The Unforgiving Margin in the Fiction of Christopher Isherwood

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY 2011
ABSTRACT

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Rebellion and repudiation of the mainstream recur as motifs throughout Christopher Isherwood’s novels and life, dating back to his early experience of the death of his father and continuing through to the end of his own life with his vitupervative rant against the heterosexual majority. Threatened by the accepted, by the traditional, by the past, Isherwood and his characters escape to the margin, hoping to find there people who share alternative values and ways of living that might ultimately prove more meaningful and enlightened than those they leave behind in the mainstream. In so doing, they both discover that the margin is a complicated place that is more often menacing than redemptive.

Consistently, Isherwood’s fiction looks at margins and the impulse to flee from the mainstream in search of a marginal alternative. On the one hand, these alternative spaces are thought to be redemptive, thought to liberate and nourish. Isherwood reveals that they do neither.

To explore this theme, the dissertation focuses on three novels, The Berlin Stories (The Last of Mr. Norris and Goodbye to Berlin), A Meeting by the River, and A Single Man, because each of these novels corresponds to marginal journeys of Isherwood—namely, his sexual and creative exile in Berlin from 1929 to 1933, his embrace of Hindu philosophy, and his life as a homosexual. Each of these novels positions characters outside of the mainstream in order to subvert a redemptive message and depict the margin as a very dark and dangerous place.
Chapter 1 focuses on the period from 1929 to 1933 when Isherwood lived in Berlin and on the collection entitled *The Berlin Stories*, which includes *The Last of Mr. Norris* and *Goodbye to Berlin*. That fiction tells of the variegated landscape that was Weimar Berlin. In that landscape, Isherwood discovers and examines others who, like himself, seek alternatives to the mainstream: the bohemian Sally Bowles, the Landauer family, who as Jews fear the rising Nazi tide, and the politically ambiguous Mr. Norris. His portraits of these people and the world they inhabit expose not only the darkest corners of mainstream Berlin, but also the futility of attempts to flee from the mainstream to more satisfying alternatives.

Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to Vedanta, one of the six schools of Hindu thought that would become central to Isherwood’s life from July of 1939 until he died in 1986 and that is at the heart of Isherwood’s final novel, *A Meeting by the River* (1967). In that work the margin and the mainstream are juxtaposed throughout. Rhetorically, the novel is rich and clearly one of Isherwood’s finest. One approach to the novel emphasizes the redemptive power of the margin. The monastic life and all that it entails spiritually free one from the burdens of the material world. A compatible approach to the novel emphasizes the power of self-discovery as a bonding agent between the brothers. I argue for an alternative reading of the novel, one that emphasizes Patrick’s journey and the implicit peril of the moral relativism endorsed by Vedanta. Patrick is nothing more than a con artist.

And finally, Chapter 4 examines Isherwood’s finest novel, *A Single Man*, the story of George, who is left alone after the death of his lover, Jim. Isherwood’s homosexuality asserts itself both covertly and overtly throughout the novels, though
today many of the positions reveal themselves as nascent attempts to understand sexual identity in personal, social, and political terms. *A Single Man* is Isherwood’s most sophisticated and probing look at what it means to be a homosexual. The militantly political is ever present. And yet, the novel is in many ways a contemplative piece, one of stunning beauty that grows out of the simple fact that George’s lover of many years has died. In reflecting on the cottage where they lived, George reminisces early on that “they loved it because you could only get to it by the bridge across the creek; the surrounding trees and the steep bushy cliff behind shut it in like a house in a forest clearing. ‘As good as being on our own island,’ George said.”¹ In essence, George and Jim cut themselves off from the world. They live unto each other and in a community of like-minded people. Together on the margin, they are content and fulfilled. And yet, when Jim dies, George is abandoned and adrift. He is deprived of mainstream consolation—public memorials, spousal recognition, and children—and deserted; he is a sobering portrait of isolation and despair.

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Acknowledgments

I begin by thanking Edward Mendelson, who has been enthusiastically supportive from the start and who continues to inspire me with his wisdom, knowledge, and abiding belief in the power of the text.

I am equally indebted to the members of my committee, each of whom challenged in order to illuminate and bolstered in order to encourage. To Peter Awn, Robert Klitzman, Victoria Rosner and Margaret Vandenber I am eternally grateful.

The work of Katherine Bucknell, who is without peer in the world of Isherwood scholarship, was indispensable to my work here. Having known Dr. Bucknell many years ago when we were young graduate students, I feel comfortable when I say, “thanks, Kate.”

Don Bachardy has been generous with his time and knowledge, providing me with access to his personal relationship with Isherwood and breathing life into a world I could otherwise have known only second hand.

In preparing the manuscript for submission, Joyce Ippolito was indispensable. Thank you, Joyce, for understanding the personal dimension to the work at hand.

At Vassar College, my advisor and teacher Paula Kopacz modeled for me what it means to be a meticulous scholar, a gifted teacher, and a true friend. My life is rich in so many ways because of her enduring presence. Over the years, many Columbians have enlightened and encouraged. I will never forget or be able to adequately acknowledge the support of Jan Allen, Karen Blank, Laura Brown, Mary Cargill, Claire Carroll, Ward Dennis, Ann Douglas, Kathy Eden, Alice Fredman, Robert Furno, Karen Green, Jean
Howard, David Kastan. Steven Marcus, James Mirollo, Frank Moretti, Catherine Nepomnyashchy, Henry Pinkham, Joseph Ridgley, Richard Sacks, Carol Slade, and Martha K. Zebrowski. I thank Jack and Cecily Salzman who were not only with me on two of the worst days in my life, but who inspired me early and have remained ever constant. My family at the School of Continuing Education has been a source of enduring support in this and many other projects. Thank you, Dean Kristine Billmyer, and all of my colleagues at SCE for the gift of time, patience, and understanding. In a world of her own, I thank Joy Hayton, Departmental Administrator in English for over thirty years; her prodding was persistent, but tempered by her unwavering faith that I would finish and prevail.

The love of true friendship fills my life on a daily basis. Manuel Hurtado makes Spain ever-present. Dennis Green delights with wit and whim. Ed Campanelli is quick to chat and distract. Darlene Giraitis is my companion in seafood and wine. And, Lisa Yakas is the older sister I always wanted. You all nourish my soul with food, song, solace and laughter.

My “out-laws,” Marina and Peter Johnson, have embraced me as one of their own for the past twenty-one years. Perhaps one day, if the government allows, they will become my in-laws. I would be honored.

My mother and father, Rose and Daniel McNeil, along with my brothers and sisters have stood by my side throughout life, protecting me from a world that shuns difference. In their embrace I was safe and able to become who I am today.
And finally, I am most thankful for every day that I spend with Soterios Johnson.

In the words of W. H. Auden, he is “my North, my South, my East, my West/My working week and my Sunday rest.”
DEDICATION

To Rose and Daniel McNeil
who first taught me to take baby steps

And

To Soterios Johnson
who has held my hand while taking them
INTRODUCTION

My preoccupation with the margin maps back to adolescence, when at the hands of a bully I discovered that most boys didn’t like boys the way that I did. Early identification as a gay boy involved my locating places where I would be safe: the school orchestra, the marching band, the theater, the choir. Because these spaces required special talents not universally shared, they were separate and apart from the mainstream. For boys like me and for others, they were safe spaces where we were protected from the brute force of the majority.

And so began my lifelong journey to the margin, which took me first to Vassar College in Poughkeepsie and ultimately to Columbia University in the City of New York. In both places, I was certain I would find communities filled with people like me, communities that would not only protect, but also nourish.

My personal experience of the margin became an intellectual interest at Vassar, where I was introduced to and ultimately became fascinated with the Puritan experiment in America. Feeling a sense of kinship with the first wave of Puritan settlers who came to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, I set off on a scholarly journey that took as its starting point John Winthrop’s often quoted phrase from the sermon he delivered aboard the *Arrabella* en route to the new world in 1630: “For wee must Consider that we shall be as
a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us.”¹ Set apart from mainstream orthodoxy, the Puritans removed themselves to the margin in the hope of creating a place where they could live according to their beliefs, untouched by the oppressive hands of the Church of England and Rome. In studying this period, I discovered what others had discovered before me—that almost immediately upon their arrival at Massachusetts Bay, the ministers set out to articulate an orthodoxy that they in turn enforced without exception. Few people at the time, however, were studying an almost inevitable by-product of enforced orthodoxy, namely dissent.

In the early part of my graduate career at Columbia I studied dissent in colonial America, ultimately devoting myself to a study of Roger Williams, whose inability to ascribe to the orthodoxy of the Massachusetts Bay colony compelled him to remove himself to the margin, where he founded the Providence Plantation and established the first Baptist church in America. In the course of doing that work, I reflected on my intellectual and personal experience with the margin and realized that the margin is a complicated place that is more often menacing than redemptive.

When my work on Williams was cut short, I stepped away from graduate study for a number of years but never set aside my interest in dissent or margins. And so it is that when I chose to return to write this dissertation, I took up the margin once again in a serious, scholarly way, choosing to focus instead on the work of a fellow traveler, Christopher Isherwood.

Notes of rebellion ring throughout the writing of Christopher Isherwood. In All the Conspirators (1926), Phillip struggles to free himself from a conventional life, vainly asserting his independence from his mother and striving to establish himself as a writer

and painter. *The Memorial* (1932) repudiates the past and shames those who, like war-widowed Lily, live in the past, in “a beautiful, happy world, in which next summer would be the same, and the next and the next. . . . The old safe, happy beautiful world.”

The created world of Bergmann, Isherwood, and Dorothy in *Prater Violet* (1945) feebly, yet admirably, challenges the commercial machine that is the film industry and the human atrocity that is Nazi Germany. And in *The World in the Evening* (1954), Stephen, an American with inherited wealth, travels to Paris to sow his oats, only to reject “the real Parisian Bohemia” in favor of a private bohemia he creates with his girlfriend Elizabeth, an accomplished novelist.

Rebellion and repudiation of the mainstream recur as motifs throughout Isherwood’s novels and life, dating back to his early experience of the death of his father and continuing to the end of his own life with his vituperative rant against the heterosexual majority. When Isherwood’s father, Frank Bradshaw Isherwood, was killed in the Battle of Ypres in 1915, Frank instantly became a hero and Isherwood earned the rank “of ‘Orphan of a Dead Hero,’ a role that carried the full endorsement of Crown, Church and Press.” The mantle proved oppressive, and he rejected the role early on, establishing what would become a recurring pattern of living apart: “He began to identify all those who enforced this sense of obligation . . . as ‘The Others,’ and to react against the sense of guilt they imposed upon him.”

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3 Bergman insists on the humanity of the Nazis in a conversation with Dorothy. When she exclaims, “Those Nazis aren’t human,” he corrects her: “That is how they wish you to imagine them, as unconquerable monsters. But they are human, very human, in their weakness. We must not fear them. We must understand them. It is absolutely necessary to understand them, or we are all lost.” Isherwood, *Prater Violet*, p. 47. Bergman’s position is enlightened, though naïve. By humanizing the Nazis he levels them and thus empowers himself and others who understand their motives to change or defeat them.


Threatened by the accepted, by the traditional, by the past, Isherwood and his characters escape to the margin, hoping to find there people who share alternative values and ways of living that might ultimately prove more meaningful and enlightened than those they leave behind in the mainstream.

