CHAPTER SIX

THE LOSS OF THE SELF

Prater Violet & The World in the Evening

> For to take that other way would mean I should lose myself. I should no longer be a person. I should no longer be Christopher Isherwood.
>
> — Christopher Isherwood

The Berlin crisis egged Isherwood on to make further probe into the growth of his self. In the final diary of *Goodbye to Berlin* Isherwood seemed to turn inward; the curiosity which once propelled him to visit Berlin is now changed into personal despair. To Isherwood's horrifying torment of the 'lost' city was added an acute anxiety about the explosive political state of contemporary Europe: the Sudetenland Crisis in August and September 1938, the big jolt that the communists suffered at the Spanish Civil War, the fall of the Weimar Republic, the Munich Crisis and above all, Isherwood's 'own "War" complex' only compounded his personal crisis. In fact, as Paul Piazza says, 'Isherwood is so much engrossed with himself that he does not see his despair macroscopically reflected in Europe's; instead, he sees England's and Europe's problems mirrored in his own manic behaviour' (1978, 103). In short, Isherwood found the whole contemporary world as too insane.

One noticeable change that occurred in Isherwood's life, during this time of crisis and despair, was his gradual disillusionment with the Communist Party. The disillusionment was, invariably, the result of his serious concern about the future prospect of his homosexual practice. The fact is that, in 1934, the communist government of Russia retracted its 1917 recognition of the private sexual rights of the individual. This only exacerbated Isherwood's resentment with the Communist Party, causing on his part a retreat into the private self. He writes in *An Approach to Vedanta* (1963) : 'I should have to put my emotions back from a political one on to a personal basis' (10). He also realized that his attempts at left-wing orthodoxy had been abortive. He said to Auden : 'You know, it just did not mean anything to me anywhere — the Popular Front, the

party line, the anti-Fascist struggle' (1993,97). He felt that 'all the slogans I had been repeating and living by were essentially materialistic' (1963, 10). Isherwood thus realized that he was neither an iconoclast nor an anti-son of Kathleen and Frank, nor even a Marxist but a pacifist. Isherwood's trip to China, in 1938, accompanied by W.H. Auden, where he got the traumatic experience of war, was no less significant in intensifying his idea of pacifism. As he himself admits : 'The visit to China brought me back from a world of political principles to a world of human values which I had temporarily lost' (1963, 8). This realization was a necessary prelude to some possibility of change and marked, evidently, a turning-point in the author's career as well as his overriding quest for the self. In a letter to John Lehmann he thus wrote : 'I have discovered what I didn't realize before, or what I wasn't till now, that I am a pacifist. That is one reason why I am going out to Hollywood, to talk to Gerald Heard and Huxley' (quoted in Piazza:1978,108-9).

Isherwood left for the USA on 19 January 1939, accompanied by W.H. Auden — a journey which Cyril Connolly described as 'the most important literary event since the outbreak of the Spanish War' (quoted in Piazza :1978, 108). In America he contemplated more and more on pacifism. He met Gerald Heard in California, along with Aldous and Maria Huxley who had been there since 1937 advocating pacism while studying Eastern Religion. Months later, Isherwood left for Los Angeles where, through Viertel, he met Thomas Mann, Greeta Garbo and Charlie Chaplin among others. But his most important introduction came from Gerald Heard through whom Isherwood met Swami Prabhavananda, a Hindu monk who had set up a centre for Vedantic philosophy. He continued, for hours, to wrangle with the Swami over a number of issues related to Vedantism. He was, however, ultimately convinced and accepted Vedanta which speaks of the essential truth about human nature and also answers to the problems that he had faced during those critical years of his life. This is why, in the autumn of 1940, Isherwood officially became the disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, and accepted him, as he himself admits in *My Guru and His Disciple,* 'as my first and only religious teacher; my Guru' (1980, 38).

Isherwood's predilection for Vedantism was a corollary to his early revolt

against Christianity. He had no faith in orthodox Christian religion which seemed to have turned God into a constitutional monarch. He writes in *The World in the Evening*: 'I could never make much out of Church religion. They seemed to me to have turned their God into such a very constitutional monarch' (1966,236). Apart from this, Christian mysticism, theologically, indeed, is based on dualism, which suggests that a Christian mystic hardly attains spiritual transfiguration, while Hindu mysticism, as Vedanta would have it, is essentially monistic, providing potential means of transformation of an individual self into some impersonal or transpersonal or universal self through the steady process of meditation or Yoga ('Yoga' comes from 'yoke' which means 'union'). One explanation offered for this by S. Radhakrishnan in his *History of Philosophy : Eastern and Western* (1953) is that 'while Western mysticism is Christo-centric and seeks to repeat in the soul the experience of Christ, the Eastern centres on the acceptance of the Holy Spirit of God for deification of the whole personality from within' (195). The Holy Spirit is Immanent in the created world as well as implanted by grace in man. So there is not in the East the same tendency to find a dualism between the natural and the supernatural as there is in the West,. Now, if the goal of mysticism is the communion of the individual self with the Universal Consciousness, or Brahman in Vedantic terms, there the Hindu philosophy of monism is affirmative. Vedanta teaches that man's real nature is divine and that the aim of man's life is to discover or recognize that divine nature within, which is called Atman and thereby, to become an illuminating part of Brahman, the Godhead, the unchanging Reality. Within the Vedantic belief, then, an individual is able to merge his essence with Brahman. Isherwood thus writes in the Introduction to *Vendanta for the Western World* that 'the Atman in Christian terminology is God Immanent. Brahman is God Transcendent. Atman and Brahman are one' (1945,2).

Vedanta also accommodated Isherwood's homosexual nature and resolved a number of psychological problems which had beset him ever since. Vedanta does not disapprove of homosexuality but views it as another form of attachment. The dichotomy between the spiritual and the carnal is one that has never been resolved for thousands of years; complete devotion to the one demands the rejection of the other. Isherwood had discovered that an active sexual existence

without spirituality was an empty experience. In this connection, Jonathan Fryer says: 'Eastern religions in general admit contradictions more readily than does the Western heritage of Judaco-Christianity' (1977, 217). Isherwood also shared the belief, only after prolonged debate with the Swami, that sex and spirit, both God-given, rightly reside in the same body in healthy co-existence. Vedanta, therefore, seemed to resolve Isherwood's problem with sexual practices and enabled him, in course of time, to find the right balance.

