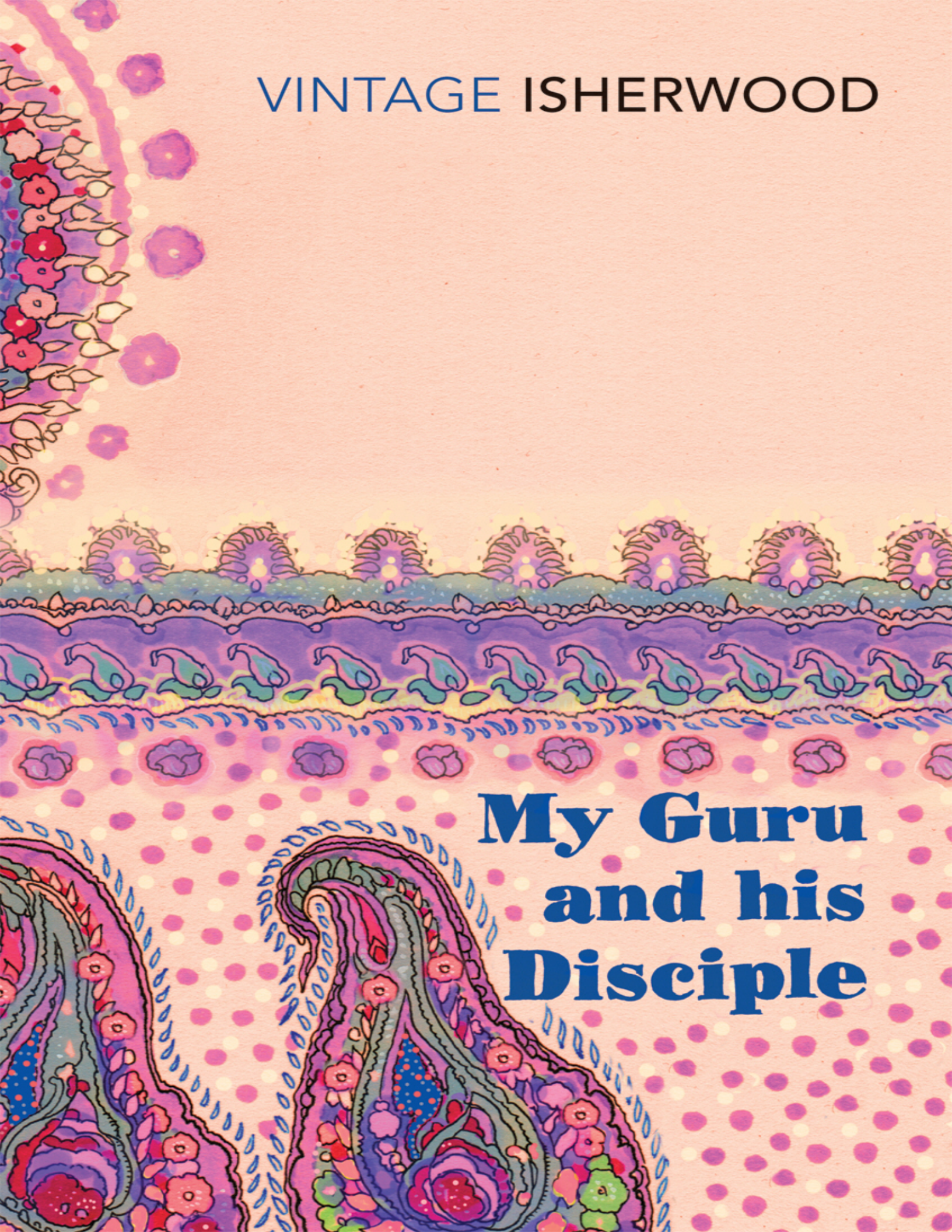
VINTAGE ISHERWOOD



My Guru and his Disciple

Contents

About the Author

Christopher Isherwood was born in Cheshire in 1904. He began to write at university and later moved to Berlin, where he gave English lessons to support himself. He witnessed first hand the rise to power of Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany and some of his best works, such as *Mr Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin*, draw on these experiences. He created the character of Sally Bowles, later made famous as the heroine of the musical *Cabaret*. Isherwood travelled with W. H. Auden to China in the late 1930s before going with him to America in 1939, which became his home for the rest of his life.

He died on 4 January 1986.

ALSO BY CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

All the Conspirators

The Memorial

Mr Norris Changes Trains

Lions and Shadows

Goodbye to Berlin

Prater Violet

The Condor and the Cows

The World in the Evening

Down There on a Visit

A Single Man

A Meeting by the River

Kathleen and Frank

Christopher and his Kind

With Don Bachardy

October

With W. H. Auden

The Dog Beneath the Skin

The Ascent of F6

On the Frontier

Journey to a War

TO DON BACHARDY

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

My Guru and His Disciple

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY

Simon Callow

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

This is neither a complete biography of Swami Prabhavananda nor a full account of my own life between 1939 and 1976. It is my one-sided, highly subjective story of our guru-disciple relationship. Many people who were closely associated with Prabhavananda or with me, during that period, have little or no part in this particular story and therefore appear in it only briefly or not at all.

