

CHAPTER NINE

BETWEEN TWO BROTHERS

A Meeting by the River

What separates me from them is not important, not ultimately. What unites is the one and only thing that matters.

— Christopher Isherwood.

A year before the completion of *A Single Man*, Isherwood embarked on the final typescript of what he called his 'weary old *Ramkrishna and His Disciples* ... a necessary work of popular biographical journalism' (quoted in Finney: 1979, 256). In October 1963, as Finney notes, the Ramkrishna Order had approved of it 'vetting its accuracy chapter by chapter' (1979,256). That winter in December and January of the following year, Isherwood accompanied Swami Prabhavananda on a flying visit to Calcutta to participate in the Centenary Celebrations of Vivekananda's birth. The celebrations lasted a whole year and the two visitors from California took part in mass meetings at Belur Math near Calcutta. As his contribution to the celebrations Isherwood delivered lectures in English to a crowd of thousands most of whom understood nothing of what he was saying. Nevertheless, it was important for him to be there. However, on his way back to America Isherwood was contemplating seriously reflecting on his experiences in India. He decided to incorporate them into a workable novel to be based on a confrontation 'between two people meeting on neutral territory between two worlds rather like Jesus of Nazareth and Satan meeting in the wilderness' (quoted in Fryer : 1977,270). Isherwood further realised that the confrontation would be more effective if one of the protagonists were a monk and another a worldly-minded man; the venue was a place near Calcutta, on the Ganges, and hence *A Meeting by the River*.

Isherwood's last novel to date, *A Meeting by the River* (1967), however, posed a serious problem to its author in so far as the protagonist of the book was intended to be a saint. E.M.Forster in *Some Aspects of the Novel* points out that 'Homo Fictus' is totally different from 'Homo Sapiens'. What Forster

means to say is that 'Homo Fictus' is deprived of a great many ordinary human attributes, and can hardly afford to be, in any work of art, an exact transcript of the 'Homo Sapiens'. Herein lies, according to Isherwood, the root of the problem of a religious novel, because a saint is different from all recognizable types. Isherwood, however, tides over his difficulty by following the manner in which Somerset Maugham has presented Larry, a 'Homo Sapien' as a perfect 'Homo Fictus' in his novel *The Razor's Edge*. He believes that *The Razor's Edge* is popular because Maugham does not stick to the popular, conventional idea of a saint-hero as a lanky, serious man. He makes his hero, Larry, a lively, natural, humorous character wearing sweet smile on his lips. Isherwood's Oliver, the protagonist of *A Meeting by the River*, is closely modelled on Maugham's Larry. Oliver is portrayed as quite normal and ordinary, with a middle-class family background, whose inner satisfaction at the prospect of becoming a full-fledged *Sannyasin* of an Indian monastery at Belur Math radiates in his smile and in practical jokes. Isherwood also might have in his mind what Swami Vivekananda wrote in a letter to Mr. Francis H. Legget, dated 6 July 1896, in London: 'It is a funny world and the funniest chap you ever saw is He — the Beloved Infinite' (*Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 419). A man who has felt in the depth of his heart this love need not put on grave look or serious appearance. Isherwood, thus, in his novel, delineates Oliver as an ordinary man with child-like prattle and candour and who is capable of making innocent practical joke, which Ramkrishna himself did in his day-to-day dealings with his disciples.

Another problem that Isherwood faced in *A Meeting by the River* relates to its form and narrative technique. He himself speaks of the novel as 'very experimental, because it is entirely told in letters and diary' (quoted in Finney 1979, 259). The fact is that Isherwood here abandons any stylistic individuality in favour of an epistolary novel. Paul Piazza says: 'It is as if in his last novel he is trying to bring the book as near as possible to the experiences of Joneses, the Smiths, the Browns, by casting the book in the form of letters and diary jottings' (1978, 161). The narrator or his namesake is absent here. The novels employing the namesake narrator had successfully proved that good art enables one to develop a better awareness of the self. Herein lies the novel's

essential problem: we tend to look for narrative authority in either one brother or the other one who seems to give vent to, as Alan Wilde says, 'a summary of Isherwood's intellectual and emotional development' (1971, 139). Isherwood, however, solves his problem by bringing two brothers into a confrontation and finally effecting an integration of the opposites, towards which the novel seems to move. Written in epistolary form, the novel presents two brothers, Patrick and Oliver, who are apart at the opening but are brought together at the close. Neither brother in fact comes to an understanding of his needs by the end of the novel, yet each decides that he must and will fulfil those needs. In drawing two brothers toward each other, by suggesting a shared change, Isherwood attempts fully rounded characterization in which both Patrick and Oliver present Isherwood's life as he interprets and lives it. It is also significant that the creation of two brothers, inhabiting two different worlds, enables Isherwood to examine his own dichotomy within — the dichotomy between flesh and spirit — one that haunted Isherwood throughout his life, and the fact that the two brothers embrace each other at the close of the novel does indicate Isherwood's own vision of concord, which he imbibed from his knowledge of Vedanta.