Now the question that invariably arises is to what degree Isherwood's conversion to Vedanta shaped his art. One important precept that Isherwood learnt from Vedanta is that he must relate his own self to the larger humanity around him. The Swami also recommended that 'Christopher should first open himstef up to feel the all-pervading Existence around him, both those visibly near and those far off" (quoted in Fryer :1977,198). This is evident in the fundamental themes of the novels written after Isherwood's conversion. In the earlier novels, Isherwood was chiefly concerned with the establishment of individual identity; in the later novels, he explores how to merge one's self with the people around. This is one reason, perhaps, why the artist's quest-motif in the novels of the Vedantic period, shifts emphasis from his concern with 'Who am I?' to 'Who am I in connection with others?' This idea of connection or wholeness — derived as it was principally from Vedanta — constitutes the thematic concern of Isherwood's later novels. After his conversion, Isherwood's new faith convinced him that all men are 'the children of God' and also 'the children of art' (Isherwood : 1961, 71). He should, therefore, manage to combine his individual needs with those of the people around him. The novels written after conversion, beginning with *Prater Violet* (1945) right up to the concluding one, *A Meeting by the River* (1967), well measure up to the values and precepts inculcated in Vedanta. They all reflect Isherwood's knowledge of man derived out of his knowledge of God and thus convey, in the words of Alan Wilde, 'a double vision of man seen through his own eyes and, as it were, through those of God' (1971, 100). Evidently, then, Vedanta not only shaped Isherwood's art in his later novels, but also a pattern of growth for him.

First among the novels of the Vedantic period, *Prater Violet* (1945) continues Isherwood's obsession with the self. One may, however, find a

spectacular drift in the emphasis given here to the world without over the world within. The artist's sense of self deepens, his self-assertion grows stronger and the namesake narrator looks at himself more critically and objectively rather than idealistically as in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains or Goodbye* to *Berlin*. As Isherwood feels more comfortable with his self, he is able to solve the problem of communication with others and ultimately with the universe by subordinating his needs to those of other people. Isherwood reconciles with his mother; he no longer argues with her and lives peacefully with his brother, Richard. So by the time of publication of *Prater Violet* Isherwood stands no more on the rocky ground with Kathleen as in the 1930's. He also establishes bonds with a parent-figure, Friedrich Bergmann, who teaches him, through his own conduct, how the artist must learn to compromise with the society he lives in. The father-figure is not like just Richard Frank, the heroic father to rebel against, not just Arthur Norris, teaching by negative examples, but a potential guide, drawn in the model of Swami Prabhavananda, the Guru, who instructs Isherwood that the essential matrix of art lies in communication with the people and the universe at large.

Conspicuously, therefore, *Prater Violet* demonstrates a new orientation in the novelist's thematic concerns. In 1943, Isherwood wrote to John Lehmann that 'he will have to find a new tone of voice; because the "ventriloquist's dummy" has changed somehow and needs a new dummy' (quoted in Lehmann : 1960, 154). This new tone of voice emerges from the change in the nature of the protagonist, from the new belief he derived from Vedanta. According to Paul Piazza 'The novel is significant because it bears witness to Isherwood's reinterpretation of reality in terms of Vedantist philosophy and because, for the first time, his hero establishes intimate contact with another human being whom he fittingly calls "father" ' (1978, 57). However, based as it is on a comprehensive and coherent system of beliefs and values, *Prater Violet* does not merely recount the narrator's growth in self-assurance but concentrates on his education in what he should do with his self, how he should accommodate others, underscoring, thereby, the seminal theme of the novel : Union.

The plot of the novel, though extremely brief, is based on Isherwood's collaboration with Berthold Viertel in London in 1934 on the film 'Little Friend'.

Here again 'Isherwood' is the person who tells the story. One day the narrator receives an unexpected telephone call, asking him to write the script of a film 'Prater Violet' (artificial violet) to be set in old Vienna during 1933-35. Chosen to direct the film is an extraordinary Viennese genius, Friedrich Bergmann. The young narrator and Bergmann at once establish between themselves a close rapport of, as it were, an affectionate son and a sympathetic father. Intelligently cultivated, sometimes solemn and sometimes playful, Bergmann is the symbol of the race to which he belonged, and became, in course, Isherwood's teacher, the Virgilian guide to the path towards spiritual illumination.

Bergmann dominates the whole film world and as a director plays an important role to breathe life into every corner of the studio world. As a young script writer Isherwood gets introduced into the studio world and perceives, within a couple of days, its simplicity, malice and final reconciliation. He is not, however, deeply involved in the day-to-day happenings inside the studio; he only observes, as in the Berlin novels, as a detached onlooker. We are given a detailed account of how Bergmann teaches his novice the art of script writing, and the methodology of his teaching is reflective of his mastery in film-making. One day he said to Isherwood, the author-narrator : 'Let me tell you something, Master, he began. The film's a symphony. Each movement is written in a certain key' (*Prater Violet,* 38).

Through the character of Bergmann Isherwood also offers a few glimpses of the turbulent state of Europe during mid-thirties and treats the problem of the artist's relation and commitment to the society he lives in. While in Germany Bergmann saw the Nazi Storm-Troopers moving on the streets like 'bandits'. He lost most of his money in consequence of the atrocities by the Nazis. His family was left in a state of uncertainty at Vienna. It is at this time of sheer anxiety that Bergmann was suddenly instructed to leave Germany and come to London to direct a motion picture. Bergmann could hardly afford to refuse the offer of the Imperial Bulldog's Chatsworth as he was in need of money. But the basic irony of the situation is that on the eve of 'Putsch' to power by the Australian Chancellor Dollfuss, a hunted man was required to direct a motion picture which would create the illusion of peace in Vienna. Bergmann recalls the trauma of

the pre-war revolution in Germany and Austria thus : 'The attack on Vienna, Prague, London and Paris, without warning by thousands of planes, dropping bombs with deadly bacilly...' (*Prater Violet,* 43). He airs his gloom when he narrates the present topsy-turvy state of Europe : 'Death comes nearer. Syphilis. Poverty. Consumption .... We are dying with our heads together in the oven' (*Prater Violet*, 43).