Introduction

In 1965 Isherwood published a biography of the Indian holy man, Ramakrishna. It was greeted, as he reported fifteen years later in *My Guru and His Disciple*, with bemusement: 'It is still a bit difficult to regard Herr Issyvoo as a guru-fancier.' This, in a rather cheap nutshell, is the problem many students of Isherwood's life and work experience when confronted with his immersion in Hindu philosophy and its attendant disciplines. Some readers prefer to ignore it altogether. Very few of the novels, except for *A Meeting by the River* (1967), and the *Paul* section in *Down There on a Visit* (1962), deal directly with religious experience. On the contrary: the novels are generally characterised by a needle-sharp awareness of the world of the flesh, of the foibles of personality, of political movements; they are made up of sardonic snapshots, brilliantly assembled into montages of the time in which they take place. They do not concern themselves with eternity, nor do they very much concern themselves with love, either human or divine. Isherwood, famously, is a camera, not an interpreter; his own presence in the early novels, particularly, is deliberately neutral, though the narrator is often acutely analytical of his motives and attitudes.

It is perhaps this last quality, the habit of self-observation, that provides a bridge between Isherwood the roving correspondent of the passing world and the Isherwood who devoted a surprising and increasingly large portion of his life to trying to connect to the ultimate. Vedanta, like most mystical faiths, is predicated on the notion of the illusory nature of sensual experience. It seeks

to transcend this illusion, directly approaching what it describes as the core reality of existence, variously identified as God and love. One of the principal obstacles to engaging directly with this core of reality is the personality, the 'I', the most treacherous illusion of all, which is conceived of as a cunning, self-perpetuating fiction, insisting on its own pre-eminence, frustrating all engagement with the universal and objective truth of existence.

That this notion would appeal to the author of *Goodbye to Berlin* is perhaps not so strange as might at first appear. The I/eye of that novel is already in quotation marks: 'Chris Isherwood' is and isn't Christopher Isherwood. 'Chris Isherwood' in the novel is the sum of the impressions and the experiences to which he is subjected, his impulses and assumptions a discontinuous sequence of adopted masks, the very thing of which Vedanta accuses the personality. 'Chris' and his counterpart 'William Bradshaw', in the earlier *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, constantly accuse themselves of inauthenticity; the very notion of a coherent personality is cast in doubt. And yet it is the evocation of personality, of larger-than-life individuals like Norris and Sally Bowles, which constitutes the greatest triumph of the Berlin novels. This paradox is at the heart of Isherwood's relationship to Vedanta, which, as he explains in *My Guru and His Disciple*, initially came about because of his pacifism, which itself came about because his former lover, Heinz Neddermeyer, had been forcibly enlisted into the German army in 1939. Isherwood found the idea of possibly killing or wounding him, if he were to join the Allied forces, intolerable. 'Heinz is in the Nazi Army. I would refuse to kill Heinz. Therefore I have no right to kill anybody.'[1] The personal was the starting point. 'I have never been able to grasp any idea,' Isherwood says in *My Guru and his Disciple*, 'except through a person.'[2]

His pacifism led him away from Europe to America, to Los Angeles and to his quirkily erudite Irish friend, Gerald Heard, part of the vanguard for Vedanta that also comprised Aldous Huxley and the dramatist John Van Druten. It was shortly after Isherwood's introduction to this group that his violent antipathy towards religion – the Church of England above all – mutated, with almost miraculous rapidity, into a fervent commitment to Vedanta. 'Be careful, my dear,' W. H. Auden had remarked to him once, when Isherwood was savagely attacking religion, 'if you carry on like that, one day you'll have such a conversion.' Listening to Heard expounding the underlying principles of Hindu philosophy with quiet, inexorable insistence, Isherwood felt powerless to counter the Irishman's arguments; as a result, he adopted Huxley's 'Minimum working hypothesis of belief', which quickly led – as it had not for Huxley – to nearly total immersion in a faith of which he had barely heard a year before. As well as having a desire to ground his pacifism in a frame of rigorous thinking, he admitted to being in the grip of a general sense of pointlessness, a feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness. 'Deep down,' he says in *My Guru and His Disciple*, 'I was miserable. I felt steeped in that dull brutish inertia that the Hindus call *tamas*, the lowest condition of the psyche.' He had come to a new country, where he was barely known as a writer, to make himself anew. He was ripe, in fact, for the conversion that Auden had predicted.