Thematically, *A Meeting by the River* is based on the struggle that goes on in the mind of an ordinary man to renounce the old, worldly life and to accept the new spiritual one. When the novel begins, the young American Oliver is found to be a novice in a Hindu monastery at the Belur Order near Calcutta and is waiting for his final initiation. And here comes Oliver's worldly minded elder brother Patrick, with his Western attitude of analysis and reasoning and with a prying curiosity to know what has attracted his brother and if possible, to persuade him to give up the idea of taking monastic vows. Ostensibly the novel describes a confrontation between two representative figures who hold utterly opposed sets of values. Patrick revels in the world of fact and flesh; Oliver renounces it. Patrick is an atheist, Oliver a theist. Patrick personifies ego; Oliver transcends it. Isherwood, however, expresses the matter in unique terms when he shows within the space of two pages of the novel first Patrick and then Oliver discovering within themselves an unmortified ego. Each brother sticks to his own world, consciously keeping aloof from

that of the other for fear of losing his identity as is evident from what Oliver says 'I get afraid that I'll start, behaving like him and lose my identity altogether' (*A Meeting by the River*, 95). But being brothers, both, however, share some common traits and also crave for unity. In their own ways, they turn out to be searching for a sense of unison with others and more especially, with each other, but each one is separated from the other by ego. According to Vedanta philosophy, the ego is what separates the individual from the fundamental reality that embraces all individuals. Isherwood suggests at this stage of the novel that both Patrick and Oliver, apart as they are, have sincere yearning for connection, which occurs only at the end of the novel, when two brothers transcend their own ego, understand each other's needs and finally, come under the magic spell of the Hindu philosophy of Vedantism, which proclaims unity of all in one Universal Truth, Brahman.

Brotherhood, as Isherwood has suggested on more than one occasion, is a dominant metaphor in *A Meeting by the River*. Both Patrick and Oliver have a dream-vision in which they become mystically united. Oliver has a parallel vision in which he seeks to get united with his Swami. Isherwood thus traces the spiritual kinship of both the brothers. Paul Piazza observes: 'Oliver construes his vision in terms of a dream, whereas Patrick has read his dream in terms of a vision' (1978,164). As Oliver says, 'Presumably it was a few moments before waking that I saw Swami', while Patrick admits that 'yes, I can say I did literally see him, although this was not a vision in the working state' (*A Meeting by the River*, 144). Oliver chooses brotherhood of his fellow-monks, while Patrick that of his male-lovers. But both are inspired by a common desire for an ideal of universal brotherhood that will transcend the limitations of every ego. What each brother does for the other is to help overcome neuroses which have prevented them from meeting each other in a spirit of love, whether human or supra-human, sensuous or supra-sensuous. In course of the novel's action, as Isherwood pointed out to one correspondent, Oliver 'overcomes the feelings of inferiority and jealousy which he has always been plagued with' (quoted in Finney : 1979, 262). Patrick, on the other hand, as he writes in a letter to Penelope, sees the possibility of 'safety and freedom' with his brother, just as Oliver sees in his life in the monastery

safety and freedom of a different kind. Patrick at long last, of course, realises that his dream-vision can be attained only with Penelope, his wife. So, he gives up Tom, and writes to Penelope to excuse him for his past life and to accept him as her sincere husband.