Nevertheless, Bergmann accepts the offer of the Imperial Bulldog to direct the film in London, by allowing his wife and children to stay at Vienna. The Viennese Director, Isherwood would suggest, is a brilliant example of a true artist who is aware of the commitment the society demands from his end. Bergmann teaches the young narrator to what degree an artist is responsible for the world around, and how one must accept, in Vedantic terms, one's *Karma*. When Vienna is embattled and his home and family are threatened, Bergmann hardly affords to think of abandoning his job. Through his conduct and instance he teaches Isherwood that true art cannot be separated from people, from life, despite all its harshness, and that, as he learnt from his own vicarious experiences, he must not use the pretext of art to divorce himself from life as he was wont to do early in the novel.

In *Prater Violet*, Isherwood, indeed, takes a few tentative steps on the path towards illumination, and progresses from bewilderment to the beginning of spiritual illumination. He has got Bergmann as his guide who teaches that one must recognize the reality that lurks beneath the outer consciousness and accept his obligation to the world and not just be concerned with self alone. It may be noted in passing that Bergmann's dialogue with Isherwood in connection with the age-old dichotomy between appearance and reality has philosophical depth and has its origin in the Hindu religious scripture, the *Gita*. It is a fact that *Prater Violet,* written as it was after Isherwood's conversion, was inspired by the *Gita*, translated by Isherwood in collaboration with Swami Prabhavananda, a year before the publication of the novel under discussion.

In an article 'The *Gita* and War', published in *Exhumations* (1966), Isherwood speaks of the major theme of the novel : the illusory nature of appearances.

In the *Gita*, Arjuna has Krishna for his charioteer, a fellow mortal, 'personal friend and his illuminated teacher' (1966, 106). Before the battle begins Arjuna asks Krishna to drive his chariot into the no man's land between the two armies. Krishna complies, and Arjuna surveys the hundreds of people, all his near and dear ones on the other side. He is deeply shocked at the idea that he will have to slay them for a victory in the war. He uses his will to act and refuses to fight. Krishna's reply untangles Arjuna's problems and crystalises the whole meaning of action and life. Krishna reminds Arjuna that he should not shrink from the act of killing, because 'in the absolute sense, there is no such act', because 'the Atman, the indwelling God is the only reality .... He only seems to kill' (1966, 107). Isherwood quotes from the *Gita* : 'Some say this Atman / Is slain, and others / Call It the slayer : They know nothing / How can It slay / Or who shall slay It?' Therefore, 'if Arjuna is objecting to the act of killing, as such, he need have no scruples. For he only seems to kill' (1966, 107). Then as a fellow mortal Krishna addresses Arjuna thus : it is Arjuna's caste-duty to fight. Hence he must wage war, without fear and desire in a spirit of detachment. For Arjuna, a member of the warrior caste, in defence of his family and property, is undoubtedly righteous. Being eventually illuminated, Arjuna confidently and joyously obeys.

Arjuna's education, derived as it was from Krishna, consists in distinguishing appearance from reality. The Vedantists would call it a journey towards light, the path of analysis or knowledge. It consists essentially in purifying one's vision, training the eye to distinguish between the genuine and the counterfeit. Bergmann in *Prater Violet* seems to be the analogon of Krishna. He is the Virgilian guide, the Jewish Socrates, a friend and a teacher to Isherwood, the disciple, the learner. Like a teacher of the Vedas, Bergmann seeks to reach out to the truth behind the appearance. He teaches how to fathom what lies at the deeper stratum of life. He also tells Isherwood what Vedanta teaches : that every individual has two selves, the apparent, outer self and the invisible, inner self. The inner self is unchanging, immortal and therefore, Real. Reality is beyond sense-perception, beyond appearances. In *Vedanta for the Western World* (1945) Isherwood writes : 'I see the Reality within the appearance. I see the world within Reality. And I love it as I love the Reality

itself' (7). Vedanta holds that the universe which is perceived by our senses is only an appearance. It is not what it seems. Beneath this appearance there is flux, there is an unchanging Reality, which Vedanta calls Brahman, the Godhead. Brahman is Existence itself, Consciousness itself. Isherwood further notes : 'If there is indeed an essential Reality, a Godhead, in the universe, then it follows that this Reality must be omnipresent '(1945,2). Every individual, then, has to realize his essential nature, unchanging nature, which the Vedantists call Atman. Atman and Brahman are synonymous; both exist beneath our sense-perception, our ego-consciousness. The aim of human life is to discover this Atman and hence our identity with the one, underlying Reality, that is, Brahman.

Isherwood's education in *Prater Violet,* pertaining to the reality of life, thus resembles Arjuna's. It enables him to move towards the path of analysis or the path of spiritual enlightenment. However, Bergmann's role as a Virgilian guide, as an exemplar of Isherwood's ideal man, is reinforced through the connection between him and Isherwood as father and son. There are, for example, at least three direct references to Bergmann as 'father' and to *Isherwood either as 'son' or 'child', as well as several others that are implied. It* is probable that Isherwood's acceptance of Swami Prabhavananda as *Guru,* internally and emotionally motivated, seems to have provided him with a positive resolution to his relationship with a father-figure. In an article 'What Vedanta Means To Me', published in *Vedanta and the West*', Isherwood clearly shows that the search for a father and the search for a religion had become inextricably interwoven in his consciousness. One may, however, find that in Isherwood's fiction two father types appear : in the early novels, the heroic father whose legend kept alive by Kathleen, emasculates his son; in the later books, after Isherwood's adoption of Vedanta, the sympathetic, broadly human, anti-heroic father. It is not unexpected then that in *Prater Violet* we see the namesake narrator on a more equal footing with his parent-figure, Friedrich Bergmann, than he was ever before.

A true artist as he was, Bergmann confronts Isherwood, the narrator, with a choice and makes explicit what the narrators of the Berlin novels only sensed. He may either accept 'the paternal, revolutionary tradition' which reminds him

of his duty as its anti-son and be loyal to 'the artistic tradition', or he may choose 'the bourgeoise dream of the mother' which he had earlier revolted against and abandoned in utter contempt. Isherwood makes the correct choice : he accepts his role as the artist's son and thus assures himself of being able to distinguish the real from the artificial and understands his own responsibility towards the world. Bergmann teaches Isherwood that every artist must do what he can and that there are limits to what one can do. In Vedantic terms, one accepts one's *Karma*, without expecting any return, and in virtue of his *Karma* he is able not only to serve others but to connect him to the whole mankind. Through his own conduct Bergmann shows the narrator how the artist must adjust himself to the community he belongs to as well as to the people he creates in the realm of his art.