In *All the Conspirators*, Phillip’s attempts to flee ultimately fail. His body is ruined by rheumatic fever; he is trapped in a wheelchair and at the mercy of his mother, who perversely delights in his confinement. In *The Memorial*, Eric does escape, inspired by the example of Aunt Mary and his two cousins, Maurice and Anne, who “quietly fitted into the picture which Eric had formed for himself of the life of his cousins and his aunt in their little house—as the life of beings altogether singular, more gifted, happier than other people. . . . He liked to imagine the three of them together in their home, at all times of the day—calling to each other from room to room, running up and down stairs, weaving, like shuttles, the strands of their existence, which seemed so mysterious to Eric because it was happy.”

In contrast to Eric’s home, which Lily turned into a shrine to her dead husband and a museum preserving the relics of the past, Mary’s home is vibrantly alive in the present. Detached therein from what Mary dubs “this cult of dead people,” Eric is stirred to flee Chapel Bridge and convert to Catholicism. In *The World in the Evening*, Stephen and Elizabeth flee as well, traveling the world, with Stephen enjoying his leisure and Elizabeth working at hers. And while *The Memorial* is silent on the impact of Eric’s flight to the margin, *The World in the Evening* speaks boldly—almost crudely—about the effect that Stephen’s choice to live in his own private bohemia has on others.

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7 Ibid., p. 113.
The writing of *A World in the Evening* burdened Isherwood for seven years, from 1946 to 1953. The period was one of the most turbulent in Isherwood’s life, marked as it was by a passionate collision between spiritual and sexual impulses and a dogged inability to write; best summarized in a 1949 diary entry: “This summer has been really disgraceful. I don’t think I can ever remember having been so idle, dull, resentful and unhappy. The novel is barely at page eighteen, creeping along against frightful resistance.”\(^8\) Isherwood’s raucous relationship with William Caskey—played out between 1945 and 1951 against the backdrop of Isherwood’s intensifying engagement of the teachings of Vedanta—had by the end of 1949 consumed itself, though it would vex Isherwood for years: “My life with Bill has reached such a point of emotional bankruptcy that he is leaving by mutual consent.”\(^9\) By the time *A World in the Evening* was published in 1954, Isherwood had struggled with a range of literary challenges. In particular, shape and point of view vexed: “But my novel—that’s sitting in front of me again, undented, unformed—like some rubbery bit of material which pops back into shapelessness the minute you take your hands from it. The approach I’ve been trying is no good. I simply cannot believe in Stephen Monkhouse, or any other fictitious character, as the narrator. I can’t narrate myself. And so I’m driven to the conclusion . . . that the novel must be written in the style of *The Memorial*: third person.”\(^10\)

The novel Isherwood produced is truly awful and yet, as Katherine Bucknell points out, *A World in the Evening* is important. “In the end, the years with Caskey were to produce Isherwood’s least impressive literary achievement. . . . Its weaknesses are in

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\(^8\) Isherwood, *Diaries*, p. 415.
\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^10\) Ibid., p. 418. N.B.: When the novel was finally published, Isherwood changed the name Stephen Monkhouse to Stephen Monk.
many ways the culmination of artistic difficulties with which he had already been
struggling long before he met Caskey, and the book reveals an enormous amount about
Isherwood’s career. As a writer, Isherwood always aspired to work on an epic canvas, but
he usually produced individual portraits or small groups of interrelated figures.”¹¹ From
the start of his career, Isherwood wanted to take on large issues, but it was only when he
discovered how to do so in an intimate setting that he produced his finest work. The
vignettes that he produced for A World in the Evening are indeed remarkable, but not
because they interconnect and so tell a universal story. Rather, the vignettes are
memorable because they hint of a stylistic accomplishment that would mark Isherwood’s
finest writing: the ability to discover and display that which is quintessentially human
through small gestures, simple words, and common objects.

Moreover, the novel is important because in its very clumsiness—in its failure to
connect the pieces—it lays bare a theme central to Isherwood’s finest work. Consistently,
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search of a marginal alternative. On the one hand, these alternative spaces are thought to
be redemptive, thought to liberate and nourish. Isherwood reveals that they do neither.

To explore this theme, the dissertation focuses on three novels, The Berlin Stories
(The Last of Mr. Norris and Goodbye to Berlin), A Meeting by the River, and A Single
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and his life as a homosexual. Each of these novels positions characters outside of the
mainstream in order to subvert a redemptive message and depict the margin as a very
dark and dangerous place.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. xxvii–xxix.
Chapter 1 focuses on the period from 1929 to 1933, when Isherwood lived in Berlin, and the collection entitled *The Berlin Stories*, which includes *The Last of Mr. Norris* and *Goodbye to Berlin*.

In *Auden and Isherwood: The Berlin Years*, Norman Page explains what drew Isherwood along with other artists to Weimar Berlin in the 1920s and early 1930s:

“Berlin around 1930 was not just an enticing destination for sex holidays or fieldwork in the study of decadence. It was the most exciting city in Europe, perhaps the world, for anyone sympathetic to experiment and innovation in a wide variety of art forms, high and popular, pure and applied: a vital city that in a surprisingly short time had become a magnet for gifted young artists and artistes.”

Page explains that while Isherwood escaped from England to Berlin in order to liberate himself sexually, Berlin also proved to be a fertile place in which he cultivated his writing. Berlin was not simply a “sex holiday,” but rather a place where Isherwood began to write more sophisticated fiction.

That fiction, collected in the *Berlin Stories*, tells of the variegated landscape that was Weimar Berlin. In that landscape, Isherwood discovers and examines others who, like himself, seek alternatives to the mainstream: the bohemian Sally Bowles; the Landauer family, who as Jews fear the rising Nazi tide; and the politically ambiguous Mr. Norris. Isherwood’s portraits of these people and the world they inhabit expose not only the darkest corners of mainstream Berlin, but also the futility of attempts to flee from the mainstream to more satisfying alternatives, such as the Alexander Casino in *Goodbye to Berlin*: “I had been here before: a year ago, in the days when Fritz Wendel used to take me on Saturday evening excursions round ‘the dives’ of the city. It was just

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12 Page, *Auden and Isherwood*, p. 3.
as we had left it only less sinister, less picturesque, symbolic no longer of a tremendous truth about the meaning of existence—because, this time, I wasn’t in the least drunk.”

Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to Vedanta, one of the six schools of Hindu thought that would become central to Isherwood’s life from July of 1939 until he died in 1986 and is at the heart of Isherwood’s final novel, *A Meeting by the River* (1967).

In that work the margin and the mainstream are juxtaposed throughout. Rhetorically, the novel is rich and clearly one of Isherwood’s finest. The series of letters and diary entries written by two brothers focus on Oliver’s spiritual journey that culminates in the taking of *sannyas* and his brother Patrick’s corresponding visit to the Indian monastery where Oliver is encamped, during which he muses over the sexual fling he is having with Tom, a man in Los Angeles. The world of spiritual enlightenment is offered up as an alternative to the world of material consumption, the life of abstinence as an alternative to the life of the flesh, radical homosexuality as an alternative to conventional heterosexuality, and the “symbolic act” as an alternative to the act of social justice.

One approach to the novel emphasizes the redemptive power of the margin. The monastic life and all that it entails spiritually free one from the burdens of the material world. To Tom, Patrick describes the monks as “grown men who have made a deliberate decision—they want no part of the problems of adult life in our world so they have turned their backs on it.” The life of the liberated homosexual is a frank and satisfying alternative to an artificial and arid heterosexual status quo: “What I want is a life beyond

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their taboos, in which two men learn to trust each other so completely that there’s no fear left and they experience and share everything together in the flesh and in the spirit.”

A compatible approach to the novel emphasizes the power of self-discovery as a bonding agent between the brothers. Oliver’s road to enlightenment takes him from England to Germany to India, where, in preparation to take sannyas, he and his Swami enfold Patrick in a spiritual embrace that is protective and nurturing: “But now it seemed to me that Patrick was very close to us. . . . And I was aware that he was an established part of our life, the three of us belonged together intimately and I accepted this as a matter of course.” Patrick’s journey of sexual discovery takes him from England to L.A. and on to India where his conventional heterosexuality is jarred and he is “liberated” as he witnesses what it means to live in an enlightened state: “Tom I feel strangely certain that one day I shall have you and you’ll have me, somehow, somewhere. Let’s have faith that it will happen—because it must! As far as I’m concerned, being with you is Life. . . . This letter sounds positively mystical, doesn’t it?”

I argue for an alternative reading of the novel, one that emphasizes Patrick’s journey and the implicit peril of the moral relativism endorsed by Vedanta. Patrick is nothing more than a con artist.

And finally, Chapter 4 examines Isherwood’s finest novel, A Single Man. In Isherwood: A Life Revealed (2004), Peter Parker observes that “throughout his life, but particularly in the wake of the new sexual liberation of the 1960s and 1970s, Isherwood drew the battle lines across the sexual divide, glaring balefully across the chasm that separated him from the heterosexual majority. Most of Isherwood’s closest friends were

15 Ibid., p. 132.
16 Ibid., p. 174.
17 Ibid., pp. 135–136.
homosexual, and such alliances drew strength from the knowledge that Christopher and his kind were beyond society’s—and, for much of his life, the law’s—pale.”

Isherwood’s homosexuality asserts itself both covertly and overtly throughout the novels, though today many of the positions reveal themselves as nascent attempts to understand sexual identity in personal, social, and political terms. In Isherwood’s first novel, All the Conspirators, one might argue that Phillip’s rejection of the conventional workplace serves as a faint metaphor of homosexual rebellion. Dr. Charles Kennedy and Bob Wood make a presentable appearance in The World in the Evening as a “normal” couple, even though Bob’s homosexual politics are strident when measured against the backdrop of rural 1950s Pennsylvania. And, The Meeting by the River takes a romantic glimpse at homosexual love and politics, while somewhat graphically tiptoeing around homosexual sex, all in the service of undercutting the dignity of the enlightened soul.

A Single Man, though, is Isherwood’s most sophisticated and probing look at what it means to be a homosexual. The militantly political is ever-present. And yet, the novel is in many ways a contemplative piece, one of stunning beauty that grows out of the simple fact that George’s lover of many years has died. In reflecting on the cottage where they lived, George reminisces early on that “they loved it because you could only get to it by the bridge across the creek; the surrounding trees and the steep bushy cliff behind shut it in like a house in a forest clearing. ‘As good as being on our own island,’ George said.”

In essence, George and Jim have cut themselves off from the world. They live unto each other and in a community of like-minded people. Together on the margin, they are

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18 Parker, Isherwood, p. 78.
19 Isherwood, A Single Man, p. 20.
content and fulfilled. And yet, when Jim dies, George is abandoned and adrift. He is deprived of mainstream consolation—public memorials, spousal recognition, and children—and deserted; he is a sobering portrait of isolation and despair.
CHAPTER 1

Isherwood lived in Germany from 1929 through 1933, leaving permanently after Hitler became chancellor in January. While his reasons for abandoning England were varied and entangled, his homosexuality was a driving force, as he asserts in the opening to Christopher and His Kind: “To Christopher, Berlin meant Boys.”