It is here significant to note, as Paul Piazza has pointed out, that 'at the centre of dream-visions of both brothers, a third person, either dead or still living, provides a link to the world of spirit' (1978,165). For Patrick, the liaison is his male lover Tom or even his wife Penelope; for Oliver, the dead Swami. Piazza further maintains that, 'it seems essential to Isherwood's conception of the saint that he be joined to the world of spirit through another person who, like Mrs. Wilcox in *Howards End* or Mrs. Moore in *A Passage to India*, reconciles the spiritual with the physical realm' (1978,165). In *Prater Violet* Bergmann served as the spiritual guide for Isherwood, just as Elizabeth for Stephen Monk in *the World in The Evening* or Augustus Parr for Christopher in *Down There on a Visit* or Jim for George in *A Single Man*; and it seems safe to say, as Swami Prabhavananda did for Isherwood. However, at the story's end, Patrick, under the magical influence of the Indian monastery with its atmosphere of centemplation and open-mindedness, is changed unconsciously. So, when Oliver and other newly initiated youngmen drop out of the Temple at the end of Sannyas Ceremony, people bow down and touch their feet in expectation of obtaining blessings, Patrick is also found, surprisingly, to touch Oliver's feet. Under the spell of Indian religion and of the Swami, all are reconciled. 'I was aware', Oliver thus writes, 'that he was an established part of our life, the three of us belonged together intimately' (*A Meeting by the River*, 146). When Patrick bows down to Oliver and touches his brother's feet, it is obviously an acknowledgement of the superiority of Hindu philosophy of Vedantism to Christian religion and of its essential precept that both the sinners and the saints alike may be united in a spirit of brotherhood with the God Transcendent, Brahman, through meditation and abnegation of individual ego.

From Oliver's letter to Patrick we understand that he came under the influence of a Hindu Swami at Munich in 1958. Oliver was offered a German

job through the International Red Cross in Geneva and was flown from there to Munich to interview some people. While working, he accidentally meets the Swami whose profound spirituality entrances him. Oliver's remarks parallel Isherwood's first response to Bergmann : 'Something about him fascinated me, from the first moment' (*A Meeting by the River*, 13). Unlike Bergmann, the Swami is 'a new sort of human being, almost' (*A Meeting by the River*, 13). He is not physically impressive, but 'small and frail and skinny, with untidy grey hair cut rather short' (*A Meeting by the River*, 14). His robust inner being, however, flashes out. Oliver describes his first talk with the Swami as the most unsettling conversation of his life. But it is more than a mere conversation, it is a 'confrontation with this individual who, just by being what he was, intrigued and mystified me... as no one else had ever done before' (*A Meeting by the River*, 14). Oliver encounters the Swami — just as Isherwood met Swami Prabhavananda — at that time when Oliver was most open to a spiritual influence. He starts arguing with the Swami and expresses his doubts about the futility of trying to save one's soul and neglect the misery of other people: 'The very idea of mysticism set my teeth on edge' (*A Meeting by the River*, 13). He also raised a few questions relating to the Hindu philosophy of Vedantism. We here perceive Isherwood's own view of spiritual doubts in real life in his 'Introduction' to the lectures delivered by Swami Vivekananda: 'But we must remember that Naren's faith was no facile thing. He doubted greatly because he was capable of believing greatly' (1962, XVI). Oliver understands that there is something in the Swami's religion which gives him an equanimity and openness. Days on end they talked with each other, but Oliver was more influenced by his personality than his cleverness in conversation. In this time, therefore, the Isherwood hero does not rebel against the dead father, nor does he invent his own father ; instead, he actually follows the plan this surrogate father had intended for him. Oliver feels secure in the Swami's rocklike assertion that he will remain with him even after death. He expresses his firm conviction that the Swami 'is with me always, wherever I am' (*A Meeting by the River*, 145) : He is convinced that the power of the Swami works in mysterious ways. So, unlike the heroic father of Philip or of Eric, Oliver's Swami does not return to haunt but to help and heal.

Oliver was, however, greatly impressed by the indifference of the Swami to his personal interests. He was influenced not by the Swami's words but by his monkish life-style. He was convinced that the Hindus do not disdain activity or withdraw from it. They absolutely agree that the world's task has to be done and an attitude of non-attachment should be maintained. This is what Isherwood writes in *An Approach to Vedanta* : 'You know now that you are the Atman and that every action is done for the sake of the Atman alone. Work has become sacramental. No fruits of it are desired, no consequences are feared' (1963, 161). Oliver follows the principles of non-attachment and his life undergoes a marked change under the influence of the Swami, who does not enjoin Oliver to do anything or tries to impose his own will upon him. He submits wholeheartedly to the will of God and thus prepares for taking *Brahmacharyay*, the first monastic vows that give him the official status of a disciple. The vows, according to Oliver, are 'pretty much the same in spirit as the Christian ones — confidence in thought, word and deed, (*A Meeting by the River*, 18). Oliver learns from the Vedantic religion that the Absolute Reality or Brahman is pervading the whole universe and is also present within the mind of man. Vedanta thus postulates : 'Just as the fire enters the earth and takes the shape of the combustible material, so the Atman enters the body of all living beings and just as the wind enters the world and takes the shape of different objects, so the one Atman residing within the body of all living beings has taken the shape of the human body' (*The Principal Upanishads*, 639). Oliver also learns from Vedanta the principle of 'self-discipline' which teaches man how to get over his ego-sense through meditation. This attempt proves to be a test of mental strength in the case of one who seeks to become a *Sannyasin*. He must free himself from the world of illusion and ego. Oliver thus writes in his diary : 'When shall I get it through my head, once and for all, that the ego, the Oliver in me, never will and never can be anything but a vain little monkey ?.... I know perfectly well that I ought to be dissociating myself from it, calmly and firmly This is what self-discipline means' (*A Meeting by the River*, 30).