Isherwood is Bergmann's greatest creation. Earlier in the novel Bergmann's statement that he would teach him from 'the beginning' only keeps us waiting for the results of the education obtained by the disciple. At the close of the novel we see the butterfly scrambling out of his cocoon. Isherwood appears with a fresh spiritual illumination. The moment of reckoning arrives. In fact, the real action of *Prater Violet* builds up with the artist's philosophical musings in the final seven pages. The narrator and Bergmann, after a party celebrating the completion of the movie, are found walking back home. It was dead of night. The lonely deserted streets, the unusually bright street-lamps and the silent atmosphere make Isherwood reflective. He feels, in a state of reverie, as if, that he is travelling to an indefinite end. He sees, with new fire and energy, Bergamann, Europe, his own life, all of life, from a radically changed perspective. He tries to move out of 'a separate secret consciousness, locked away within itself' (*Prater Violet*, 122). For the first time, the inner life of Isherwood unfolds here. He ponders over man's consciousness of himself and of others, and the possibility of a Greater One. Isherwood here poses a few fundamental questions about life and death. Life, according to him, is full of boredom, and this feeling of boredom is the inevitable result of our ego-consciouness — consciouness that we have a separate individual existence, that our obstinate belief that all our behaviours are conditioned by our environment. Our daily life is nothing but a habit, and we go on living like automations. Even our love-affairs are more or

less a habit. The consciousness of approaching death, either as a fearful or a longed-for event always haunts our mind and motivates us to go on doing our daily round of duties. Isherwood raises this question of 'boredom' in the Introduction to *Vedanta for the Western World* (1945). He points out that 'life's subtlest riddle : the riddle of human boredom' (4) makes man feel 'an emptiness' after attaining 'the world's advertised objectives'(4). As a solution to this riddle of boredom Isherwood prescribes the antidote of realization of one's own essential nature, which is called Atman in Vedanta. This Atman (Godhead within) exists in every individual and his recognition of this divine self serves as a therapy for all modern malaise infecting contemporary people, and gives 'a lasting strength, wisdom, peace and happiness' (1945,4).

At the close of the novel, Isherwood further suggests, as also what Vedanta would have it, that every object of the universe is an effect of Brahman, the Universal Consciousness. It stands to Brahman in the same relation as heat to fire. They are inseparable. Fire burns one but warms another, and is neither cruel nor kind. Here Isherwood puts another question : 'Now how do I stop being Christopher Isherwood ?' Answer : 'By ceasing to believe that you are' (1945,5). In other words, Vedanta teaches us that so long as man sticks to his ego-consciousness, to the belief that he stands apart from other people, he remains in a state of endless personal gloom and despair. If he is confined within his rigid ego, he is debarred from viewing the world objectively, from getting connected with the larger humanity. Isherwood further mentions that the scientists would agree with me that 'every living creature and every object are interrelated biologically, psychologically, physically, politically, economically. They are all of a piece' (1945,5). The truth, therefore, as the Vedantists would have it, lies in the antidote of self-realization, Atman, which enables one to get rid of his facile self and thereby to become connected with other people around him and finally, with the Supreme Being, Brahman.

The final pages of *Prater Violet* constitute a kind of epilogue to the book and also show Isherwood's epiphany. The novel begins with persistent self-confirmation ('Mr. Isherwood?' 'Speaking'. 'Mr. Christopher Isherwood?' 'That's me'), but it becomes, in the final impression, the artist's Dantesque journey

from inveterate ego-reinforcement to a loss of name and identity. It is a paradox that during 'that hour of the night at which man's ego almost sleeps' and 'the sense of identity, of possession, of name, address and telephone numbers, grows very faint' (*Prater Violet*, 121), the narrator feels most burdened by the awareness of himself as an oppressively separate identity. He begins to lay bare the unstable foundations on which he has been building his life. He reveals in the process the state of modern man, as described by Alan Watts : 'In the act of pulling everything at a distance so as to describe and control it, we have orphaned ourselves both from the surrounding world and from our own bodies — leaving "I" as a discontented and alienated spook, anxious, guilty, unrelated and alone' (quoted in Wilde : 1971, 94). Isherwood realizes the absurdity of his world and of himself, the detached world dominated by ego, as portrayed in the earlier novels : the 'I' which was once deemed to be his definition is now felt to be his prison; and the experience as such comes, obviously, as the culmination of what all his earlier protagonists felt and suffered.

In the final section of the novel, the narrator also faces the problems of communication and identity. He asks some important questions: 'What makes you go on living?' No more the earlier narrator's 'Who am I ?', but now 'Why am I ?' These questions are at the heart of the novel. It is, perhaps, the presence of these fundamental considerations of life which prompted Viertel to comment that although Isherwood has his namesake 'in every book he has written, (he has) never before (been) so frankly exposed' (1946,297). Isherwood, however, finds that he 'goes on living' because there are things to do : 'We had to go on playing them as long as we were together' (*Prater Violet,* 125). This desire for duty is the desire for communication, for destroying barriers and even more radically for merging the self with something other than the self. We perceive the need for union fighting its ideological and emotional battle against the protagonist's habitual sense of separateness and fear. Isherwood tries various alternatives in a bid to overcome the barriers of communication, to remove the fear of isolation and thereby, to progress from the personal to the impersonal. But each solution points more emphatically to the final and inevitable dissolution of the self as a necessary condition to integrate the divisions within himself.

Isherwood, first, explores the experience of love as a means of some transpersonal union. He paints a sentimental picture of his vocation with J., his lover, but he begins to see the possibility of its failure to establish communication. The narrator uses the initial letter of the name of his lover and says : 'After J. there would be K. and L. and M., right down the alphabet. It's no use being sentimentally cynical about this or cynically sentimental. Because J. is not really what I want' (*Prater Violet*, 124). He realizes that J. is not important in his life nor are other anonymous lovers, because none of them can establish communication. The love which he imagines is egocentric and narcissistic and centres round the ego to escape from itself into oblivion. He feels frustrated in his quasi-anonymous lovers or in the sexual act of itself. The problem is not that his lover is meaningless and therefore deserves no individualising. Isherwood does not place him in the gallery of K., L. and M., which would suggest involvement in a number of physical affairs. The point is that this individual has no more meaning than any other. He recognizes that there will be K., L. and M., 'because J. is not really what I want. J. has only the value of being now. J. will pass, the need will remain... the pain of hunger beneath' (*Prater Violet,* 124). Thus neither love-making nor sexual partnership offers the possible 'way that leads to safety' or provides any potential means of intimacy, of merging his self with others.