In 1928 Isherwood first traveled to Germany to visit an “elderly cousin who was the British consul at Bremen. He had no love adventures while there, but he looked around him and saw what he was missing.” He subsequently visited Auden in Berlin, and that is when he was introduced to the demi-monde where he would unbridle his sexuality: “I can still make myself faintly feel the delicious nausea of initiation terror which Christopher felt as Wystan pushed back the heavy leather door curtain of a boy bar called the Cosy Corner and led the way inside.” The experience was nearly religious and a prelude to his undoubtedly fervent journey of sexual self-discovery.

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1 Isherwood, Christopher and His Kind, p. 2.
2 Ibid., p. 3.
3 Ibid.
4 Upon arriving in Berlin to settle in November of 1929, Isherwood went to live with Frances Turville-Petre, to whom he had been referred by Auden. The apartment they shared was owned by Magnus Hirschfeld’s sister and was located in a building next door to the Hirschfeld Institute. Parker, Isherwood, p. 158. According to Norman Page, “Francis became his guide to the bars of the working-class district of Hallesches Tor. It was very much the lower end of the market to which these two upper-class Englishmen made their way, and someone who spoke German and knew his way around (as Frances certainly did) was an advantage when it came to finding the small, backstreet bars that, as Isherwood explains, depended for
For Isherwood and many others, though, Berlin of the 1920s and 1930s was not simply a hedonist’s playground. As Norman Page explains in his prologue to *Auden and Isherwood: The Berlin Years*: “Berlin around 1930 was not just an enticing destination for sex holidays or fieldwork in the study of decadence. It was the most exciting city in Europe, perhaps the world, for anyone sympathetic to experiment and innovation in a wide variety of art forms, high and popular, pure and applied: a vital city that in surprisingly short time had become a magnet for gifted young artists and artistes.”

Set alongside the sexual burlesque of Berlin’s legendary nightclubs and Hirschfeld’s research in sexual variation were “some of the most progressive movements in painting and theatre, architecture and cinema, and other pure and applied arts.” Intently focused on the actual and present, rather than the romantic and historical, the visual, literary, and performed art of the period bore the label *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), “a collective concept for a series of different genres whose common feature was an artistic examination of modern industrial society which was cooler and more analytical in nature.” Its champions included: The Bauhaus; Walter Gropius and Mies van de Rohe; Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Weill, and Lotte Lenya; Paul Hindemith; Otto Dix and Georg Grosz; Fritz Lang, G. W. Pabst, and Walter Rutteman.

In Berlin, Isherwood inserted himself into the cultural avant-garde with as much vigor as he haunted the sexual demi-monde. For him the boy bar and the Romanisches Café coexisted, as did the cabaret and opera, the painted face and Dix canvas, the street and the cinema—entwined metaphors for the freedom he enjoyed by relocating to Berlin.

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6 Ibid., p. 3.
7 Ibid., p. 8.
7 Palmer and Neubauer, eds., *The Weimar Republic*, p. 211.
He had cut himself off from England—never to return in a sustained and engaged way—and in so doing he had repudiated the past that haunted him and the culture that repressed him. He pushed aside the heroic myth of his dead father, killed in 1915 at the second battle of Ypres in Flanders,⁸ and his overbearing and obsessive mother, though he never entirely repudiated her, the family, or England for that matter—all three of which provided him with a source of income that secured his journey of sexual and artistic self-discovery.

Isherwood settled into bohemian circles in Berlin, a young writer struggling to discover his voice and a young man desperate to claim his sexuality. Phrased differently, the bohemian is what drew Isherwood to Berlin. Therein he hoped to liberate himself from an oppressive past and invent himself as a writer and as an adult. While there, he kept a journal—a habit that persisted throughout his life. As he explains in the 1954 preface to the New Directions collection entitled The Berlin Stories, this “detailed diary . . . provided the raw material for all my Berlin stories.” The diary was subsequently destroyed, but what remains are two works, The Last of Mr. Norris (published originally in England as Mr. Norris Changes Trains) and Goodbye to Berlin. Both works are preoccupied with the margin and the people who occupy it, the very bohemian culture which drew Isherwood to Berlin: “My first idea, immediately after leaving Berlin in 1933, was to transform this material into one huge, tightly constructed melodramatic novel, in the manner of Balzac. I wanted to call it The Lost. This title, or rather its German equivalent, Die Verlorenen, seemed to me wonderfully ominous. I stretched it to

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⁸ “By dying in the war, Frank also underwent an instant metamorphosis from fond parent to distant icon. Well-meaning adults began to hold him up as a hero worthy of emulation: the man whom Isherwood was able to amuse with his conjuring tricks and his jokes suddenly became a god who had to be placed by decorous behavior. The effect of this was to distance Isherwood from the man who had really been his father.” Parker, Isherwood, p. 40.
mean not only the Astray and the Doomed—referring tragically to the political events in Germany and our epoch—but also ‘The Lost’ in quotation marks—referring satirically to those individuals whom respectable society shuns in horror: an Arthur Norris, a von Pregnitz, a Sally Bowles.” Of Isherwood’s time in Berlin we have neither a “detailed diary” nor a “huge tightly constructed melodramatic novel.” Rather, what remain are stories that reflect on “those individuals whom respectable society shuns”—namely, the bohemians who separate themselves from the mainstream in the hope of redemption.9

The stories are small, narrowly focused on individual people and the lives they lead, the spaces they inhabit. The lens widens, though, and Isherwood’s portrayal of these people reveals the political, economic, and personal despair that is Berlin of the late 1920s and 1930s. The stories reflect a world in decay, and in so doing, they challenge the very notion of bohemian salvation.

I

As The Last of Mr. Norris opens, William Bradshaw startles Arthur Norris when he asks for a match. The scene is odd, largely because the two are riding in the same train car together, and yet Arthur is entirely self-absorbed to the point that “he started violently at the sound of my voice; so violently, indeed, that his nervous recoil hit me like a repercussion.”10 What preoccupies Arthur is not entirely clear, and even though we eventually learn that he is anxious about crossing the border into Germany, the source of that anxiety is explained only when we later learn that Arthur is a con artist, for whom identification is perilous.

9 Isherwood, Berlin Stories, p. v.
10 Isherwood, The Last of Mr. Norris, p. 1.
Arthur values appearance, particularly the appearance of propriety. The first physical description of him is that of a gentleman: “Delicately, with finger and thumb, he fished in the waist coat-pocket of his expensive-looking soft grey suit, extracted a gold spirit-lighter. His hands were white, small and beautifully manicured.”\(^{11}\) The look of the “soft grey suit,” the gold lighter, and the gentle fluid movement of his “beautifully manicured” fingers combine to create an air of moneyed refinement. He establishes his social standing, first in his introduction—“I ought to introduce myself. Arthur Norris, Gent. Or shall I say: Of independent means?”—and then in his recollection of his social connection to “the Suffolk Bradshaws.”\(^ {12}\) He evokes a worldly air, recalling his extensive travel and allowing that “the only two cities of which he greatly approved were Paris and Athens. Athens particularly. Athens was his spiritual home.”\(^ {13}\)

The actual border crossing and passport inspection fray Arthur’s nerves, and yet as soon as the train passes into Germany, he regains his composure and invites William to be his guest for lunch in the dining car. The meal is peppered with affectation: Norris breaks with personal custom to partake of a cognac before eating; he returns the soup while solicitously engaging the waiter (“Surely you’ll agree that there’s too much onion? . . . Will you do me a personal favour? I should like you to taste it for yourself”); he fusses over the choice of wine; and he celebrates the Hungarian preparation of kidneys. And after lunch, he sings the praises of luxury over a cigar: “I must say the older I get the more I come to value the little comforts of this life. As a general rule, I make a point of traveling first class. It always pays. One gets treated with so much more consideration.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., p. 2.  
\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 4.  
\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 6.
Take to-day for instance. If I hadn’t been in a third-class compartment, they’d never have dreamed of bothering me.”

Appreciation of the “little comforts of this life” entitles one to “so much more consideration.” Phrased differently, investment in the appearance of refinement “pays”; it is a mark of class distinction: “My generation was brought up to regard luxury from an aesthetic standpoint. Since the War, people don’t seem to feel that any more. Too often they are merely gross. They take their pleasures coarsely.” Norris elevates himself into a privileged class solely because he values tasteful appearance and mannered behavior. He has aesthetic values that he implicitly equates with moral values. Thus, indulgence in the “little comforts” and “luxury” can become an act of moral and social responsibility: “The conditions in Berlin are very bad. Oh, very bad. . . . And here we are, riding in the lap of luxury. The social reformers would condemn us, no doubt. All the same, I suppose if somebody didn’t use this dining-car, we should have all these employees on the dole as well. . . . Dear me, dear me. Things are so very complex, nowadays.”

The fusion of the aesthetic and moral is at the heart of each of Norris’s cons. “Norris’s approach to life is primarily aesthetic,” Claude Summers explains in his biography of Isherwood. “Claiming membership in the Wildean Café Royale literary circle, he is a caricature of the fin de siècle aesthete. . . . For Norris, style triumphs over substance, appearance over reality. His personal appearance quite literally represents an attempt to disguise reality.” Norris’s toilette—“bottles of perfume, lotions, antiseptics, pots of face cream, skin food, powder and ointment . . . two lipsticks and an eyebrow

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14 Ibid., pp. 10–11.
15 Ibid., p. 11.
16 Summers, Gay Fictions, p. 19.
pencil—"is devoted to the transformation of his actual appearance. He is a con artist who manipulates, using carefully styled looks to seduce and exploit.

The opening scene of *The Last of Mr. Norris* poses two questions that remain central to that novel and the subsequent *Goodbye to Berlin*. The first question is straightforward: “with so much unemployment and distress everywhere,” what is one to do? The second question is sprawling: what happens when “style triumphs over substance, appearance over reality”?

II

To begin with the second question—namely, the relationship between appearance and reality—is to open up the options Isherwood explores for salvation in 1930s Berlin, with Hitler on the ascendance.

Early in the novel, Arthur and William plan to meet after dinner on New Year’s Eve to usher in 1931. When William arrives at the Troika, he makes his way through the cabaret crowded with people dancing and celebrating, only to find Arthur in a corner with Baron von Pregnitz, his presumed dinner companion, whom he wishes to introduce to William. All three are drunk at the start, and as the baron engages William in a seductively suggestive game of “haven’t we met before,” William rebuffs him with curt denials. Eager that the two should like each other, Arthur suggests a change of venue and fresh air. William describes the cabaret:

> The dancers, locked frigidly together, swayed in partial-paralytic rhythms under a huge sunshade suspended from the ceiling and oscillating gently through cigarette smoke and hot air rising. . . . In the windows were bottles filled with coloured liquids brilliantly illuminated from beneath, magenta, emerald, vermilion. They seemed to be lighting up the whole room. The cigarette smoke made my eyes smart until the tears ran down my face. The

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17 Isherwood, *The Last of Mr. Norris*, p. 17.
18 Ibid. p. 11.
music kept dying away, then surging up fearfully loud. I passed my hand down the shiny black oil-cloth curtains in the alcove behind my chair. Oddly enough they were quite cold. The lamps were like alpine cobwebs. And there was a fluffy white monkey perched above the bar. In another moment, when I had drunk exactly the right amount of champagne, I should have a vision. I took a sip. And now, with extreme clarity, without passion or malice, I saw what Life really is. It had something, I remember, to do with the revolving sunshade. Yes, I murmured to myself, let them dance. They are dancing. I am glad.  