It was Gerald Heard who led Isherwood to Swami Prabhavananda, and thus to one of the key relationships in his life; perhaps, he felt at the end of his life, *the* key relationship of his life. 'If I hadn't met him,' Isherwood says in *My Guru and His Disciple*, in a remark that graphically establishes the significance of Vedanta to him, 'my life would have been nothing.' It also confirms the central importance for him of personality, the conduit by which he experienced the world. 'I realise more and more,' he noted,

after some years of discipleship with Prabhavananda, ‘that Swami is my only link with the spiritual life.’ But then, in a characteristically combative aperçu, he adds: ‘that’s like a San Franciscan saying that the Golden Gate Bridge is his only link with Marin County. What more could I ask for?’ But he is acutely aware that his role as a disciple may simply be another ruse of the ever-asserting ‘I’: ‘It’s as if I’d walked into a trap at last. After all my other impersonations, I have picked up yet another funny mask and stuck my nose into it—and now it won’t come off.’

Quite aside from the insights the book may offer into the life of the aspiring adept, *My Guru and His Disciple* offers a double portrait of two strikingly different personalities who were powerfully drawn to each other: Isherwood – quintessentially English, restless, sexually driven, fond of the bottle, the darling of the Hollywood cocktail circuit – and Prabhavananda, the former anti-British terrorist, chain-smoking, tolerant, tender, subtle, unselfconsciously profound. Isherwood immediately responded to something he perceived in Prabhavananda, a sense of resolution, of centredness, of joy; while Prabhavananda, to Isherwood’s frank astonishment, saw in him a potential monk. Isherwood decided to tell the truth about himself from the beginning; at one of their first meetings he had asked Prabhavananda whether his involvement in a sexual relationship with a young man was an obstacle to his spiritual development. Prabhavananda had replied, memorably, ‘You must try to see him as the young Lord Krishna.’ The relationship between guru and disciple was without cloud, although Isherwood constantly felt that he was failing Prabhavananda, not least when, after a couple of months, he gave up the attempt to live in Prabhavananda’s Vedanta monastery in the Hollywood hills; but Prabhavananda was never less than understanding, always sympathetic.

In this regard the book is very unlike most classic accounts of the guru/disciple relationship – those, for example, on Sufic initiation by Reshad Feild, or the many memoirs of the pupils of the Armenian sage George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, in the course of which the author of the memoir is subjected to alarming tests, reversals and privations, forced to perform humiliating and exhausting tasks, mocked and exposed. No such spiritual boot-camp tactics in the Vedanta Society of Southern California; Prabhavananda himself is genial and serene. The pressure all comes from within. Isherwood struggles valiantly with his desires and needs, occasionally allowing himself 'rests' for alcoholic or sexual or social release; he sometimes rebels against the mealy-mouthed demeanour that seems to be required of him. But despite these challenges, and despite having to earn a living as a Hollywood screenwriter, he works tirelessly at his faith – not only in long hours of making *japam* (repetition of the *mantram* or Holy Name, sometimes as often as a thousand times), but also in editing the Society's journal, working on translations of the Hindu classics including the *Bhagavad-Gita* and in writing, with studied restraint, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, his biography of the extraordinary giggling, dancing, cross-dressing mystic after whom the branch of Vedanta practised by Prabhavananda was named. None of this material is less than lucid, modest, sincere; but the writing comes to life when Isherwood has a personality to describe: Swamis Brahmananda and Ashokananda, the dashing figure of Swami Vivekananda and the great actress Sarah Bernhardt, whom the Swami seems to have met more than once – a gloriously unlikely encounter.

Prabhavananda is a less flamboyant personality than any of these, and the portrait Isherwood offers is accordingly more in pastel than in oil. It is suffused with affection and a sort of awe for the intensity of the Swami's inner life; more and more it seems to Isherwood that Prabhavananda is

engaging, in an overwhelmingly emotional way, with reality itself. He has a vision in the shrine room of the monastery, becoming overcome with the knowledge that there is 'abundant grace'. He asks Isherwood what the use is of reasoning and philosophy 'when all that mattered was the love of God'. One senses Isherwood's longing for such experience himself, but nothing of that sort comes to him. He goes his increasingly worldly way, now accompanied by his much younger lover, Don Bachardy; he is, as it happens, out of the country when Prabhavananda dies. The final paragraph of the book is superbly understated and curiously moving, a rare example of what may be called spiritual modesty: disclaiming any title to being 'a knower', Isherwood says that he can only offer those who feel that life is meaningless and unjust 'this book, which I have written about matters I only partially understand, in the hope that it may somehow, to some readers, reveal glimpses of inner truth which remain hidden from its author'.