Finally, the narrator goes to explore the fear of death — 'death the desired, the feared'. He is surely afraid of death and unable to face it rationally. He accepts this fear as part of himself, 'but how infinitely faint, how distant, like the high far-glimpse of a goat track through the mountains between clouds, I see something else : the way that leads to safety' (*Prater Violet,* 125). Although the narrator glimpses, in his mystic vision, 'the way that leads to safety', the novel does not make clear what the way is. However, the image of 'the goat track through the mountains between clouds .... To where there is no fear, no loneliness, no need of J. K. or M.' suggests union with the infinite and subsequent loss of the solipsistic self. Isherwood's imagery of 'the high far glimpse of a goat track through the mountains' reminds us of the following sloka from *The Song of God : Bhagavad Gita* (1954) : 'Let him who climb / In meditation / To heights of the highest/ Union with Brahman / Take for his path / The Yoga of action'

(63). Paul Piazza explains Isherwood's movement as forward and upward, 'for to know the path one must travel in life is a step on that path and certainly a prerequisite for salvation' (1978, 70). For Isherwood, then, the means to overcome fear of death, of loneliness, is to lose his self, his personal identity : 'I should lose myself. I should no longer be a person. I should no longer be Christopher Isherwood' (*Prater Violet*, 125). Isherwood here obviously refers to his spiritual life, to the realization of the Supreme Being, the knowledge that enables one to say 'I know Him who is self-illuminating like the sun beyond all the darkness of ignorance. Only by knowing Him alone can one overcome the fear of death. There is no other way out' (*The Principal Upanishads*, 747). The final pages of the novel thus offer what could be called Isherwood's epiphany — his mystical feeling of connection with the Supreme Being, and conveys, as it were, the lyrical mysticism of a miniature *Bhagavad Gita*.

So, *Prater Violet* is, for Isherwood, the longest journey that begins with the artist's persistent confirmation of the self, but ends, paradoxically, with its loss — the abnegation of the self. Mrs. Trilling aptly remarked that 'it is a book written in the author's own person, yet utterly without ego' (quoted in Piazza : 1978,67). Thus with *Prater Violet* Isherwood seems to have largely resolved his question about identity and to have discovered as well the means of attaining it.

After *Prater Violet*, Isherwood published a few books on Vedanta, showing his commitment to the spiritual life and his belief in the values the books inculcate. Towards the end of 1945 *Vedanta for the Western World* was published by the Vedanta Society of Southern California. The book was chiefly a collection of pieces from *Vedanta and the West*, edited the previous year. In 1946, Isherwood completed the translation of *Shankara's Crest Jewel of Discrimination* with Swami Prabhavananda. He also collaborated the Swami on the translation of Patanjali's *Yoga Aphorisms*, published later in 1964. By this time Isherwood frequented the Vedanta Centre at Los Angeles and lived openly with Caskey, a vigorous farm boy, as his homosexual partner.

In 1953, however, Isherwood turned to a new novel, *The World in the Evening* which was published in 1954. The novel is concerned, as already

suggested in *Prater Violet*, chiefly with the problem of establishing intimacy. The earlier protagonists had tried to find the answer to'Who am I?' But *The World in the Evening* reflects a more mature version of the question and asks 'Who am I with someone else?' The fact is that Isherwood, from now on, had begun to see himself and his relationships with others differently, and we would expect to find this reflected in his work. The tentative suggestions of 'that other way', 'the way that leads to safety' in *Prater Violet* are here thoroughly and more intensively explored with a view to expressing the artist's dominant concerns which become central to the leading themes of the present novel and of those that follow it. Comfortable as he felt with his own self, Isherwood now tries to fuse his identity with that of others, reconciling, ultimately, the tension between intimacy and isolation. Intimacy, as Isherwood believed, denotes not only a commitment to an affiliation, but the ethical strength to live by the commitment which requires significant sacrifice of one's self. In *The world in the Evening* the artist, then, moves from being cared for to caring for others and love becomes for him potential means of connection and concord, which underlie the major themes and concerns of his novels of the Vedantic period.

As regards technique, the novel marks a bold departure from the earlier ones. Isherwood here uses the device of the third-person narrator, which had been used so extensively in the previous books. Since thematic emphasis has now shifted from self to selflessness and the artist begins to see his identity in a new light, he finds it pertinent to abandon the egotistical namesake narrator. In 1947, Isherwood wrote to Edward Upward : 'I'm determin'd to write in the third person and abolish 'Christopher Isherwood', but this other character has to be such lot of things which I am and also am not' (quoted in Fryer : 1977, 224). This is why, Stephen Monk, the protagonist of the novel, shares much with Isherwood in the outer events of his life, but differs from him in his inner feelings. His spiritual odyssey from anger to acceptance mirrors Isherwood's, but the novel portrays feelings which are obviously Stephen's. In fact, Isherwood's new awareness of others and of their feelings exerts pressure on him to leave the namesake narrator and move beyond the self as the only means to salvation. The decision was also motivated more by the professional considerations than personal ones — the artist seeking to experiment but the man still needing to portray, analyse and affirm his self.

The title of *The World in the Evening* seems to have been derived, as Alan Wilde believes, from John Donne's poem *The progress of the Soul* — 'I sing the progress of a deathless soul / .... And the great world to his aged evening;/ From infant morn, through manly noon I draw' (quoted in Wilde :1971,103). The borrowing provides a clue about the major focus of the novel : Stephen's progress from a selfish adolescent to a mature adult, and this progress is worked out through three large segments of the book : 'Part One — An End', 'Part Two — Letter and Life' and 'Part Three — A Beginning'. This partitioning signifies the jumps in time. The first section concentrates chiefly on Stephen's egocentricity and jealousy — his failures to be united with others in love. Part Two focuses on past action, as contained in the letters of Elizabeth Rydall, allowing Stephen a scope for reliving the past and rediscovering the self. The final section is fittingly entitled 'A Beginning' as it portrays the Dantesque 'purgatorio' in the career of the protagonist whose spiritual growth offers him a fresh lease of life.