In effect Isherwood’s description of the cabaret uses sfumato to suggest an atmosphere of entities, sounds, and smells blending into each other with almost indistinguishable boundaries. The cabaret is otherworldly. Colored light fills “the whole room,” dispersed by the haze of “cigarette smoke.” Music flows without beginning or end, “dying away” and “surging up.” The light fixtures tangle into “alpine cobwebs,” and the whole room is shut off from the actual world by “shiny black oil-cloth curtains.”

The cabaret exists unto itself, an exotic space presided over by a “fluffy white monkey.” It is a place where “vision” is brought on “by the right amount of champagne” and then blurred in the sober light of day: “It had something, I remember, to do with the revolving sunshade.” Life in the cabaret is a diversion from the actual world, as we are reminded in the musical adaptation of the “Sally Bowles” story, Cabaret. There the world appears gay when in fact it is grim; appearance and reality are at odds.

To end with this literal, rather straightforward reading of Isherwood’s description, though, is to ignore another, complementary and deeply disturbing, reading. William’s vision suggests that this temporary retreat from daily life can become a permanent alternative for those who choose to turn their backs on and abdicate responsibility for a world filled with unemployment, economic ruin, and unspeakable horror. “I saw what Life really is . . . . Yes, I murmured to myself, let them dance. They are dancing. I am

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19 Ibid., p. 23.
The cabaret is alluring because it is immediately satisfying in its decadence. Life in that space thrives on “dancing,” losing oneself in a bacchanalian swirl and submitting to the demands of the decadent—often regardless of one’s personal preferences. Decadence is primal, human, appealing. And yet, it is dangerous because it is blinding.

Norris and von Pregnitz trade the Troika for a raucous party, dragging William with them. En route, they stop at a bar, lose Norris, and engage a taxi, which passes “along a street bounded by a high dark wall.” The taxi stops once so that William can throw up—the only moment that the reader is exposed to the outside air. One enclosed space gives way to another: the Troika sealed off with its “oil-cloth curtains,” the bar, the taxi, “the street bounded by a high dark wall,” and the private residence. William is a passive participant in the scene, unaware of how he moves from one place to another: “Here one of the anesthetic periods of the evening supervened. How the Baron got me upstairs, I don’t know. It was quite painless. We were in a room full of people dancing, shouting, singing, drinking, shaking our hands and thumping us on the back.” Everyone is sealed off from the outside world, insulated from the deprivation and political turmoil of Berlin at the dawn of 1931. To be sure, the revelry and drink anesthetize; appearance conceals reality, neutralizing—for a time—the threat of the actual.

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20 When Isherwood arrived in Berlin, there was already a sharp contrast between the actual world of the street and the dream world of the cabaret. “At the outset, Isherwood and his friends brought with them an image of Berlin that bore only a limited relationship to reality: already there was a darker and grimmer side to the city that seemed to them to extend the bright promise of enlightened tolerance and unrestricted freedom. To cite only a single, though a major, instance: unemployment in Berlin was in 1927 already running twice as high as in the country as a whole, and matters rapidly got worse, so that by the winter of 1929–30, during which Isherwood took up residence, unemployment and hardship were widespread. Many of the ‘boys’ who were so readily and delightfully available in the Cosy Corner formed part of the statistics, and one of the interests offered by Isherwood’s fiction is the balance it strikes, and the compromises and evasions it effects, between a romantic and sentimental Bildungsroman and a historically grounded reflection of realities that it became daily harder to ignore.” Page, Auden and Isherwood, p. 79.

21 Isherwood, The Last of Mr. Norris, p. 25.

The description of New Year’s Eve is more than an account of holiday cheer; rather, it is a look at the degenerative power of the decadent. At best, the cabaret seals off the reveler from the actual world and provides temporary relief. At worst, the cabaret becomes an alternate reality—albeit a fictional one—detaching the reveler from the actual and rendering him vulnerable.

William orients himself, finding von Pregnitz at his side on a sofa and Arthur seated across from him, a girl on his lap and his wig removed. Olga, the hostess, pushes her way through the crowd to greet the three: “An enormous woman. . . . She wore a silk blouse and a very short pleated white skirt; her feet were jammed into absurdly small high-heeled shoes, out of which bulged pads of silk-stockinged flesh. Her cheeks were waxy pink and her hair dyed tinsel-golden, so that it matched the glitter of the half-dozen bracelets on her powdered arms. She was a curious and sinister as a life-size doll. Like a doll, she had staring china-blue eyes which did not laugh, although her lips were parted in a smile revealing several gold teeth.”

The initial description of Olga recalls Otto Dix’s representations of whores and madams of the period: “very short pleated white skirt,” “absurdly small high-heeled shoes,” “waxy pink” cheeks, “hair dyed tinsel-golden,” and “several gold teeth.” Olga is voluptuously sensuous, spilling out of her shoes; she is sexual pleasure. And yet, Olga is also dark; she is “curious and sinister” with “china-blue eyes which did not laugh.” Olga is cold and exacting. She is a dominatrix.

The scene draws to a close when William, having been separated from Arthur, goes looking for him. He makes his way through an entangled crowd. He approaches a door at the other end of the room, through which he passes down a hall filled with furniture: “I had wriggled and shuffled about half the distance when an agonizing cry

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23 Ibid., p. 27.
came from the lighted room ahead of me.” He deduces that someone is robbing Norris; the spell of the bordello is broken and reality intrudes: “We were fools ever to have poked our noses into a place like this. We had only ourselves to thank. Drink made me brave.” William makes his way to the door and opens it, only to discover Arthur, Olga, and Anni engaged in a sadomasochistic frenzy:

The first person I saw was Anni. She was standing in the middle of the room. Arthur cringed on the floor at her feet. He had removed several more of his garments, and was now dressed, lightly but with perfect decency, in a suit of mauve silk underwear, a rubber abdominal belt and a pair of socks. In one hand he held a brush and in the other a yellow shoe-rag. Olga towered behind him, brandishing a heavy leather whip.

“You call that clean you swine!” she cried, in a terrible voice. “Do them again this minute! And if I find a speck of dirt on them I’ll thrash you till you can’t sit down for a week.”

As she spoke she gave Arthur a smart cut across the buttocks. He uttered a squeal of pain and pleasure, and began to brush and polish Anni’s boots with feverish haste.

“Mercy! Mercy!” Arthur’s voice was shrill and gleeful, like a child’s when it is shamming. “Stop! You’re killing me.”

“Killing’s too good for you,” retorted Olga, administering another cut. “I’ll skin you alive!”

“Oh! Oh! Stop! Mercy! Oh!”

They were making such a noise that they hadn’t heard me bang open the door. Now they saw me, however. My presence did not seem to disconcert any of them in the least. Indeed, it appeared to add spice to Arthur’s enjoyment.

“Oh dear! William, save me! You won’t? You’re as cruel as the rest of them. Anni, my love! Olga! Just look how she treats me. Goodness knows what they won’t be making me do in a minute!”

“Come in, Baby,” cried Olga with a tigerish jocularity. “Just you wait! It’s your turn next. I’ll make you cry for Mummy!”

She made a playful slash at me with the whip which sent me in a headlong retreat down the passage, pursued by Arthur’s delighted and anguished cries.24

The scene William happens upon is, in fact, superficially horrifying, with “Arthur cringed on the floor” and “Olga . . . brandishing a heavy leather whip,” administering a “sharp cut across his buttocks.” Her threats are literally menacing (“Killing’s too good for you . . .

I’ll skin you alive‖). Arthur’s pleas are explicitly earnest (―Mercy! Mercy! . . . Oh! Oh! Stop! Mercy! Oh!”).

In reality, though, what is being exquisitely played out before William’s eyes is a sadomasochistic farce. The scene is enclosed. Olga and Anni wield absolute power over Arthur, with no salvation seemingly at hand. Arthur pleads with William, assuming he will be turned down before William even has a chance to answer his plea: “William, save me! You won’t? You’re as cruel as the rest of them.” In fact, reality has not broken the spell of the bordello—Arthur is not being robbed. Rather, his sexual fantasy is secured and being played out in a sealed-off dungeon at the hands of a woman skilled in the arts of the sadist. This is a place in which appearance supersedes reality, as it must in the enactment of any sadomasochistic fantasy—otherwise the masochist would end up dead: “Killing’s too good for you . . . I’ll skin you alive.”

William escapes the enclosure, bolting from the room “in a headlong retreat down the passage.” In so doing, he underscores the disconnect between appearance and reality upon which the S&M game depends: “Several hours later I woke to find myself lying curled up on the floor, with my face pressed against the leg of the sofa. I had a head like a furnace, and pains in every bone. The party was over.”25 For William and Arthur, the “party” was a temporary escape, as was the outing to the Troika and the bar that followed. William returns to his boarding house and the doting care of Frl. Schroeder. His escape reminds the reader that he is not of Berlin, but rather a visitor to Berlin. He can leave when he wishes. Olga and all those she represents cannot. Arthur hovers between the two.

25 Ibid., p. 31.
Olga is trapped in Berlin, and “like most people who still contrived to earn a living in those bankrupt days, she was a woman of numerous occupations. . . . She was a procuress, a cocaine-seller and a receiver of stolen goods; she also let out lodgings, took in washing and, when in the mood, did exquisite fancy needlework.”\(^{26}\) In the face of staggering rates of inflation and unemployment, Olga does what she needs to do to survive, a fate that befell the common person in the late Weimar Republic. Olga the dominatrix, the madam, the drug dealer trades in the actual world for the demi-monde. She seals herself off in that world—making no public appearance throughout the entire novel—choosing to evade rather than engage the social, economic, and political horror that is unfolding around her. Viewed favorably, Olga is at best a symbol of those who choose diversion rather than engagement. A much darker light, though, is ultimately cast on Olga.

The reappearance of S&M later in the novel reveals the danger of her position. Arthur is summoned to appear before the political police for questioning and when pressed by William, he explains with a certain degree of pride that it appears his work on behalf of the communist party in Moscow has attracted the attention of the police.

William inquires:

“Perhaps, they’ll put you through the third degree.”
“Oh, William, how can you say anything so dreadful? You make me feel quite faint.”
“But, Arthur, surely that would be . . . I mean, wouldn’t you rather enjoy it?”

Arthur giggled: “Ha, ha. Ha, ha. I must say this, William, that even in the darkest hour your humour never fails to restore me. . . . Well, well, perhaps if the examination were to be conducted by Frl. Anni or some equally charming young lady, I might undergo it with—er—very mixed feelings. Yes.”\(^{27}\)

\(^{26}\) Ibid., p. 80.
\(^{27}\) Ibid., p. 57.
As Claude Summers explains “it is precisely the fantasy element in sadomasochism that is the most important aspect of Norris’s sexual eccentricity and that makes this comic scene a serious parody of the coming political disruption in the novel. . . . Norris’s real fear of actual torture by the police underlines the fact that his revelry in the simulated punishment of sadomasochistic games depends on a discrepancy between fantasy and reality.”

The very reason that Norris can derive pleasure from the inflicted pain is his steadfast knowledge that the cruelty is not real but rather acted-out sadism that is virtually choreographed and has boundaries. In stark contrast, the ruthless torture brought on by the Nazis was neither limited nor predictable, and those vulnerable to destruction were the very people who either did not or were unable to mount a powerful challenge to Nazi authority.

