and it is heartbreakingly intimate. Every night he goes to sleep holding the old dying creature in his arms.⁶²

His fears came and went, and he struggled humbly with them. He continued to be happy with Bachardy, and he experienced powerful visions of Swami which he recorded in the diary and which suggest that what he had always hoped for from his religion was there for him at the end:

Sometimes I feel the death fear bothering me again. I pray hard to Swami, asking him to make me feel his presence, "Now and in the hour of death." The response I get from this is surprisingly strong. I'm moved to tears of joy and love. I pray for Darling also, seeing the two of us kneeling together in his presence. Religion is about nothing but love—I know this more and more.⁶³

In the 1980s, Isherwood made fewer and fewer diary entries. They have a tenderness and pathos unlike the smart and cynical writer of his youth. His psyche was so tuned and disciplined by a lifetime spent writing, that even as the grammar vanishes and the commas are no longer placed, he shapes his prose with a cadence of ending. As he fades physically and presses towards transcendence, he continues to report factually on his experience, finding words for the body's creaturely, unconscious existence on the threshold of an awesome physical transformation: ". . . I'm not in a good state. Death fears—that's to say, pangs of foreboding—recur often. They seem to be part of a quite natural physical condition; the pangs of a dying animal, thrilling with dread of the unknown."⁶⁴

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