Stephen Monk, the protagonist of the novel, is a wealthy American adolescent of thirty six. He is shocked to find that his second wife, young and lovely Jane falls in love with a screen star in a Hollywood party. Disgusted and jealous, he bolts back home, wrecks her bedroom and flees to Aunt Sarah, the Quackeress at Twelfan, in Dolgelly, Pennsylvania, where he was brought up under Sarah's care. It is significant that, for the first time, an Isherwood hero seeks to solve his problems indoors; instead of fleeing from home he seeks home as a place to sort them out. Stephen married twice, the first time a renowned writer, Elizabeth Rydall and second time a society lady, Jane. Both had public celebrity in their own way. He was jealous of the fans of his first wife and married Jane, but ultimately suspected Jane for having been pregnant by another man and divorced her. Stephen also developed homosexual relation with Michael Drummond, which did not last long.

At Pennsylvania, Stephen meets the German refugee girl Gerda Mannheim whose husband is in interment camp. Sensing that he still cannot face his failures, he deliberately steps in front of a speeding truck. He is injured badly and gets a little better by Gerda's expert nursing and sisterly care. During his

convalescence he re-reads abed the letters of Elizabeth and is recalled to life. The major part of the novel treats Stephen's physical and psychological recovery as he recalls the past. At the end of the novel, however, Stephen and Jane meet on friendly terms. But there is no remedy for the mischief already done; but in the hero's confession to Jane of his past misdeeds we discern his growth — the progress of his soul.

Ostensibly, then, *The World in the Evening* is about growth and self-understanding, as Isherwood's novels always are. He must understand himself in his intimate relationship with his two wives and his lover, Michael Drummond. But like the earlier protagonists who never succeeded in overcoming their private temporal world of ego, Stephen too remains aloof, his loneliness suggesting an egotism which is responsible for his failure to negotiate his adulthood for close identification with others. In *Prater Violet*, Isherwood is aware of a need for something beyond sex, but the intimacy he longs for is beyond his grasp. Stephen has all that Isherwood desires, but he lacks the discipline intimacy calls for. As the first part of the novel suggests, Stephen is never propelled by the true passion of love to get closer either to Elizabeth or to Jane or even to Michael. Goaded as he was by a sense of pride and inferiority complex, he always kept aloof from Elizabeth, the celebrated novelist. As he himself admits, 'a perverse pride or stubbornness would make move away from her, as far as I could get, the moment the introductions were over' (*The World in the Evening,* 145). Stephen's childish carelessness was also responsible for his indifference to Elizabeth. After their marriage Elizabeth describes her young husband, ten years her junior, to Cecilia as 'a child lost in fairy - story forest' (*The World in the Evening*, 84). This purple romantic utterance may be an exaggeration on the part of a newly married woman, but it is an exaggeration of the vital truth that Stephen displays his childishness and even childish cruelty on more than one occasion. Referring to Stephen Gerda once said, 'This Kid I can see in you I like very much only, Stephen, you know, children can be cruel sometimes, by not thinking' (*The World in the Evening,* 60). Like a child again, he looked upon marriage as a funny game and enjoyed the idea that unknown people should think of him as Elizabeth's husband: 'I suppose, I still regarded marriage as a kind of game' (*The World in the Evening,*131).

Stephen lacks consistency. In the beginning, he feels jealous of the fans of Elizabeth, but then he does the work of her secretary and house keeper and leaves Elizabeth free to think about her novels. However, he cannot shake off his feeling of jealousy and egotism. He remains a misfit who cannot adjust himself with the intellectuals and fans admiring Elizabeth or with the fashionable society to which his second wife Jane belongs. Moreover, it is Stephen himself who is responsible for Jane's supposed unfaithfulness. The idea of a baby sharing the love of his wife, even if it is his own baby, drives him mad and he pretends to Jane that another man, Martin, must be the father of the baby. Again, he feels relieved on hearing the news that Elizabeth has got her abortion. Further, Stephen's brief affair with Michael Drummond is not only a betrayal of his relationship with Elizabeth, it is also a betrayal of the gift of love she has given him. When Michael reappears in Stephen's life and lets him know that he has come back because he still loves him, Stephen hardly cares for his passion of love. In fact, Stephen's cold-hearted treatment of Michael provides an example of his failure to develop an ethical sense necessary to sustain any relationship. His childish immaturity and jealousy, coupled with his inveterate egotism dissuaded him on every occasion to see the problems of others, to feel the needs of others as his own and finally, to get connected with others in love.

In the second part of the novel, 'Letters and Life', Stephen relives the past by reading the letters of Elizabeth, which he hopes to edit for a book in the same way as J. Middleton Murray edited Katherine Mansfield's letters and journals. At Sarah's house at Twelfan, he lies on bed with his broken thigh, and reads Elizabeth's letters. While reading these frank, inspirational letters, he vicariously relives the struggle of this perceptive, sensitive woman seeking to comprehend her work, her inner life and her life with him. The hours Stephen spends with her letters are transformed into moments of high truth during which he re-experiences his own past. The letters of Elizabeth, however, reverberate two themes which occupy a large part of this larger section of the novel : her honesty as a writer and her heroism. As Stephen himslef affirms, Elizabeth never made any compromise. When Gerda denounces Elizabeth's novels as irrelevant to politics, Stephen replies that Elizabeth never dealt directly with

'world-situations or big-scale tragedies'. Even at her death she remained committed to her craft and its values.

The confessional letters of Elizabeth Rydal who is modelled on Katherine Mansfield, however, serve as a therapy to Stephen. Paul Piazza observes that 'Isherwood intends Stephen's letter-reading to be more akin to prayer than to nostalgic recall of a former lover's words and actions' (1978,47). By reading Elizabeth's letters and by recapitulating the memories of the past, Stephen discovers a new life in the giant shadow of his dead wife, who is more present to him than anyone else. Her memory does not eclipse, rather it floods the present with life. He faces his dependence on Elizabeth, his egoistical cruelty to Jane and to Michael, his homosexual lover. He manifests his guilt over having betrayed Elizabeth first by his obsession with her memory and then by offering himself up to her completely. What Stephen does, in effect, is to open himself to the truth of his past life of childish dependence and egotism, in addition to his lack of integrity in personal relationships. These experiences he conveys as counsel to Charles Kennedy and Bob Wood who are verging on a separation. Stephen indeed grows up. He has travelled through the Dantesque woods as referred to in the letters of Elizabeth, and obtains mystical experiences as indicated in Isherwood's Vedantic books.