Indeed, in the first instance the Nazi menace threatened those who ran afoul of the Fascist agenda. Ultimately, the net widened. As The Last of Mr. Norris draws to a close, William recounts: “The town was full of whispers. They told of illegal midnight arrests, of prisoners tortured in the S.A. barracks, made to spit on Lenin’s picture, swallow castor-oil, eat old socks. They were drowned by the loud angry voice of the Government, contradicting through its thousand mouths.” At first Jews and Marxists fell victim and then others until “the whole city lay under an epidemic of discrete infectious fear.”

No one was on sure footing, least of all the ranks represented by Olga—namely, those who sealed themselves away in the diverting demi-monde, hoping they would be insulated and safe. In the “clean-up” the Nazis seized homosexuals, prostitutes, gypsies, and other

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28 Summers, Gay Fictions, p. 20.
29 Isherwood, The Last of Mr. Norris, p. 180.
marginal figures, putting them in camps or killing them outright with bullets or torture.\textsuperscript{30} Olga is spared, though, as William discloses at the end of the novel: “Olga was doing finely. That remarkable business woman had escaped the clean-up through the influence of one of her customers, an important Nazi official. Others had begun to go there, now. Her future was assured.”\textsuperscript{31} Olga escapes temporarily because she accommodates. She continues her life in the bordello, but she is neither protected nor secure because her welfare depends on a single “important Nazi official.” Olga is at once a representative of those who furtively sought safety in the perimeter and of those whose very willingness to accommodate ultimately proved to be their undoing. Indeed, “her future was assured.” With a snap of the Fascist whip, Olga would one day be transformed from a sadist into a masochist; the game would become real.

III

Unlike Olga, who is trapped in Berlin, and William, who is free to flee when he wishes, Arthur comes and goes, manipulating truth—often by manipulating appearance—in order to advance his own personal interest. His movements in and out of Berlin are as fluid as his slippery manipulation of others.

\textsuperscript{30} In 1933 the World Committee for the Victims of German Fascism published \textit{The Brown Book of The Hitler Terror and the Burning of the Reichstag}. In his foreword to the collection, Lord Marley explains that “it is always difficult to secure authentic information as to what is happening under a well-organised terror. . . . Each case cited is typical of many others which are in our possession or in the hands of the national Committees.” The book is intended to bear witness: “These manifestations of Fascism are appalling. But the memory of the public is short, and the public opinion is unfortunately only too ready to reconcile itself to a \textit{fait accompli}, as in the case of Italy. The book aims at keeping alive the memory of the criminal acts of the Nazi Government. It is a contribution to the fight against Hitler’s Fascism. This fight is not directed against German; it is a fight on behalf of the real Germany.” The collection of cases prove that the targets of Hitler’s terror were many, though the Jews were singled out for particular brutality, and that as early as 1933 the world had at its disposal testimony that illustrated the systematic, established, and broadly based terror wrought by the Hitler regime and dating back before Hitler became chancellor (ibid., pp. 11–12).

\textsuperscript{31} Isherwood, \textit{The Last of Mr. Norris}, p. 184.
At the heart of the narrative is a basic fact: Arthur owes people money. Beyond that certainty, very little is fixed and concrete. His con game depends on obfuscation, on Arthur’s “constitutional dislike of laying his cards on the table.”32 Apart from manservant and heavy Schmidt, we don’t know the names of the people to whom he is indebted nor do we know the source of the indebtedness. We don’t know precisely how much he owes any one party, for even though at one point he slips in that he is “crippled . . . with five thousand pounds worth of debts,”33 he seems to have pulled the figure out of the air in order to shock and alarm William. And throughout we don’t entirely understand Arthur’s motives for doing any one thing, though we remain as drawn to him as William does: “Arthur Norris is an endearing figure, and his charm does, for awhile, insulate him from moral censure.”34 Arthur builds the elaborate con piecemeal. No single act is deemed reprehensible at the time of commission. Rather, the entangled pieces elicit “moral censure.”

Shortly after we are introduced to Arthur, he leaves Berlin. “An air of mystery surrounded his departure.” William is initially told that Arthur is in London, but when he returns he invites William to his flat, where he equivocates and then discloses that he had traveled to Paris, admitting that “it is desirable that a slight uncertainty as to my whereabouts should exist in the minds of certain persons here.” Arthur reports to William that his trip “was not unconnected with the Communist Party,” and William inquires: “Do you mean to say that you’ve become a communist? In all but name, William, yes in all but name.” Arthur invites William to a meeting of the KPD (Communist Party of

32 Ibid., p. 127.
33 Ibid., p. 75.
34 Summers, Gay Fictions, p. 28.
Germany), where he will speak in “protest against the exploitation of the Chinese peasantry.”

Arthur is opaque. London covers for Paris to create “a slight uncertainty.” The mission is hinted at, but obscured by the use of the double negative (“not unconnected”); the reader remains unclear about the precise nature of Arthur’s work on behalf of the “Communist Party.” Arthur’s political allegiance is qualified rather than absolute: “all but name . . . all but name.” And his authority as a speaker on behalf of “Chinese peasantry” is challenged by his status as “a caricature of the fin de siècle aesthete.”

Nonetheless, Arthur does appear at the end of a long program that features three other speakers, including two visitors from China. He is introduced by the party head, Ludwig Bayer, who announces that Arthur’s topic is British imperialism in the Far East. The speech is neither focused nor rigorous. He concludes:

The cries of the starving Chinese peasantry are ringing in our ears as we sit in this hall to-night. They have come to us across the breadth of the world. Soon, we hope, they will sound yet more loudly, drowning the futile chatter of diplomatists and the strains of dance bands in luxurious hotels, which have been bought with the price of the blood of innocent children. Yes, we must see to it that those cries are clearly heard by every thinking man and woman in Europe and America. For then, and only then, will a term be set to this inhuman exploitation, this traffic in living souls.

Reason yields to hyperbole: “starving Chinese peasantry,” “futile chatter of diplomatists,” “blood of innocent children,” “inhuman exploitation,” “traffic in living souls.” Following the meeting, Arthur invites William, Anni, and Otto, her sidekick, to his flat for supper to celebrate his rhetorical performance. The language of the party dominates their conversation; they refer to each other as “comrade,” and when Otto discovers that Arthur

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35 The Last of Mr. Norris, p. 44.
36 Summers, Gay Fictions, p. 19.
37 The Last of Mr. Norris, p. 51.
is out of brandy, Arthur appropriates the rhetoric of Marx to explain away this deprivation born of poverty rather than oversight: “Never mind,” said Arthur, “brandy is not a proletarian drink. We’ll drink beer. . . . To the world revolution.” Comically, “Arthur’s beer went down the wrong way and choked him. He coughed, spluttered, dived for his napkin.”

Arthur literally chokes on his words; language is used for effect. Words are stripped of meaning because they are used to stir people rather than engage them intellectually. Meaning is subordinated to rhetorical effect; appearance is detached from reality. Moreover, the audience is complicit in the charade. They accept without question Arthur’s authority as a political speaker and social advocate: “They accepted without question this urbane bourgeois gentleman, accepted his stylish clothes, his graceful rentier wit. He had come to help them. Bayer had spoken for him. He was their friend” (p. 50). And the audience response to the speech is unchecked: “Salvo upon salvo of clapping rattled over the hall. Many of the audience cheered.”

Arthur’s charade depends on the audience’s lack of critical engagement; Arthur says what the audience wants to hear.

In so doing, Arthur wins the favor of the audience and derives the power to manipulate his listeners to advance his own interests. In very literal terms the speech and its enthusiastic reception are testimony to Arthur’s status in the Communist Party, a confirmation of his identity and stature. The reader knows that Arthur is up to something and the con job depends on his perceived affiliation with the Communist Party. Metaphorically, though, Arthur’s appearance at the party meeting recalls the important

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38 Ibid., p. 52.
39 Ibid., p. 51.
role that rhetorical manipulation of the bereft working class played in the Nazi seizure of power. The audience is filled with workers, who

sat there in their soiled everyday clothes. Most of the men wore breeches with coarse woolen stockings, sweaters and peaked caps. . . . what struck me most was the fixed attention of the upturned rows of faces; faces of the Berlin working class, pale and prematurely lined, often haggard and ascetic. . . . They were attentive but not passive. They were not spectators. They participated, with a curious, restrained passion, in the speech made by the red-haired man. He spoke for them, he made their thoughts articulate. They were listening to their own collective voice.40

The skill of the “red-haired man” is the skill of the Nazi orator: “he made their thoughts articulate.” Both give voice to the fear and suffering of the Weimar working class; both, thus engage the audience and elicit its approval: “they were attentive but not passive. . . . they participated” by giving their consent. The very dynamic at play at the party meeting is at the heart of the Nazi rise to power. Hyperbole wins the support of the people at the same time that it conceals Nazi brutality.41

The party meeting is a metaphor for the failure of popular politics in Weimar Germany. Norris the aesthete is absurdly out of place in his role as spokesperson for the downtrodden, Chinese worker. Neither he nor the red-haired man is qualified to address the topic at hand. The farce is rounded out when the Chinese delegates speak in labored German. And the topic is oddly remote, given the suffering that plagued the working class in Germany. The meeting is a stage show, a diversion that fails to mount a political challenge to the rising Nazi power. As William notes later in the novel: “Political meetings were well attended; they were cheaper than going to the movies or getting

[40] Ibid., p. 48.
[41] As Summer explains: “Norris, himself a clever and unscrupulous liar, nothing more or less than a criminal, is actually a small-scale, comic version of Hitler. Just as his sadomasochistic pleasures parody the real sadism of the Nazi regime, so his . . . minor intrigues parody the major betrayals of Hitler, who is himself a split personality.” Summers, Gay Fictions, p. 28.
drunk. Elderly people sat indoors, in the damp shabby houses, brewing malt coffee or weak tea and talking without animation of the Smash.”

Isherwood’s handling in the novel of the Communist Party is at once a metaphorical look at Hitler’s sway over the German people and a condemnation of the left’s inability to thwart the Nazi rise to power.

William and Arthur next visit the party headquarters during the first week of November following an election in which the Nazis “lost two million votes” and “the Communists had gained eleven seats.” Von Papen’s government prevails, as does a nearly irrational enthusiasm. Upon entering the headquarters, the two happen upon Otto, who embraces them: “Mensch! Willi! Jetzt geht’s los! Just let them talk about forbidding the Party now! If they do we’ll fight! The old Nazis are done for, that’s for certain. In six months, Hitler won’t have any storm-troopers left!” The exclamation is hyperbole rather than fact. The Nazi loss and the Communist gain in the Reichstag portend at this point in history neither the demise of Hitler—a far too powerful force—nor the ascendancy of Communism—a far too fractured movement.

In fact, the crowd’s response recalls the frenzy with which Hitler himself was received at public rallies throughout the period. Otto’s “affectionate” greeting of Arthur sets off a chain reaction:

“Good old Arthur!” exclaimed one of Otto’s friends loudly. The name was overheard, taken up, passed from mouth to mouth. “Arthur . . . who’s Arthur! Why, man, don’t you know who Arthur is?” No, they didn’t know. Equally, they didn’t care. It was a name, a focus-point for the enthusiasm of all these excited young people; it served its purpose. “Arthur! Arthur!” was caught up on all sides. People were shouting on the floor above us; in the hallway below. “Arthur’s here!” “Arthur for ever!” “We want Arthur!”