My Guru and His Disciple was Isherwood's last book; it is an indispensable illumination of a highly significant part of his life. Much of it is taken from his diaries; parts are transcribed from articles from the journal of the Vedanta Society, some of them included in the book that he edited in 1945, *Vedanta for the Western World*. Isherwood's biographer, Peter Parker – who is not an enthusiast of Isherwood's religious aspirations – has noted the selective approach to facts, the disparities, omissions and downright inaccuracies of some of the material in the book. But in that regard it is no different from any other Isherwood book, even *Kathleen and Frank.* In *My Guru and His Disciple*, as in all the others, Isherwood is making an alternative reality. He is in fact doing what he so brilliantly describes in his *Paris Review* interview with W. I. Scobie:

> in art, almost by definition, everybody is quite extraordinary if only you can see them as such. When you're writing a book, you ask yourself: What is it that so intrigues me about this person – be it good or bad, that's neither here nor there, art knows nothing of such words. Having discovered what it is you really consider to be the essence of the interest you feel in this person, you then set about heightening it. The individuals themselves aren't quite up to this vision you have of them. Therefore you start trying to create a fiction character that is quintessentially what you see as interesting in the individual, without all the contradictions that are inseparable from a human being, aspects that don't seem exciting or marvelous or beautiful. The last thing you're trying to do is get an overall picture of somebody, since then you'd end up with nothing.

The conundrum remains that, even in this last book, so explicitly concerned with the rejection of the world of appearances, of illusions, Isherwood remains the writer he always was, his irrepressible but almost clinically detached fascination with the mechanics of personality as compelling to him as ever. The effect on Isherwood of his religious explorations was profound and subliminal and largely invisible. When Scobie asked him whether Vedanta had changed his life, he replied: 'It's made a very great difference, but I couldn't exactly describe to you what the difference is.' Perhaps the ineffable, by definition, will have no place in a writer's work. And perhaps what Isherwood got from Vedanta – in addition to his conviction that, as he tells Scobie, 'there is such a thing as mystical experience … the thing I had completely dismissed' – was a framework, a structure, a channel for his energies, a discipline, a regular and diligently performed activity; no wild spiritual journey, but a comfortable slog, whether with the meditation, the

translation or the hagiography. It is interesting that Isherwood's oldest friend, Edward Upward – his fellow student at Repton, a superb novelist and short-story writer, creator with the youthful Isherwood of the fantasy world of Mortmere – lived his life as a committed Communist, an activity that involved him not in storming barricades or laying down his life, not in spying or undercover manoeuvres, but in the mundane activity, over many decades, of arranging and attending meetings, of selling newspapers, of canvassing his fellow citizens. Isherwood often referred to Vedanta as a longing for sanity – 'a *homesickness* for sanity', he says in *My Guru and His Disciple* – and perhaps in the end that, in conjunction with the deep charm and spiritual richness of his long relationship with Swami Prabhavananda, is what he got from it.

Simon Callow, 2013

1 Diary from 17 June 1942. *Christopher Isherwood Diaries, Volume 1*, edited by Katherine Bucknell (Vintage, 2011)
2 Ibid.

1

Toward the end of January 1939, Wystan Auden and I arrived in New York, by boat from England. I have described the events and decisions which led to this journey in my book *Christopher and His Kind.* It was our second visit to New York; we had spent a few days there in the summer of 1938, on our way home to England from China. Now, although our plans weren't definite, it seemed that we might be staying for a long time, perhaps permanently.

Our first visit had been a tourist visit, uniquely magic. As far as I was concerned, it could never be duplicated. The tension of New York life had been thrilling when it had had a time limit; now it quickly began to demoralize me. Less than two months after our arrival, I wrote in my diary:

This has been a bad sterile period for me. I've done practically nothing. Every day I think: Now I must get busy, now I must start work. But at what? My money is rapidly running out. Wystan has the prospect of a lecturing job, later on. My whole instinct is against lecturing or exploiting my reputation in any way. I would like some sort of regular humble employment. I got to know Berlin because I was doing work which related me to my social environment in an anonymous unpretentious way, as a foreigner teaching his own language. I must be anonymous until I discover a new self here, an American me.

Wystan is as energetic as I'm idle. He writes a great deal, in his best manner—poems and articles and reviews—he makes speeches, goes to parties and dinners, is brilliantly

talkative. It's as if he and I had changed roles. He's the confident one, now. He is making himself at home here.

So I despaired and did nothing, blaming New York for my jitters. I now realize that they weren't caused by New York, or by my money worries, or even by the probability of war in Europe, but by an emptiness inside myself, of which I wasn't yet fully aware.

I was empty because I had lost my political faith—I couldn't repeat the left-wing slogans which I had been repeating throughout the last few years. It wasn't that I had lost *all* belief in what the slogans stood for, but I was no longer wholehearted. My leftism was confused by an increasingly aggressive awareness of myself as a homosexual and by a newly made discovery that I was a pacifist. Both these individualistic minority-attitudes kept bringing me into conflict with leftist majority-ideology.