As Stephen grows, so does Isherwood. In his mature years Isherwood is found no longer at loggerheads with his mother. He seems to feel repentant for what he has already done towards her and revises his stand vis-à-vis his mother. This is clearly indicated in Elizabeth's novel, *As Birds Do Mother*. The idea contained in the book is Elizabeth's, but the sentiment is surely Isherwood's. The title of the novel is taken from an expression that occurs in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Isherwood reads a new meaning in Shakespeare's expression. In *Macbeth* Lady Macduff thinks that Macduff is killed and she asks her young son, 'And what will you do now? How will you live?' The boy replies sportively : 'As birds do mother.' Elizabeth is intrigued by the young boy's answer and goes on to contemplate on the two generations represented by mother and son. Unlike the monstrous mother, Kathleen, Lady Macduff, utterly and angrily alone with her tragedy longs to break down the barrier

between them; to get through to him and make him share what she feels. In his mature years too, Isherwood seemed to be sympathetic to his mother's needs. Trying desperately to unclench Kathleen's grip on his life — by refusing an academic career, by revolting against religion — he separated himself from his mother. But, ironically, in his later years, Isherwood accepted the job of teaching and became an academician. He became a religious person by embracing Vedanta. Indeed, an irony seems to be at work in Isherwood's life exactly as it takes place in his novels. And Paul Piazza rightly observes that 'the irony with which he (Isherwood) decks his novels he begins to glimpse in his own life as a saving grace' (1978,52). Towards the end of his life, Isherwood realized that there is no real basis of quarrel between two generations and it is because they try to avoid involvement and commitment that they fail to understand each other.

Renewed and purged of his egotism, Stephen, at the close of the novel, admits to Jane, his second wife, a number of important facts about him : that he provoked Jane into adultery, that he rekindled their affair out of guilt over his betrayal of Elizabeth and that he had judged people according to his private standards. This understanding and acceptance of responsibility marks Stephen's growth. Stephen's confession as such is immediately followed by 'Part-Three — A Beginning'. Indeed, reading Elizabeth's letters over again and learning how she had viewed and loved him in the past — have all served for Stephen's spiritual illumination. Stephen is greatly invested with Elizabeth's grace and mystical experiences as revealed in the letters. As he reads Elizabeth's letters, the question that Stephen asks is not Isherwood's to Bergmann in *Prater Violet* :not 'What makes you go on living?' but 'How can I possibly be of any interest to you?' The protagonist learns that the reassurance and love he demands from others requires an investment of self in them which he has here-to-fore been unwilling to make. In the final pages of the novel, he explains to Jane how he lacked the sense of 'togetherness' in his earlier dealings with his two wives, how his exclusive concern with individual self led to the break-up of the marital ties one after another. He also realizes that he cannot exist alone, that his existence becomes meaningful only when it is connected with others. It is only after Stephen has 'cut all life lines' that he can understand the meaning of life,

and that he can assert 'I do really exist'. This is no doubt a new development in the career of the protagonist and in the career of Isherwood too : the emphasis is not on existence, but on existence in connection with others.

One may, however, find a narrative fault in the way Isherwood effects Stephen's self-realization. Stephen reads Elizabeth's letters and achieves freedom through the discovery of himself as Elizabeth has known him, loved him. He gives expression to this discovery in a letter to Jane. But Isherwood has not dramatised Stephen's change in action or in deeds, as he had done in case of Christopher in *Prater Violet*. This is how the narrator distances himself from the protagonist. Because he has abandoned the device of the namesake narrator, he cannot experience the narrator's feelings; he cannot dramatise Stephen's feelings convincingly. The only option, therefore, left to Isherwood, is to reveal himself through the secondary characters, who function as various segments of Isherwood's personality and of his self-analysis.

Elizabeth Rydal, among these secondary characters, easily come to the forefront, since she represents in her writings what Isherwood thought about life and art or what he learnt from Vedanta. Carolyn G. Heilbrun sees Elizabeth as 'probably the closest Isherwood has come to a self-portrait... portrait of the humanly suffering individual with the 'dharma' of an artist' (1970,41). In his earlier novels Isherwood's namesake narrators have all been would-be artists, and the novelist has made close identification with them. Even in Bergmann is presented the fortune of a suffering artist. The point is that Elizabeth represents the writer and embodies the intuitive aspect of Isherwood's personality and vision. Isherwood's spiritual interests are also carried forward through the characters of Gerda and Sarah. Gerda represents what might be called 'worldly spirituality'. Like Bergmann in *Prater Violet* she also believes that art must not be divorced from politics, or from life, and that an artist must suffer to grasp the realities that lurk under the surface of life. Sarah Pennington, even more than Gerda, injects into the novel's texture the view of 'religious spirituality' in her devotion to and involvement with the Quakers. As Alan Wilde says, '(She) functions in the novel primarily as another embodiment of spiritual reality' (1971,109). Indeed, Sarah Pennington, through her practice of Quakerism,

becomes an instance of involvement and commitment — an ideal which is obviously Isherwood's.

It is, however, Elizabeth Rydal who explains, for Isherwood, the religious connotation of the novel. Elizabeth's religion is Isherwood's. Like Isherwood, Elizabeth had little faith in the orthodox Christian religion : 'I could never make very much out of Church religion. They seem to me to have turned their God into such a very constitutional monarch' (*The World in the Evening,* 236). Like a true Vedantist, she refers to God as 'It' rather than 'He', and believes that the Vedantic God, unlike the Christian God, is not vindictive nor does He intervene in human affairs. Isherwood, true to the spirit of Elizabeth, also writes in his book on Vedanta that 'Brahman does not intervene in the world's affairs .... It has nothing to do with the shifting standards of good and evil, pleasure, unhappiness, right and wrong' (1945,5). Elizabeth believes in the source of life within her, which cannot be destroyed : 'There is a source of life within me — and that it cannot be destroyed. I shall not live on, but It will' (*The World in the Evening*, 236).