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42 Isherwood, The Last of Mr. Norris, p. 110.
43 Ibid., p. 111.
The storm of voices had risen in a moment. A mighty cheer, exuberant, half-humorous, burst spontaneously from a hundred throats.  

In much the same way that “Arthur” serves as a “focus-point” for the unfounded “enthusiasm of all the excited young people,” so Hitler served as a “focus-point” for “the Berlin working class.” He gave voice to the intense suffering brought on by the economic ruin that was particularly acute in Germany. He laid blame clearly and he offered a relatively simple solution that would bring about the restoration of Germany. Hitler persuaded because his platform was straightforward and readily accessible; he persuaded because the people were desperate, with little left to lose and a predisposition to follow unchallenged if led. Relatively speaking, Hitler’s popularity with the German people “had risen in a moment” and his message “passed from mouth to mouth,” unchecked because of the simple promise of salvation. As with Arthur, the German people “didn’t know” of Hitler’s true plan and “they didn’t care,” and his political program went unchecked until it was too late. What he promised was bright; what the people were living was dark.

Moreover, the frenzied embrace of Arthur turns into an indictment of liberal politics. The roar of the crowd expands:

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44 Ibid., p. 111–112.
45 Detlev J. K. Peukert speaks eloquently about the complexity of forces that were in play throughout the 1920s to create the ruinous financial situation in Germany. His analysis begins with the reparations that Germany was forced to pay as part of the Treaty of Versailles, but he cautions that the reparations alone did not ruin the German economy even though they did have a damaging effect on the German psyche. “All told, reparations were far less of a burden on the German postwar economy than had been feared. Between 1919 and the introduction of the Dawes Plan in 1924 Germany remitted approximately 10 billion RM. Under the Dawes and Young Plans annual reparations payments ranged from 0.6 to 2.1 billion RM, giving a total of 11.2 billion RM between 1924 and 1932. During the same period, however, imported capital to the value of about 28 billion RM flowed into German, of which the Americans alone lost roughly 8 billion RM as a result of the world economic crisis. Reparations did not, in fact, bleed the German economy. Indeed, their net effect was to leave the economy in rather better shape. But the psychological effects of reparations were extremely serious, as was the strain that the vicious circles of credits and reparations placed on the international financial system.” The ruination of the German economy was brought about by hyperinflation and the “collapse of the German Currency in 1923.” Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, pp. 197, 62.
Another followed it, and another. The crazy old staircase shook; a tiny flake of plaster was dislodged from the ceiling. In this confined space, the reverberation was terrible; the crowd was excited to find what a noise it could make. There was a powerfully, convulsive, surging movement inwards, towards the unseen object of admiration. A wave of admirers elbowed their way up the stairs, to collide with another wave, cascading down from above. Everybody wanted to touch Arthur. A rain of hand-claps descended on his wincing shoulders. An ill-timed attempt to hoist him into the air nearly resulted in his being pitched headlong over the banisters. His hat had been knocked off. I had managed to save it and was fully expecting to have to rescue his wig as well. Gasping for breath, Arthur tried, in a muddled way, to rise to the occasion: “Thank you . . .” he managed to articulate. “Most kind . . . really don’t deserve . . . good gracious! Oh dear.”

Arthur is indeed, in Summers’s words, “a small scale comic version of Hitler.” He draws a “wave of admirers to him” with the rhetorical promise of hope. At the same time, Arthur is also a mockery of the liberal politician. He stands before a meeting of the party, a Communist “in all but name . . . in all but name.” He spews hyperbole with the same abandon evinced by the crowd as they chaotically manhandle him in an “ill-timed attempt to hoist him into the air.” Arthur is disheveled both physically and ideologically; he reflects a party that is neither unified within itself nor integrated into a coherent liberal agenda.

In his seminal study The Weimar Republic, Deitlev J. K. Peukert explores at length the failure of the left to challenge the Fascists effectively. He focuses in particular on the rift between the KPD and the SPD (Social Democratic Party). To oversimplify, the SPD became the party of skilled workers who believed that education would lead to social and economic advance, whereas the KPD became the party of the unemployed who “were drawn towards the radicalized political counter-culture of the Weimar left by a sense of disillusion: a belief that education and skills would do nothing to improve their

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Isherwood, The Last of Mr. Norris, p. 112.
future prospects.” Various attempts at cooperation between them failed, only exacerbating the friction within and between the two:

After 1928 . . . the KPD line switched to one of fierce competition with the Social Democrats. The trade unions were split, and divisions within the rich life of the workers’ clubs and associations also became more marked. . . . The split between the “mass organizations” of the labour movement also damaged the movement’s political effectiveness. In the short run, it is true, political radicalization led to a new upsurge in of activity. Intellectuals committed or sympathetic to the Communist Party were particularly active in trying out new forms of communication and propaganda and path-breaking approaches and experiments in the arts. . . . Yet the political radicalization that was part and parcel of these innovations also mirrored and reinforced the political impotence of the left as it faced the general rightward movement in the country and the rise of National Socialism in particular. The split in the labour movement not only diminished the political strength of the two parties but diverted a large portion of their organizational energies into their own internecine struggles.

As the 1920s gave way to the 1930s, “internecine struggles” preoccupy the German left. Liberal politics is splintered by ideological and tactical disputes, some of which were significant and others irrelevant, while both were nonetheless diverting. Instead of mounting a coherent and consequently powerful challenge to the Fascist rise to power, the left turned inward and squabbled bitterly.47

The party fails to speak with a single voice; harmony gives way to discord: “the reverberation was terrible” and the “crowd was excited to find what a noise it could make.” Sympathizers that should be joined together by a common cause and shared ideology are presented as a mob easily swayed by an “unseen object of admiration.” Irrational in its affection, the mob can be drawn as easily to the Communist as it can to the Fascist or, for that matter, a representative of any one political view within a broad range of options. In Isherwood’s hands, Norris is a metaphor for both Hitler and the

liberal politician. In the end, though, the scene stresses the very noise that dominated the German left and the fact that it was undone by its “powerfully, convulsive, surging movement inwards.” The novel sounds the death knell of liberal politics in Weimar Germany, lingering over the failure of the left in Germany and Europe to stop the Fascist rise to power.

III

The novel is also a comic dirge, lamenting both the failure of personal relationships and the absence of moral absolutes in the world of Arthur Norris and Adolf Hitler.

Norris forms ready friendships. He embraces William impulsively on the train, endearing himself with his quirky aesthetic. The intrigue that Norris exacts from his admirers, though, ultimately proves beguiling.

Norris leaves Berlin shortly after meeting William, and upon his return reports that he was in Paris and not London, as William had been told, explaining that “just at present, it is desirable that a slight uncertainty as to my whereabouts should exist in the minds of certain persons here.” He dissembles, allowing that “my visit was not unconnected with the Communist Party.” He has affiliated himself with the Communist Party in Germany, affecting the appearance of a strident comrade in arms. His trip to Paris, though, was “not unconnected,” but most certainly not on behalf of the party. Norris dissembles, a Communist “in all but name . . . all but name.” His appearance at the party meeting is a sham, and his affection for the cause is both disingenuous and self-motivated. Eventually, we learn that he has aligned himself with the party in order to

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Isherwood, *The Last of Mr. Norris*, p. 45.
gather information that he then sells to the French Secret Police, through an intermediary, Mr. van Hoorn.

Bayer, the head of the Communist Party in Berlin, is wise to Norris and uses him instead to pass false information to the French. Norris is ultimately discredited, but the mercenary van Hoorn commissions Norris to arrange a meeting outside of Germany at which he can meet von Prennitz, whose position in the right-wing von Pappen government provides him with “access to many secrets from the German Government. It is possible for him to obtain copies of maps, plans, and private documents which van Hoorn’s employers will pay very much to see.”

Thus, Norris launches the Swiss project.

Norris decides that the meeting should take place in Switzerland, and he uses William to lure him there. Von Prennitz (known familiarly as Kuno) “made a great hobby of his figure” and lived in a “house full of handsome young men with superbly developed brown bodies which they smeared in oil and baked for hours in the sun.” Kuno is overtly attracted to William, but suspicious of Norris for good reason:

“I think,” Arthur gave me a discreet, sideways glance, “that he’s taken a great fancy to you.”

“Do you?”

“I sometimes feel, William, that with your talents, it’s a pity you’re not more ambitious. A young man should make use of his opportunities. Kuno is in a position to help you in all sorts of ways.”

I laughed. “To help both of us, you mean.”

“Well, if you put it in that way, yes. I quite admit that I foresee certain advantages to myself from the arrangement. Whatever my faults, I hope I’m not a hypocrite.”

Norris, the declared Communist, and Kuno, the appointed minister in Von Pappen’s conservative government, should be sworn enemies. Norris nonetheless cultivates a social relationship with Kuno because it is in his best interest to do so. A rift eventually forms

49 Ibid., p. 157.
50 Ibid., pp. 43–44.
between the two when Kuno learns from Schmidt that Norris intends to ask him for a loan. Schmidt—Norris’s manservant, heavy, and alter ego—no doubt warns Kuno that Norris is a credit risk, though his motive is far from altruistic.

Norris flees to Paris—no doubt to meet with van Hoorn and launch the Swiss project—and returns intent on repairing his relationship with Kuno. To do so, he hosts a dinner party for three: Norris, Kuno, and William. As the evening unfolds, “Kuno relaxed by imperceptible stages, from polite suspicion to positive jollity. Arthur, recovering his nerve, was naughty and funny. We drank a good deal of brandy and three whole bottles of Pommard.” After dinner, Norris abruptly excuses himself from the table, claiming that he has an evening appointment. Taken aback at first by Norris, William is stunned by Kuno’s reaction: “‘Don’t mention it, my dear fellow. . . . We quite understand.’ His foot pressed mine under the table.” Kuno invites William to view his new flat, but William demurs, while still accepting a ride home from Kuno. The two are “tucked . . . into the depths of the vast black limousine” by a “handsome” chauffeur, and Kuno takes his hand under a “fur rug.” William does not respond, and Kuno’s sexual energy dissipates: “Kuno gave my hand a limp squeeze.” He consoles himself with talk of platonic friendship and drops William at Frl. Schroeder’s boarding house.\(^{51}\)

The rapprochement between Arthur and Kuno not only allows cordial interaction between the two men to resume, but it also restores William’s sexual power over Kuno, an influence upon which Arthur depends when implementing the Swiss project. Arthur tells William that Kuno has an abiding interest in a German glass works and reports that a French businessman named Margot has commissioned him to arrange a meeting with Kuno. The encounter must take place outside of Germany so as not to raise suspicion in  

\(^{51}\) Ibid., p. 108.
the small circles of high finance, and it must appear to happen by chance. Any direct involvement of Norris or Bradshaw would offend Kuno: “He’d regard it as an unwarranted intrusion into his affairs. He’d withdraw at once. . . .” Pregnitz refuses . . . to mix personal with business relationships. Coming from you or from me any suggestion that he should enter into negotiations with Margot . . . would be an impertinence.” The meeting is planned for Switzerland, to which William will lure Kuno with an invitation to a skiing holiday: “He’d probably be only too delighted to travel with such a young and lively companion.”