An Irish journalist Rafferty wants an interview with Oliver on the eve of his taking *Sannyas* and manages to get the permission of Mahanta Maharaj,

the head of the monastery, through Patrick. The Rafferty episode is Patrick's own contrivance with a view to dissuading his brother from his chosen path of becoming a saint ; it is also by Isherwood to testify Oliver's practice of 'self-discipline'. Rafferty brings with him a group of Indian journalists. On the eve of his renunciation of Western culture and in fact, of his old self, Oliver passes through a state of acute mental conflict and tries to practise self-control. This is not, admittedly, the proper time for an interview, for privacy is Oliver's greatest need of the moment. He is on preparation for his final initiation through meditation. But the Irish journalist is encouraged by Patrick to intrude into Oliver's privacy. Oliver writes in his diary : 'One lesson I learnt from the Rafferty incident is that it is very important to enter willingly into the game' (*A Meeting by the River*, 104). Oliver is disgusted and the incident is squarely repugnant. But he tries to get over this attitude by calling the Rafferty incident the Divine play of *Maya*. In Vedanta *Maya* is described as the indescribable divine power present both in the good and the bad, a power which can work wonders : 'You should know nature to be *Maya* and God to be the master of *Maya*' (*The Principal Upanishads*, 734). In their translation of Shankara's *Vivekchudamani* Swami Prabhavananda and Isherwood have observed : 'God means *Iswara*, the ruler of *Maya*..... The circumstances of our life, our pains and pleasures, are all the result of our past actions in this and countless previous existences, from a beginningless time. Viewed from a relative standpoint, *Maya* is quite pitiless. We get exactly what we earn, no more, no less'(1946, 27). By calling the Rafferty incident a Divine play of *Maya*, Oliver is somehow making himself responsible for this untoward incident. If he is moved by the external incidents as such, it means that, he has not got over his vanity. He must rise above his self-consciousness : 'It's Oliver who is fake and I don't have to identify with him' (*A Meeting by the River*, 105). A true *Sannyasin* is one who is capable of facing praise and humiliation alike. Thus Oliver has to undergo a terrible struggle until he overcomes all temptations, material taints and egotism. Through the character of Oliver, with all his honest doubts and their solutions, all his spiritual struggle ending in peace, *A Meeting by the River* becomes Isherwood's exploratory vehicle for moral and spiritual values.

More effective and subtler than Rafferty incident is Patrick's temptation which occurs towards the close of the novel. Patrick finds the qualities of leadership in Oliver, which, in his view, would enable him to become pre-eminent in whatever field he chooses to put his energies into. He speaks straight to Oliver: 'You'd have proved yourself that your faith was strong enough to survive outside in the wicked world' (*A Meeting by the River*, 132). We are here reminded of Satan's offer to give Jesus power over all the kingdoms of the world. Brian Finney says: 'Just as Satan tempts Jesus, after his fast of forty days and nights, to turn stones into bread, Patrick urges Oliver to attend more to his bodily needs and further offers him the temptations of the flesh when he exercises naked before him' (1979, 262). One may also recall, in this connection, the subtlest temptation given to Thomas Becket by the Fourth Tempter in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* to become a martyr for self-glory. Becket wavers a little and ultimately realises the danger — the sin of spiritual pride to which Lucifer or Satan yielded — and resists the temptation confidently. Similarly, Oliver struggles hard to overcome all the temptations, passes all the tests successfully and sticks to his decision to get initiated. Patrick finally submits to his brother's will and endorses the Hindu belief to which his brother is committed. Oliver writes: 'Patrick put his camera away and suddenly without any warning dropped to his knees and took the dust of my feet and bowed down before me' (*A Meeting by the River*, 146). He includes Patrick in the mystical communion of himself and his Swami: 'The general impression I had was that Patrick had got himself into a spiritual state which was very serious, so serious as to be almost ridiculous but that nevertheless he would be alright' (*A Meeting by the River*, 146). In spite of his mistrust and antagonism, Patrick also admits in one of his letters to Penelope: 'And through him, I seem closer than ever to you, my darling — I mean, I feel such cleverness in the thought of us three together' (*A Meeting by the River*, 152). This sense of togetherness as perceived by the worldly - minded Patrick, nurtured in Western culture and Christian values, is indicative of the endorsement of the truth underlying the fundamental precept of Vedantism which Oliver has already adopted. Brian Finney has thus rightly described the novel as 'a metacomedy ending with both brothers and the Swamis, all

laughing at the cosmic joke in which they have participated' (1979, 265).