Elizabeth also accepts what Isherwood described in his Vedantic writings as 'Non-attachment' (Nishkama Dharma) — the ability to perform an action successfully, without fear or desire. And to make this point Isherwood devotes a large part of the novel to Elizabeth, to affirm the primacy of her integrity and of her ethics of creativity. The thoughtless cruelty of Stephen makes Jane vindictive and she poses to be unfaithful. But in the case of Elizabeth Stephen's heartlessness never produces the feeling of humiliation. When she comes to know that her husband is making love, at her back, with an American girl, Jane, she does not feel hysteric nor does she burst out into fury. She tries to get over her ego-sense which suggests an attempt at self-discipline. She sees 'life as pain, attachment as pain, possession as pain, and in the midst of this realization found some charity and peace' (*The World in the Evening,*23[illegible]). Elizabeth believes in the principle of 'Non-attachment' and transcends all pains and afflictions, fears and desires, and is, thus, able to move to the path of spiritual peace and serenity. This is clearly echoed in Isherwood's statement that occurs in *An Approach to Vedanta* (1963) : 'Theoretically, at least ... every action ...

may be a stepping stone to spiritual growth, if it is done in the spirit of non-attachment' (61). In confirmation of Isherwood's statement Elizabeth Rydal achieves this awareness for which her whole life is a vicarious preparation. Evidently, we find in Elizabeth a real saint, and with her mystical experiences she resembles what is called ' Sthitapragna' in the *Gita* — a mystical being who remains unmoved either by sorrow or by happiness and rises above lust, fear, anger or disappointment. In fine, Elizabeth could be said to have a unique combination of the artist, the saint and the social activist within herself. It was equally Isherwood's endeavour.

Three minor characters in the novel, Bob Wood, Charles Kennedy and Michael Drummond are drawn with a view to carrying Isherwood's precept of the novel. Bob is a militant young man who characterises plea for freedom. Charles Kennedy, a doctor, with the aspiration to write, resembles Isherwood much more than any other character in the novel. But, of all the minor characters in the novel, it is Michael Drummond who is drawn as close as possible to the protagonist, Stephen Monk. He is intended to serve as a dramatic foil to Stephen. On the one hand, he represents the positive image of a homosexual and on the other, the negative image of Stephen, exposing the latter's covert fantasy of freedom from responsibility, his cruelty and ego-centricity. Bob and Charles, in their marital relationship, extend the novel's overall theme of commitment and connection more than Stephen and his wives could do.

However, since Isherwood's major concern in the novel is to portray the spirituality of connection — the ideal he derived from Vedanta — he concentrates, ultimately, on Stephen's growth, and the final section of the novel is largely devoted to that end. Stephen's growth consists in self-knowledge which implies transcendence through union with Universal Consciousness and discovery of God within. Eastern philosophies such as Vedanta place great value on self-knowledge. Isherwood explains the notion of self-knowledge as another part of ourselves which is non-individual and eternal. Alan Watts pertinently explains that 'the main resemblance between these Eastern ways of life [Buddhism and Taoism, Vedanta and Yoga] and Western Psychotherapy is in the concern of both with bringing about changes of consciousness, changes

in our ways of feeling, our own existence and our relation to human society and the natural world' (1961,3-4). Both the approaches stress transfiguration of individual identity with some Impersonal Being through an understanding of others as intimate part of one's life.

At Twelfan, Stephen's convalescence from his broken thigh makes him conscious of the memories of the past. But Stephen mentions that consciousness is not mere recapitulation .It is not identical with memory, for 'memory pieces things together gradually making a chain; this was total instantaneous awareness' (*The World in the Evening*, 100). Giving vent to his experience of the split moment, Stephen admits that thousands of bits of his life are scattered around him like the furniture of a room, all simultaneously present: 'What was aware of this was a simple consciousness that had no name, no face, no identity of any kind, consciousness lay here anonymous and looked at the accumulated clutter of half a life time' (*The World in the Evening* 100). The 'consciousness' which is referred to here is complete withdrawal of an individual self from the world of time and sense perceptions. When a person resigns himself to pure consciousness, his individual self stops working and Time, with its distinction of past, present and future, stops its function. In *How to know God : The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* (1953), Swami Prabhanannda and Isherwood explained Patanjali's 'aphorisms' thus: 'Every perception arouses the ego-sense which says"I know this". But this is the ego speaking, not the Atman, the real self' (17). Stephn's confession that 'consciousness was not I' conveys the Vedantic belief, which is also Isherwood's, that the secret of happiness lies in an escape from the ego, from sense-perceptions and in the discovery of the Atman, the God in man, the Universal Consciousness. Stephen does achieve this bliss of communion, the joy of togetherness. When he is sitting in the Meeting House with Sarah and other Quakers, he says : 'Togetherness grew and tightly enclosed us, until it seemed that we must all be breathing in unison' (*The World in the Evening*, 48).

This sense of togetherness, the idea that we are not alone but that all of us are manifestations of the same Atman and as such are related to one another surely marks Stephen's growth and spiritual enlightenment. Isherwood's burgeoning concern with connection and intimacy, thus, requires him to move

beyond a concern with personal identity. The artist, whose concern has always been to establish his self, seems to find fulfilment, most ironically, in the extinction of his self to the needs of others. It is significant that if Isherwood's artistic popularity lies with the pre-war fictions, dealing as they do with the world of self and time, his greatest strength may be found in the post-war fictions which limn with depth the world of spirit and eternity.

The two novels under consideration, *Prater Violet* and *The World in the Evening* may, however, be said to exhibit what Alan Wilde calls 'irony of liberation' and 'irony of reconciliation', as contrasted with the earlier novels which suggest 'irony of limitation'. In the earlier books, the irony dwells in between the limited and temporal world — the world of time and ego — and the moral values they inculcate. The protagonists like Philip, Eric, William and Christopher are restricted to the dimensions of time and are exposed in terms of their failures to face the odds of life, and to act upon the values underlined in those books. On the contrary, in the novels written after his conversion, the irony rests in the disparity between the world of time and the world of spirit. The protagonists of *Prater Violet* and *The World in the Evening* move between two opposed worlds, the worlds of ego and Atman. But they are shown to achieve the realization that they must transcend their egos as a pre-condition to self-discovery that would yield real freedom and salvation. Both the characters evince, in words and deeds, the feeling of the need of self-abnegation in the interest of others as a means of release from one's ego and reconciliation with Brahman.