Kuno eagerly accepts William’s invitation at tea the next day and agrees to set off for Switzerland on Christmas Eve. Familiar with the ways of Arthur, William confronts him directly:

“I want you to speak the truth. Are you and Margot going to swindle Kuno? Yes or no?”
“My dear William—er—really . . . I think you presume . . .”
“I want an answer, please, Arthur. You see, it’s important for me to know. I’m mixed up in this now. Are you or aren’t you?”
“Well, I must say. . . No. Of course not. As I’ve already explained at some length, I . . .”
“Do you swear that?”
“Really, William, this isn’t a court of law. Don’t look at me like that, please. All right, if it gives you any satisfaction, I swear it.”
“Thank you. That’s all I wanted. I’m sorry if I sounded rude. You know that as a rule, I don’t meddle in your affairs. Only this is my affair too, you see.”

In wringing a commitment out of Arthur, William poses the moral question at the heart of their relationship: on what basis does he trust Arthur? In search of an answer, he “tried to look Arthur in the eyes. But now this time-honoured process didn’t work. Here were no
windows to the soul. . . . There was nothing for it but to take Arthur at his word.”

Believing in the integrity of Arthur’s word, William sets off to Switzerland with Kuno. Morally, William is on shaky ground from the start. “My journey with Kuno to Switzerland resembled the honeymoon trip which follows a marriage of convenience.” He agrees to operate as Arthur’s agent because he is assured that Kuno stands to gain financially. As with any “marriage of convenience,” the two parties enter into a pact whereby they agree either explicitly or implicitly to create an impression in order to advance or protect their respective interests. In this instance, William readily adopts the role of traveling companion because he takes Arthur at his word; brokering a relationship between Kuno and Margot will benefit both men. Moreover, Kuno complies because he finds the prospect of spending time in William’s physical presence all too eagerly enticing even though he knows that the relationship is platonic. Both parties prosper; neither is cheated.

The journey to Switzerland, though, lays bare the ethical challenge posed by the “marriage of convenience.” Arriving at the ski chalet, William is preoccupied by one question: how will he recognize Margot? The reader is introduced to five people in the scene: Piet van Hoorn and his uncle Mr. van Hoorn, M. Janin and his female assistant, and M. Bernstein.

He meets Piet van Hoorn first, when Piet, an experienced skier, stops to watch Kuno instructing William on the novice slope. Annoyed at the intrusion, William deliberately swerves into Piet and knocks him over. William helps Piet to his feet, introduces himself, and then presents Kuno, who is instantly smitten: “After this, to my

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54 Ibid., p. 139.
relief, Kuno’s interest in my instruction considerably decreased. Van Hoorn was a tall, fair, boy handsome in the severe Viking manner. . . . He was furiously shy and blushed crimson whenever Kuno, with his discreetly flattering smile, addressed him.” The three come off the slopes and enter the dining room for lunch, where they meet up with Piet’s uncle, the elder van Hoorn. Taken with Piet, Kuno insists that uncle and nephew join them for lunch; “he gave a meaning glance at Piet as he spoke. I felt rather embarrassed. Kuno was certainly a bit crude in his advances.”55

While the four dine, William zeros in on a man whom he takes for Margot based entirely on the gentleman’s appearance and manner:

He had a bald egg-shaped head; bold, rudely prominent, round solemn eyes; yellowish-white hair brushed back around the base of the skull like a pair of folded wings. His voice was vibrant and harsh. About his whole appearance there was something indescribably unpleasant and sinister. I felt a curious thrill pass through my nervous system; antagonistic, apprehensive, expectant. I glanced quickly at the others; but no, they seemed entirely unaware of the stranger’s cynical, concealed inspection. . . . I hadn’t dreamed of anything so authentic, so absolutely, immediately convincing.56

The man is identified by his appearance; he is known by his features, which in turn reflect his character: “bold, rudely prominent, round solemn eyes,” a “vibrant and harsh” voice, a visage that is “indescribably unpleasant and sinister.” He is a type, “so authentic, so absolutely, immediately convincing.” In fact, the description recalls period caricatures of Jewish businessmen. While having tea alone, William sees the gentleman again, but does not approach him. William and Kuno are joined by the van Hoorns for dinner, 

55 Ibid., pp. 142–143.
56 Ibid., p. 144.
during which the gentleman approaches their table to ask Piet, “Have you the true Aryan
descent. . . . I am Marcel Janin.”

William recognizes the name immediately as belonging to a writer of popular
pulp fiction that borders on soft pornography. Janin entertains the party with a description
of how he writes: “‘I write very quickly. . . . For me, one glance is sufficient. I do not
believe in second impressions.’ Looking for fresh worlds to conquer, he had fixed on the
Nazi movement and he and his secretary were leaving the next day for Munich. ‘Within a
week,’ he concluded ominously, ‘I shall know all.’” Janin’s writing depends entirely on
what he immediately observes. He takes for granted that what he sees is a true reflection
of reality. Working entirely on the surface and with little regard for probing analysis,
Janin is not discouraged by the fact that Piet van Hoorn, who looks of “true Aryan
descent,” is in fact Dutch. And upon learning that Piet is not German, “he didn’t seem
much disappointed . . . to discover that this wasn’t his legitimate prey. His
generalizations, formulated, to save time, in advance, were not easily disturbed.”

The scene is a deliberate reference to the Nazi preoccupation with appearance.
Like Janin, the Nazis categorized people by appearance and based thereon made moral
judgments that more often than not had barbaric consequences. Things are what they
appear to be; all is taken at face value and sanctioned or censored accordingly. Aryans
“were suddenly proud of being blond.” And Jews were frightened, marked as they were
by Semitic features, religious garb, and circumcision. The epistemology is disturbing. It
produces moral judgments that are invariably skewed because they are made with
reference to appearance alone. The Nazis and Janin alike work in “generalizations.”

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57 Ibid., p. 147.
58 Ibid., p. 148.
59 Ibid., p. 179.
fact, people and their motivations to act are far more complicated than they appear to be on the surface, calling for more a nuanced epistemology.

Ironically, appearance is discredited as a factor in moral judgment. If one does not allow for the subtle complexity of the relationship between appearance and reality, one can never determine when or if appearance actually is a reflection of reality. In Janin’s world of shallow observation, where “one glance is sufficient and . . . second impressions” are disregarded, in the Nazi world where the orator’s hyperbole celebrates absolute “generalizations” and stirs the people to action, and in a world where the con artist Arthur Norris manipulates appearance to advance his own interests, the physical object and action are unreliable portals to the truth. When William had “tried to look Arthur in the eyes,” he found that they “were no windows to the soul.” Moral judgment is thwarted.

By William’s account, neither the van Hoorns nor Janin is Margot. Puzzled, he continues his pursuit of Margot in the morning, talking to a hall porter and learning that the hotel is filled with successful businessmen. He focuses on one guest in particular—M. Bernstein—when he learns that he is a factory owner. However, Bernstein ultimately shows no interest in meeting William and Kuno, leaving William to deduce that he is not Margot. On the next and third day of their trip, William goes off skating with Piet, only to learn that he is a Fascist and admirer of Hitler, and returns to find Kuno having tea with van Hoorn, the two wrapped in conversation, which they interrupt when the young people approach their table. At that juncture, William receives a telegram from Bayer in Berlin telling him to return immediately. Thus, William leaves Switzerland without identifying Margot and certain that he has failed in his mission to connect him inadvertently with
Kuno. Appearance is an unreliable indicator, as we soon learn when William meets up with Bayer.

William is at a complete loss and utterly confused; he is incapable of making deductions based on appearance and unable to distinguish between good and evil because neither is readily apparent. Of one thing he is certain: Arthur is in trouble and the trouble involves the party; otherwise, he surmises, Bayer would not have been the one to summon him. “Here my reasoning came to an end. It was bounded by guesses and possibilities as vague and limitless as the darkness which enclosed the train. Lying in my berth, I tried to sleep and couldn’t. The swaying of the coach, the clank of the wheels kept time with the excited, anxious throbbing of my heart. Arthur, Bayer, Margot, Schmidt; I tried the puzzle backwards, sideways, all ways up. It kept me awake the whole night.”60 William’s attempts to reason are thwarted by the disconnection between appearance and reality; “possibilities” are “vague and limitless” because nothing can be known with certainty by its appearance.

Upon arriving in Berlin, William goes first to Fr. Schroeder’s boarding house, where he inquires after Arthur’s health and learns that he is fine. He then goes to the party offices and meets with Bayer, who allows that William has been heretofore deliberately deceived by both himself and Norris: “It is not right that you are kept any longer in ignorance of the truth.” When asked, William explains the reason for his journey with Kuno to Switzerland. Bayer then explains that their party members in Paris know van Hoorn, allowing that “he is a clever man. He has given us much trouble.” According to Bayer, van Hoorn is a mercenary of sorts, gathering information and selling it to the highest bidder. He is motivated by financial gain rather than political

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60 Ibid., p. 153.
commitment. Naively devoted to Arthur, William infers that van Hoorn duped Arthur into gathering information. Hence, he is stunned to learn that Arthur was complicit, a knowing participant with a financial interest. In the words of Bayer: “Norris was quite aware, you see of what van Hoorn wanted. They understood each other very well. Since Norris returned to Germany, he has been receiving regularly sums of money through van Hoorn from the French Secret Service.” 61

Bayer’s disclosure disorients William entirely. The elder van Hoorn, whom William supposed to be a somewhat tediously entertaining Dutch gentleman, is in fact Margot, an espionage agent working for cash on behalf of the French Secret Police. Pregnitz is a politician with access to information and a susceptibility to bribery, rather than a financier with a predilection for kink and “handsome young men with superbly developed brown bodies.” And, Arthur is a calculating con artist, rather than a Wildean eccentric. His assurance—neither he nor Margot intended “to swindle Kuno”—is hollow, his word without meaning and authority. William’s moral framework is shattered. Arthur pleads with him:

“Don’t be angry with me, dear boy. I can’t bear it.”
“I’m not angry with you; I’m angry with myself for being such an idiot. I thought you were my friend, you see.”
“I don’t ask you to forgive me,” said Arthur humbly. “You’ll never do that, of course. But don’t judge me too harshly. You’re young. Your standards are so severe. When you get to be my age, you’ll see things differently, perhaps. It’s very easy to condemn when one isn’t tempted. Remember that.”
“I don’t condemn you. As for my standards, if I ever had any, you’ve muddled them up completely. I expect you’re right. In your place, I’d probably have done just the same.”
“You see?” Arthur eagerly followed up his advantage. “I knew you’d come to look at it in that light.”

61 Ibid., pp. 154–156.
“I don’t want to look at it in any light. I’m too utterly sick of the whole filthy business. . . . My God, I wish you’d go away somewhere I’ll never see you again!”

The code of absolute right and wrong has been destroyed; “standards” have been “muddled up completely.” Moral judgments are relative, conditioned by self-interest: “in your place, I’d probably have done just the same.” Personal relationships are formed with an eye on material advantage. No longer forged by spiritual bond, the romantic friendship is ruined: “I thought you were my friend, you see.”