Now, what Isherwood, in his last novel, seeks to demonstrate, through Oliver's conversion to Vedantism, is that we are all inhabitants of the world of *Maya* and that the Ultimate Reality is Brahman. We all exist in him and as such whether we are saints like Oliver or sinners like Patrick, we have our importance in the vast scheme of the universe. As such, there is no fear of loneliness, no fear of death. Isherwood further affirms that no life, however 'lost', is valueless in this transcendental scheme, the world of Brahman, and no individual should be worried by fear or sorrow if he ceases to be his own self, transcends ego-consciousness and withdraws from the time-ridden world of sense - perceptions, beyond which exists what the Vedantists call Reality. This is how even a modern man, with all neurotic crises, can become what the *Gita* calls *Sthitapragna*, to be achieved through meditation or Yoga. Yoga, which is derived from the English word 'yoke' meaning 'union', is the only mystical technique, as prescribed by the Hindu Philosophy of Vedantism, of union with the Atman. Isherwood learns from the Vedantic literature that the creature is Atman and the Atman is Brahman which must be personified at first if it is to be loved and realized. A monist never disdains the dualism of Christian mysticism. But it is very hard for the rigid dualist to accept monism. Vedanta is essentially monistic, while Christo - centric Western mysticism is dualistic. This is, perhaps, one reason why only a Hindu mystic has access to complete transfiguration of his self into the Ultimate Reality, Brahman, the God Transcendent. Oliver, thus, in *A Meeting by the River* by turning himself into a Hindu mystic, not only overcomes all anxiety and fear of death but, in his final mystical vision, thinks of Patrick and the Swami in spiritual communion with each other. In *Vedanta for the Western World* Isherwood writes : 'It is upon the nature of the final mystical experience that all agree. What is this experience ? It seems that when the ego-sense has, through constant self-discipline, grown very weak, there comes a moment of which the presence of the essential nature is no longer concealed' (1945,8-9). The saint becomes aware that the Atman actually does exist. Furthermore, he experiences the nature of the Atman as his own nature. He knows he is nothing but Reality. This is what the Christian writers call 'the mystic union' and the Vedantists

Samadhi. The attainment of this ecstasy is the spiritual being's *summum bonum*.

Within the novel's texture, then, what makes Patrick and Oliver share the need of each other is their dedication to an ideal — the Vedantic vision of universal brotherhood — which gives meaning to their lives. That the novel closes with the reconciliation of the brothers affirms the very Vedantic ideal of oneness. The relationship is meant, in fact, to symbolize the oneness of all beings in the enlightened state. Both brothers express the desire of their deepest selves to overcome isolation. Oliver has the awareness of his Swami's concern for Patrick and of the belief that 'the three of us belonged together intimately' (*A Meeting by the River*, 146). Patrick, on the other hand, informs Tom : 'I'm certain that you could be my brother — the kind of brother I now know I've been searching for all these years' (*A Meeting by the River*, 109). We are here to understand that through acceptance of self the brothers are no longer threatened by one another and now respond with the love they have always felt in the blood. Oliver no longer considers Patrick to be his enemy but rather an essential part of his own being. It is here significant to note that Isherwood in his last novel resolves the old dichotomy between the Truly Strong and the Truly Weak Man. He recognizes that the Enemy is no longer the majority or the outside forces which he earlier called 'Others'. The mature Isherwood can now discern them as capacities residing simultaneously within a person. For Oliver, the Enemy is not the outside world : withdrawal from the world, Oliver realizes, actually binds him to the world's people by his love of them. Hence the Enemy no longer implies spite but the warring self within, and in religious terms one has to reconcile the old self with the new one. Understandably, then, what separated the two brothers is not, finally, important but what ties them together showing up the centrality of Oliver's discovery : 'What unites is the one and only thing that really matters' (*A Meeting by the River*, 99). And Oliver's recognition is Isherwood's, a stage of definite spiritual progress. Oliver is meant to be seen to achieve this self-realization which for Isherwood is man's higher goal in life. Discovery of one's true self may or may not make one holy but it is surely important for one who has constantly and consistently striven for it.