I called myself a pacifist because Heinz, the German boy I had lived with for five years during the nineteen-thirties, was about to be conscripted into the Nazi army and I found it unthinkable that I should ever help to cause his death, however indirectly. I had therefore decided to refuse to take any part in the war effort, if war came. But this was a merely negative decision. What I now needed to learn were positive pacifist values, a pacifist way of life, a Yes to fortify my No; it was the lack of values which was making me feel so insecure. The strength Wystan showed in contrast to my weakness was based on the Christian values which he had learned from his mother, as a child, and which he had never entirely abandoned. He didn't discuss these with me at that time, knowing what a violent prejudice I had against the whole concept of religion as I then understood it.

Pacifism was the basis of a friendship I now made with John van Druten. John was easy and witty and charming, very much a man of the theater, but he was also a moralist,

anxious to impose ethical standards on his life and on his plays, even when they were the lightest of comedies. After careful discussion, we made up a list of questions concerning the role of the pacifist in wartime and sent it to three prominent pacifists, George Lansbury, Rudolph Messel, and Runham Brown. All of them took the trouble to answer us.

Messel was the most radical of the three. He wanted the pacifist to sabotage the war machine, demanding total disarmament, unilateral if need be. He hoped the war would turn into a revolution. The Nazi aggressor must be allowed to invade the country without opposition. A bloodless victory, Messel added, would be no advertisement for Nazism, anyway.

Brown wrote that a pacifist should at all times try to be a useful member of society. In wartime he should work harder than ever, on some kind of social-relief project which was independent of government control and unrelated to the war effort. He should practice civil disobedience to the aggressor, no matter what the consequences.

Lansbury's letter agreed substantially with Brown's. Its tone touched John and me deeply; you could almost hear the voice of this gentle, fearlessly honest eighty-year-old warrior for peace: 'You, like many others, find it extremely difficult to realise your idealism in the midst of the kind of world in which we are living. All the same, comrade, whatever was true yesterday, is true today. If you, and millions of other young men of all nationalities are once more thrown into this hell of war, nothing will come out of it but more and more confusion. Our way of passive resistance has never yet been tried out, but war has been tried through all the centuries and has absolutely failed.'

The dedication and courage of these three men was inspiring, but they couldn't help me much in my present condition. They were in England, preparing to play their

part in the expected war crisis. Even if I were to go back there, I shouldn't be able to discuss my personal problems with them; they would be far too busy. They might give me work to do, but I wasn't yet sufficiently sure of myself to become their follower. I needed a lot more time to think, and someone to help me clarify my thoughts.

So Gerald Heard was increasingly in my mind. He and his friend Chris Wood had emigrated to Los Angeles in 1937, together with Aldous Huxley and his wife, Maria. I had seen a good deal of Gerald and Chris while they were still living in London, and I already knew Gerald well enough to feel sure he would be understanding. The Huxleys I had never met, I was eager to talk to Aldous, whose *Ends and Means*, published two years earlier, was regarded as a basic book for pacifists.

I knew, from somewhat vague gossip, that Heard and Huxley had become involved in the cult of Yoga, or Hinduism, or Vedanta—I was still contemptuously unwilling to bother to find out exactly what these terms meant. To me, all this Oriental stuff was distasteful in the extreme. However, my distaste was quite different from the distaste I felt for the Christians. The Christians I saw as sour life-haters and sex-forbidders, hypocritically denying their rabid secret lusts. The Hindus I saw as stridently emotional mysterymongers whose mumbo jumbo was ridiculous rather than sinister. That Heard and Huxley could have been impressed by such nonsense was regrettable. I explained their lapse by saying to myself that it was typical of these hyperintellectuals to get caught unawares from time to time and led astray by their emotions. But surely such a lapse could be only temporary? I intended to avoid discussing the subject with them, as tactfully as I could. After all, it was their intellects that I needed to consult.

So I now began corresponding with Gerald. To my surprise and relief, he wrote nothing about Yoga—indeed, his tone was reassuringly practical. His thinking seemed to

be chiefly in terms of group formation. Pacifists must be organized into groups which were small enough to be cohesive, every member accepting total responsibility for every other. Order and creative accuracy must be opposed to disorder and destruction. We must create a doctorate of psychologically sound, well-equipped healers … Gerald's phraseology wasn't always clear to me but it sounded authoritative; he seemed to know what he was up to. The idea of belonging to a like-minded group appealed to me strongly. Since my decision to be a pacifist, I had felt isolated, fearing that many of my friends must disapprove.

When I first wrote to Gerald, I didn't suggest coming to California, but he himself urged me to, in his reply to my letter. From then on, I took it for granted that I would come, sooner or later. Quite aside from wanting to talk to Gerald and Huxley, and to get away from New York, I had always had a romantic longing to visit the Far West. Now that this journey was actually in prospect, I realized that I needed to share it with an American, so as to see the country through his native eyes as well as my foreign ones. Luckily for me, there was a young American ready to be my fellow traveler. I will call him Vernon.

