

A Passage from India

At Swami Prabhavananda's persistent request, Isherwood accompanied him—who was, in turn, always also accompanied by Swami Krishnananda—to India in December of 1963. Swami Vivekananda's 100th Birth Anniversary was being celebrated, culminating in a Parliament of Religions at which Chris was to speak. Chris had a meltdown. He started self-medicating—Librium¹—ahead of the trip and also abruptly stopped drinking, another possible explanation for his bad mood.

He's created a truly grotesque version of the airport send-off in the Diaries, writing of the devotees who had come to wish Prabhavananda a bon voyage, as was customary before a long trip, an expression of affection and respect: "...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."²

His notes of this trip before the Parliament begins paint a more benign picture than his dread at the outset justify. At times India's charms break through, but he observes, "I feel dazed with 'unreality'...They have pulled me up by the roots, flown me all these thousands of miles and dumped me down here. I can't be transplanted. But I may not die if I am moved back promptly. Am getting fatter at an alarming rate...Fat, lonely, bored."³

A few days later, "Why do I feel such an intense eagerness to leave this place, and this country?...I am getting something out of it, I know. And yet I strain like a leashed animal to escape."⁴

His mood only got worse when the Parliament began. He wrote of the Inaugural session: "Next to the hashish experience in Tangiers,⁵ this was the least endurable time stretch I have ever known." The speakers droned out written speeches. "When it was my turn, I spoke too loud and too urgently—rather like a communist speaker in the thirties."⁶

To add injury to insult, he got very sick: gastrointestinal trouble, headaches, exhaustion, and rage. He attributed the rage to "a very deep aversion which I have been aware of from time to time ever since I first got involved with Vedanta. It has...nothing directly to do with Ramakrishna, Vivekananda or Swami...it all expresses itself in the old cry of the ego, *I'm being pushed around!*⁷ Chris rehearsed and executed a scene expressing his frustration, in his own words he was "acting hysterically,"⁸ but after it was over he wrote that the boil had been lanced and on the ride home "India suddenly seemed charming."⁹

¹ He discontinued the Librium a week into the trip. V2 305

² V2 301

³ Ibid 306

⁴ Ibid 313

⁵ A Visit to Anselm Oakes

⁶ V2 315

⁷ Ibid, 324

⁸ Ibid, 325

⁹ Ibid 326

John Yale was also in India at the time to take his vows of sannyas.¹⁰ Yale writes of this visit:

During sessions of the Parliament Chris gave several lively talks. One on Swami Vivekananda, another on his conception of and reverence for the guru. He was treated with the greatest respect, which meant, considering the circumstances, rendered adulation as a religious spokesman...To be treated as a religious leader was a situation intolerable to Chris's hatred of sham. What happened is recounted in the following entry from my [John Yale's] journal:

Friday, January 3, 1964. Belur Math. Chris was given a round-the-world air ticket to come here and speak at the Parliament of Religions. Yesterday he appeared, returned ahead of time from an excursion to Maharaj's village, which he had abandoned with the excuse that he was not feeling good. Privately he told me what had happened. Being on display, written up by newspapers, giving lectures, being supposedly a religious celebrity, he grew nauseated with the role...Said he'd never be placed in such a false position again. "...It is as though my serious work [which he assumed the monks had never read] must be considered to be done by a secret Mr. Hyde. I don't feel like that at all. Within my lights the novels I write are serious, expressing a kind of truth as I see it. Speaking on religion—which means being considered religious—puts me in a false position. I'll never do it again..."

In all fairness, we should mention that Swami Prabhavananda had also never read his fiction novels, "Swami was well aware I had written novels and that they had scenes in them which some people considered shocking. He had no intention of reading the novels..."¹¹ a fact which didn't seem to rile Isherwood; and we will see shortly that when Isherwood does ask Swami's approval for a novel, Isherwood offers up the venture very meekly. Yale continues:

Chris left India the same day we completed our vows, feeling, I think, that the experience had been a fiasco. But...things turned out otherwise. The idea for a new novel was born out of those few trying days at Belur Math. He told me that he felt this to be one of Sri Ramakrishna's little jokes, or perhaps his reward for having acceded to his guru's demand despite his own disinclination.

In fact, Isherwood got the idea for *A Meeting by the River* on the plane ride out of India. He writes: "I used to claim jokingly that it was then I first became aware that Vivekananda¹²...had given me a charming thank you present, an idea for a novel... about Prema taking sannyas."

¹⁰ Final vow of renunciation.

¹¹ Isherwood, *My Guru*, 124.

¹² Even though both are immediate sources, Yale's account of what Chris said to him: "he felt this to be one of Sri Ramakrishna's little jokes..." and what Chris writes: "Vivekananda... had given me a charming thank you present." We can only note the discrepancy and recognize that we should take all histories with

Yale writes:

Chris remained till the day of our glory and rushed up to prostrate when we issued from the temple resplendent in gerrua, about 6:00 in the morning. Bless his heart...The beautiful gesture of Patrick prostrating before Oliver [in *Meeting*] is a fictionalized account of the true fact, Chris's salutation of me in that memorable dawn.

A Meeting by the River concerns two brothers. The elder, Patrick, is a successful man of the world and a devoted hedonist; the younger, Oliver, is a monastic novice and candidate for sannyas. The two meet after a long separation at a Hindu monastery on the Ganges just as Oliver is about to pronounce his vows. As they meet, each is prepared to reject the point of view of the other, attitudes made more intense by the remnants of old sibling rivalries. This is how Chris expressed the work's inception in a letter he wrote me on March 15, 1964, as he was about to begin work:

...for many years I have been playing with the problem of a confrontation—two people who are like two halves of a larger person, and who represent diametrically opposite ways of life...one is in the world, the other has been rather mysteriously absent in India...I know I am not making it sound exactly thrilling, but I do smell something.

The “something” culminated in the long-sought synthesis, Isherwood's first religious novel. Of the presentation to Swami, Isherwood writes:

May 31, 1966. Yesterday I finished my third and final draft of *A Meeting by the River*. I've always known that I would have to show it to Swami—since he will be held responsible for me if Belur Math takes offense at anything in the book...But the thought of Swami reading the homosexual scenes¹³ makes me squirm inside. Why? I would never apologize for them, morally or artistically...Furthermore, Swami has praised me for being myself and making no pretenses about the way I live my life. Just the same, I squirm. Am taking him the manuscript tomorrow.

June 3[, 1966] Swami rang up to say he'd finished my novel. "When I finished the last scene there were two tears running down my cheeks." What an angel he is! He was obviously every bit as relieved as I was...He even suggested it could be

caution. But in digging deeper we find two explanations: the first is that to Chris Ramakrishna/Vivekananda/Prabhavananda were a continuum, and the second is that this section, the trip to India, was not immediately written in his Diaries but was rather reconstructed from notes after the fact; the origin of the idea for *Meeting* was not in the diary at all.

¹³ These scenes are more emotionally than physically graphic. They are actually prim, even by the literary standards of the time, 1966.

sold at our [Hollywood Temple] bookshop, but I felt that this was just his relief speaking.¹⁴

His friend, Gore Vidal, in a review written for *The New York Review of Books* classed *A Meeting by the River* as one of Chris's best. It was also produced as a play, which Chris insisted he preferred to the novel.¹⁵ Additionally, he and Don Bachardy co-wrote a draft of a screenplay. There was considerable interest, but the film was never made.

¹⁴ Isherwood, *My Guru*, 289-290.

¹⁵ Private conversation in Montecito 1975.