Vernon and I had met and become lovers during my first stay in New York. After I went back to England we had written to each other, and when I returned in January, he was waiting on the dock to meet me. To begin with, we had taken a room together in the same hotel as Wystan. Later, when Wystan and I rented an apartment, Vernon had moved in with us.

He and I left New York on May 6, by bus. Bus travel was cheap in those days, so we could afford to make a big detour to the South, by way of Memphis, New Orleans, Houston, and El Paso; we also stopped off to see the Grand Canyon. It was almost two weeks before we reached Los Angeles.

I had felt sad to be leaving Wystan behind, but nothing would have induced him to come with us; he was busy and happy in New York. Of course we assured each other that our parting would be only temporary, and indeed Wystan did come out to California briefly, later that year—and hated it. We were together many times during the remaining thirty-odd years of Wystan's life. But our relationship was altered, not because the strength of our love had grown less, but because we no longer had to rely on each other. When we had sailed from England that January, leaving behind us nearly everyone we knew, our futures seemed interlocked for good or ill; we were a mated, isolated couple. America was to have been our joint adventure. But it was America which, literally, came between us.

Chris Wood, when I met him again in Los Angeles, appeared to be no different from the London Chris I had known, except that he was sunburned. But Gerald was certainly changed. The London Gerald had been a characteristically clean-shaven type. The Los Angeles Gerald wore a beard. True, this beard had a reason for its existence; he had grown it because he couldn't shave while lying in bed with a broken arm—the result of a fall in the snow in Iowa during a lecture tour with Huxley. But that had happened at the end of 1937, and the beard was still there; indeed, it showed signs of careful grooming and was trimmed to a point. It gave his face an upward, heaven-seeking thrust which was disconcertingly Christlike. And whereas the London Gerald had been neatly and even elegantly dressed, the Los Angeles Gerald wore jackets with ragged cuffs and jeans which had holes or patches in the knees. The London Gerald had struck me as being temperamentally agnostic, with a dry wit and a primly skeptical smile. The Los Angeles Gerald was witty, too, but

he had the quick eager speech and the decisive gestures of a believer.

A believer in what? That remained for me to discover, and the discovery was a gradual process. Gerald was a master of the oblique. If I asked him a direct question, I got an answer which rambled like a river over a vast area of knowledge, carrying me past the shores of prehistory, anthropology, astronomy, physics, parapsychology, mythology, and much much more. The glimpses he allowed me of these shores were tantalizing and I would beg him to extend them, forgetting or not caring what my original question had been.

Gerald simply wasn't the sort of person one could come to and say, 'Please summarize your views, so I can decide if I agree with them.' Nor could I carry out my intention of accepting Gerald's pacifism while rejecting his religious beliefs. I'd begun to realize that the two were completely interdependent.

And, anyhow, Gerald subtly but absolutely refused to be rejected. If I disagreed with a statement of his—or with his use of certain words—he dismissed my disagreement by implying that it was merely semantic. He was so sure of himself that he could afford to apologize to me. He was sorry, he said; he had expressed himself clumsily. He should have stated his case in apter words—to me, especially, whose skill with them so far exceeded his own. He hadn't forgotten how to flatter.

Despite his vast learning, he treated me as an equal. He had an air of conferring with me, never of teaching me. 'You remember, of course, that odd book of Smith's on the customs of the Micronesians?' would be a typical opening of one of his expositions. During our first weeks together, I would keep telling him that I'd never read Smith, or Jones, or Robinson, or Brown, as the case might be. Later I learned to let such rhetorical questions go by without comment. They were rhetorical because Gerald always told

you, anyway, what Smith had said that was relevant to the subject being discussed. In the same manner, he would declare that ‘I should like your opinion on Smith’s theory’ and then proceed to inform me what *his* opinion was, and hence mine—since disagreement between us wasn’t possible, according to his rules of intercourse.

I was anxious to hear more about the pacifist groups which he had written of in his letters. What kind of preparation did he think would be necessary for the members? Paramedical training? A study of Gandhi’s tactics of non-violence? No, Gerald didn’t show any interest when I mentioned either of these. All he would discuss was a form of self-preparation at what he called ‘the deep level.’ To become a true pacifist, you had to find peace within yourself; only then, he said, could you function pacifistically in the outside world.

Gerald had already started his own drastic program of self-preparation; every day he sat for three two-hour periods of meditation—in the early morning, around noon, and in the early evening. During these six hours he was engaged, as far as I could gather, in somehow fixing his thoughts upon what he called ‘this thing’—‘this thing’ being the source of inner peace which he was trying to contact. I think it was Gerald’s natural fastidiousness which prevented him from calling it ‘God’—to say that he was looking for God would have sounded pretentious, ungentlemanly. Perhaps, also, he guessed that I would have a prejudice against the word. If he did, he was right. I loathed it.

My interpretation of the word ‘God’ had been taken quite simplemindedly from left-wing anti-religious propaganda. God has no existence except as a symbol of the capitalist superboss. He has been deified by the capitalists so that he can rule from on high in the sky over the working-class masses, doping them with the opium of the people, which is

religion, and thus making them content with their long working hours and starvation wages.

I soon had to admit, however, that Gerald's 'this thing'—leaving aside the question of its existence or non-existence—was the very opposite of my 'God.' True, it was by definition everywhere, and therefore also up in the sky, but it was to be looked for first inside yourself. It wasn't to be thought of as a Boss to be obeyed but as a Nature to be known—an extension of your own nature, with which you could become consciously united. The Sanskrit word *yoga*, ancestor of the English word 'yoke,' means union, and hence the process of achieving union with this eternal omnipresent Nature, of which everybody and everything is a part.

During the past few years, I had kept declaring that I knew religion was a lie, because I knew that I hadn't got an eternal soul. Now, after talking to Gerald, it became obvious to me that I had been misusing the word 'soul' to mean my ego-personality. I had merely been saying (quite correctly) that my ego-personality, Christopher, was subject to change, like my body, and therefore couldn't be eternal. If I did have a soul, it could only be 'this thing,' seen in relation to Christopher. I might call it 'mine' for convenience when thinking about it, but I must remind myself that Christopher could never possess it. If the two were ever to become united, Christopher would cease to exist as an individual. He would be merged in 'this thing'; not vice versa.

The question remained: Why should I believe in 'this thing' at all?

Among the various areas of knowledge that Gerald was opening up to me was the history of mysticism. For the first time, I was learning that there had been thousands of men and women, in many different countries and cultures throughout recorded history, who had claimed to have experienced union with what is eternal within oneself. That

their accounts of this experience were essentially similar was certainly impressive, but it didn't prove anything, as far as I was concerned. Even when these people belonged to the modern world, they seemed utterly remote from me. Mightn't they all have been self-deluded, however sincere?

Gerald countered my objections with a compliment. My attitude showed, he said, that I was approaching the problem in exactly the right spirit. Credulity was the greatest obstacle to spiritual progress; blind faith was just blindness. He quoted Tennyson's line about 'honest doubt' and told me that Ramakrishna (whoever that was) had urged his disciples to keep testing him, as a moneychanger rings coins to hear if they are false. It was no use just passively accepting the dogmas of the Church or the words of the Scriptures: I knew, of course, what Vivekananda (whoever that was) had said: 'Every man in Christian countries has a huge cathedral on his head and on top of that a book.' No—the only way to begin the search for 'this thing' was to say to oneself: 'I'll keep an open mind and I'll try to follow the instructions in meditation which my teacher gives me. If, after six months of honest effort, I've had absolutely no results, then I'll drop it and tell everybody that it's a sham.'

This sounded fair enough. And I was impressed by Gerald's restraint. He didn't urge me to start meditating then and there. He didn't tempt me by describing the benefits he got from his own meditation—quite the opposite; he spoke of it in the same tone I would have used when complaining of my struggles to get a book written: it was a lot of hard work and most of the time it was frustrating. 'When one comes to this late in life, one's mind's already so wretchedly out of condition.'

Oh yes, Gerald impressed me enormously. Already I believed that *he*, at least, believed he was making some progress in contacting 'this thing' inside himself. He couldn't be lying to me; he hadn't any motive for doing so.

He couldn’t be shutting himself up for six hours a day in his room and pretending to meditate merely in order to impress Chris Wood. I didn’t deny that Gerald was a playactor, with an Irish delight in melodrama and arresting phrases. Indeed, I believed in him *because* he was theatrical, because he costumed himself as a ragged hobo, because his beard was Christlike but trimmed, because some of his lamentations over the human lot had a hint of glee in them and some of his scientific analogies a touch of poetic exaggeration. 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, for I was a playactor, too.

What made his company so stimulating was that he seemed to be so intensely aware. Awareness was his watchword. According to him, you had to maintain continual awareness of the real situation, which is that ‘this thing’ exists and that we are therefore all essentially united. Whenever your awareness weakened, you slipped back into acceptance of the unreal situation, which is experienced as space-time and which imposes disbelief in ‘this thing’ and belief in individual separateness. Gerald would quote Jesus admonishing the apostle Simon Peter: ‘Simon, Simon, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat.’ Gerald uttered the word ‘desired’ with a kind of snarl, baring the teeth on one side of his mouth. Then, quite uncannily, he would mime Satan himself, separating the mortal ego-husk from the immortal wheat grain and blowing it to perdition with a gleeful puff of his breath. ‘Satan,’ in Gerald’s interpretation, was the distracting, disintegrating, alienating power of space-time, operating through its agencies—the radio, the movies, the press. ‘It’s the very *devil*!’ Gerald would exclaim in a whisper, his pale blue eyes wild, like those of a man in a

haunted house, beset by terrors. (He had developed the theme in a book published that year, *Pain, Sex and Time*.)

Lao-tze's *Tao Te Ching* was Gerald's favorite gospel of pacifism. He often repeated a sentence from its sixty-seventh chapter; 'Heaven arms with pity those whom it would not see destroyed'—meaning that to feel concern for others is the only realistic attitude, because it is a recognition of the real situation, our oneness with each other. Feelings of love and compassion are not merely 'good' and 'right,' they are ultimately self-protective; feelings of hatred are ultimately self-destructive.

Lao-tze says that we should be like the water, because fluidity always overcomes rigidity; rocks and prejudices get washed away in the end. To illustrate this, Gerald used to say that Man, who has survived the dinosaurs and managed to evolve without growing wings or gills or poison glands, is descended from a small, weak, but adaptable tree shrew. (A famous biologist later assured me that Gerald's sense of poetic truth had carried him too far; Man is more probably descended from a large and aggressive ape.)

Gerald agreed with Lao-tze that one should never put the other party in the wrong if that can possibly be avoided. Martyrdom may be heroic if it is unavoidable, but you must be very sure that you have done everything permissible to save your persecutors from the spiritually self-destructive act of killing you. Otherwise, your death will be an act of passive aggression for which you will be partly to blame. Gerald would say with a sigh: 'I'm afraid that that exceedingly odd individual, Jesus of Nazareth, *deliberately* got himself lynched.'

But Gerald disapproved of Jesus far less than of his Church. Gerald said that he could never become a Christian as long as the Church claimed for itself a monopoly of divine inspiration—which Hindus and Buddhists do not—and as long as it represented the

crucifixion as the supreme and crowning triumph of Christ's career. Here, Gerald was joining Bernard Shaw in his condemnation of 'crosstianity.' Which I found amusing, because Gerald's meditative bearded beauty, high temples, and long red nose seemed to present the composite image of a Shavian Christ.

Gerald referred to the life he was trying to lead as 'intentional living.' Its purpose was, as he put it, to 'reduce' the 'strangulated' ego; he was fond of using words in their medical sense. The intentional life required not only long meditation periods—he insisted that his own six hours were an absolute minimum—but also an attempted moment-to-moment vigilance over one's every thought and action, since every thought and every action helps either to create or to remove the obstacles to union with 'this thing.' No thought or action, however seemingly unimportant, can be regarded as neutral.

What were these obstacles? Gerald, who had a tidy mind and an inclination to think in trinities, would tick them off on his long, expressive fingers—addictions, possessions, and pretensions. Addictions included their opposites, aversions. They therefore ranged from, say, a lust for blonds, heroin, or toffee to a disgust-fear of cripples, gangrene, or lizards. Gerald regarded addictions as the least harmful of the three categories. Pretensions were the worst, he said, because there is one of them which can outlast all other obstacles. You may conquer your addictions and unlearn your aversions; you may unload yourself of your possessions; you may resign from your positions of honor and retire into humble obscurity. But then, and only then, the most deadly of all the pretensions may raise its head; you may begin to believe that you are a spiritually superior person and therefore entitled to condemn your weaker fellow creatures. (Was Gerald himself in danger of yielding to this final temptation? Yes—

if only because he did seem capable of overcoming all the other obstacles along the course which led to it. I could imagine that Gerald might one day begin to take himself too seriously as a religious teacher. But, surely, not for long. He was too much of a comedian not to become quickly aware of the funny side of his holiness.)

As a concept, 'intentional living' fascinated me. I saw how immensely it would heighten the significance of even the most ordinary day, how it would abolish boredom by turning your life into an art form. Indeed, it was related to the attitude which a novelist should have, ideally, toward his work on a novel. With one huge difference, however. The novelist is involved only with his novel and only during work hours; the intentional liver is involved with his whole life experience, and throughout every waking moment of every day until he dies. The finality of such an involvement scared and daunted me. To Gerald's austere temperament, it strongly appealed. The negative side of his involvement was his hatred of space-time, and he gloried in his hatred. 'It's only when the sheer *beastliness* of this world begins to hurt you—like crushing your finger in a door' (here he winced, miming the physical pain) 'that you're ready to take this step.'

Gerald accepted the Hindu and Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation—that life within space-time is a cycle of birth-death-rebirth; you are born again and again, whether you like it or not, as a consequence of your past deeds (your *karmas).* Yon can only free yourself from this cycle by achieving union with your real nature and thus breaking your bondage to space-time. That was why Gerald was working so hard to make sure that this life would be his last.

I simply could not share Gerald's feelings, much as I respected his beliefs. How could I hate space-time when it contained so much that was lovable and beautiful, including Vernon? Admittedly, my feelings for Vernon were