With the disclosure of Norris’s scheme, the novel moves rapidly to a close. Norris is hunted by the German police, and he ultimately flees Berlin. The Reichstag burns and Hitler assumes the chancellery. As William prepares to leave Berlin, he meets with his friend, the reporter Helen Pratt, who tells him that Kuno, having initially laid low after the visit to Switzerland, surfaced and began doing business with the French. With the German police moving in to arrest him, Kuno attempted suicide, but he “fired crooked. Nearly blew his eye out; bled like a pig. They had to take him to hospital to finish him off.” Shortly after his meeting with Pratt, William learns that Arthur traveled to the Americas, pursued from place to place by Schmidt, a rabid dog chasing his prey. “In Valparaiso, a truce seems, however, to have been at last declared,” and the two begin to travel together. Thus, the novel ends with a lament: “Their new partnership won’t be so easy to dissolve as their old one. Henceforward they are doomed to walk the Earth together.” The language is a deliberate reference to the closing lines of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*:

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62 When William first introduced Norris to Helen Platt, a friend and economic journalist, she cautions William, chastising him for his “romantic” view of friendship. “Oh, I know you. You’re soft, like most men. You make up romances about people instead of seeing them as they are. Have you ever noticed his mouth?” Isherwood, *The Last of Mr. Norris*, p. 34.

63 Ibid., p. 189.
They looking back, all th’Eastern side beheld
Of Paradise, so late thir happy seat,
Wav’d over by that flaming Brand, the gate
With dreadful faces throng’d and fiery Arms
Some natural tears dropp’d, but wipp’d them soon;
The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest and Providence their guide,
They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow
Through Eden took their solitary way.⁶⁴

As Adam and Eve turn their backs on Eden “with wandering steps and slow,” so too Norris and Schmidt “are doomed to walk the Earth together.” The comparison to Adam and Eve elevates the pair; bound together, they are archetypes, representatives of the human condition. Their lot differs, though, from that of Adam and Eve. As they “through Eden took their solitary way,” they would rely on “Providence their guide.” God would steer their course; good and evil would be clearly delineated and absolute. Not so for Norris and Schmidt.

Their world is decidedly modern, abandoned by God and deprived of moral absolutes. Self-interest prevails. At best, people are motivated by personal gain; at worst, by the desperate struggle for personal survival. In Isherwood’s hands, the relationship between two people—Arthur and William—dilates. At first isolated and enclosed within a train, the quirky personal friendship connects to the historical; Norris’s sway over William becomes a metaphor for Hitler’s sway over the German people as well as a signal that the human condition has changed. Accompanying the rise of Fascism is the destruction of an ethical framework that assumes a link between appearance and reality. Moral certainty is replaced by moral relativism, and the exchange threatens the very existence of humanity. In the end, the force to which all succumb is ultimately too

overwhelmingly powerful to be stemmed. Refuge is to be found neither in the cabaret nor the political party.

VI

Isherwood’s relocation to Berlin in 1929 was an act of defiance, a declaration of personal and poetic independence. Looking to explore his sexual identity with a degree of freedom not afforded to him in England, Isherwood was equally drawn to the artistic avant-garde of Weimar Germany, which was decidedly political. As Samuel Hymes notes in his seminal study *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s*, “In the last years of the Weimar Republic there were said to be 132 homosexual cafes in Berlin. . . . But Berlin offered more than sexual freedom: to be with Germans was to cast off the emotions and rhetoric of the First World War, and so to reject childhood and become free and adult. And once the young English writers were there they discovered that Berlin also offered a contemporary literature, and particularly drama, that was at once avant-garde and highly political, as England’s was not.”65 In Berlin, Isherwood was seduced as much by the politics of aesthetics as he was by the boy bars, confronting as he did “the essential aesthetic question of the decade: how can an artist respond to the immediate crises of his time and yet remain true to his art.”66

The question spawned debates that were sprawling, yet two central questions stood out: does the artist have a moral and political responsibility to respond through art to the world in which he or she is living, and if so, how can the artist reconcile the

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66 Ibid., p. 207.
demands of art with the demands for social action? Phrased simply, what can the artist do in the face of horrific human suffering?

Isherwood’s treatment of what Hynes labels the “obsessive theme of the ‘thirties, the relation between poetry and action” was undoubtedly influenced by Auden who, as Hynes points out, addressed the issue directly in his preface to his 1935 collection The Poet’s Tongue. There Auden draws a sharp distinction between propaganda and poetry:

The propagandist, whether moral or political, complains that the writer should use his power over words to persuade people to a particular course of action, instead of fiddling while Rome burns. But Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice. . . . One must show those who come to poetry for a message, for calendar thoughts, that they have come to the wrong door, that poetry may illuminate but it will not dictate. 67

The poet lays bare essential truths and in so doing stirs the reader to “make a rational and moral choice.” The propagandist advocates; the poet “illuminates.”

Auden’s position is one that is entirely compatible with the documentary, a genre that flourished in Weimar Germany. Hynes explores this impulse toward documentary, citing the Brown Book of Hitler Terror and the Burning of the Reichstag, prepared by the World Committee for the Victims of German Fascism and published in 1933. The work chronicles the early torture of Jews, nonconformists, Communists, and Social Democrats brought about at the hands of the Nazis. It is an eerie foreshadow of what was to come and a signal that “reality meant something other, and worse, than men had thought . . . human beings were capable of greater evil than liberalism had allowed for.” The narrative

is blunt and straightforward, documenting incident upon incident of Nazi terror and
giving rise to an impulse to record rather than imagine. According to Hynes, “as actual,
verified human behaviour . . . became more and more violent, more brutal, and more
extreme, the realistic impulse in literature turned away from imaginative forms, toward
liberal, documentary forms.” Facts revealed more about the human condition than tropes
and “this is because the imagination simply could not exceed what reality offered in
terror, pity, and suffering; but it is also because in these circumstances the real might
have a propaganda effect, and thus be a mode of opposing action, in a way that the
imaginative could not be.”68

For Hynes, the “real” functions in much the same way as Auden’s “poetic.” Both
reveal and, in so doing, both “have a propaganda effect.” They gently steer the reader to
good rather than evil and make, as Auden explains, “the necessity for action more
urgent.” Moreover, while the documentary impulse in literature that emerged in the 1930s
could and did lead to the production of “propaganda” per se, it also inspired Isherwood to
produce a group of stories collected in Goodbye to Berlin that draw on the actual to
reveal basic truths of the human condition.

Goodbye to Berlin is a collection of four stories—“Sally Bowles,” “On Ruegen
Island,” “The Nowaks,” and “The Landauers.” The stories are framed by two “diary”
entries—A Berlin Diary (Autumn 1930) at the beginning and A Berlin Diary (Winter
1932–33) at the close.

In the first entry, Isherwood takes his narrative stance in an often quoted passage:
“I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording not thinking. Recording the
man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair.

68 Hynes, Auden Generation, p. 131.
Someday, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed.” Isherwood the narrator is a documentary photographer, a collector of fragmented images—“the man shaving at the window,” “the woman in the kimono”—that await arrangement into a coherent picture. He is an objective observer, nonjudgmental and distanced from his subject.

According to Carolyn Heilbrun, Isherwood’s stance accounts for the very success of these stories as political literature. Looking at Isherwood’s entire canon, Heilbrun divides the work into the documentaries and the novels. *The Berlin Stories* belong to the former category, and they work as political literature precisely because Isherwood positions himself as a firsthand observer who is removed from historical events and detached from actual people:

> If, for example, we call the books with the “Christopher Isherwood” narrator “political,” we begin to see that it is precisely in the use of this particular device of point of view that Isherwood’s success as a political novelist lies. . . . In all of these, emotion has been transposed or dissolved, and the distance which political novels require has been achieved.

The narrator establishes his authority by distancing himself emotionally. The reader trusts that his record of historical events is complete and accurate because he is not personally invested in the act of recording. He is a “camera.” The “shutter is open,” capturing all the visual images that come before it. The photographer/narrator is simply documenting what he observes with no particular axe to grind—he is “passive, recording, not thinking.”

In reality, though, Isherwood relies on documentary conventions to write a political fiction that impacts the world by stirring the reader to action. As Heilbrun explains:

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70 Heilbrun, *Christopher Isherwood*, p. 15.
An interesting comparison occurs with Orwell. Certainly it can be argued that Orwell’s best, most perceptive, and most moving works are his nonfiction. . . . When Orwell comes to write novels, the same genius does not manifest itself, and in his last two novels, Animal Farm and 1984, the powerful emotion infusing the work pushes them too far in the direction of polemics or frenzied prophecy. What Isherwood has achieved in his documentaries is the quality of Orwell’s nonfiction, but presented, not personally, but through the eyes of an observing, not emotionally committed narrator.71

Far from being “polemics or frenzied prophecy,” Isherwood’s stories are lean accounts of “historical” events. By affecting an air of objectivity, the narrator leaves the reader alone to interpret these events and draw his or her own conclusions and to make his or her own moral choices. Or so it seems. In reality, the hand of the narrator is always present, guiding the reader. He chooses what to record; he orders the material. Christopher Isherwood—the skilled narrator; the controlling artist—constructs the stories in such a way that the reader can only draw particular conclusions and only make particular ethical choices. Both carry the weight of inevitability. The author is a social agent, with the power to persuade through the act of telling.

So construed, literary Berlin—“at once avant-garde and highly political”—is charged with redemptive energy; it is a place where change can be wrought through art. Isherwood’s stories challenge this very notion.

Ever present throughout the stories either in the foreground or background is Frl. Schroeder’s apartment that she lets out to boarders. The place is a bohemian den that has changed with the times. Like its owner who “long ago before the War and the Inflation, used to be comparatively well off,” the flat has seen better days. As Frl. Schroeder explains, she first welcomed boarders into her home twenty years ago to keep her company: “You see, Herr Issyvoo, in those days I could afford to be very particular about

71 Ibid., pp. 15–16.
the sort of people who came to live here. I could pick and choose. I only took them really well connected and well educated—proper gentlefolk (like yourself, Herr Issyvoo).” Her boarders treated her as a lady showering her with “presents—a bottle of cognac or a box of chocolates or some flowers.” When Herr Issyvoo meets Frl. Schroeder, her salon has become home to a decidedly different type of guest.72

Turned out of her own bedroom by the need to take in as many boarders as possible, Frl. Schroeder now sleeps in the living room and scrubs her own floors, “all day long . . . padding about the large dingy flat. Shapeless but alert, she waddles from room to room in carpet slippers and a flowered dressing gown pinned ingeniously together . . . flicking with her duster, peeping, spying, poking her short pointed nose into the cupboards and luggage of her lodgers.”73 The doyenne turned charwoman is landlady to a slightly tarnished bohemian cast of characters.

In total, there are five boarders. Herr Issyvoo is a tutor of English and a novelist. Frl. Kost is a prostitute who sloppily affects a sophisticated air. Frl. Mayr is a professional yodeler, who despite Schroeder’s assurance that she is “one of the best . . . in the whole of Germany” is nevertheless behind on her rent. Bobby is a bartender at the Troika, a German youth who has changed his name “because English Christian names are fashionable just now in the Berlin demi-monde.” And finally, there is “a commercial traveler who is out all day and most of the night.”74 The boarders represent the corruption or deterioration of the arts: theater (Kost, the prostitute), music (Mayr, the yodeler; Bobby, the cabaret “mixer”), and literature (the “commercial traveler” who has no name and Issyvoo, the private tutor who has no scruple: “I am bribed with fruit not to

72 Isherwood, Goodbye to Berlin, p. 3.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., pp. 6–8.
be tiresome about the English language; she, for her part, tells her parents that I am the best teacher she ever had.”}75 In short, Schroeder’s boarding house is a vulgarized bohemia, a fitting home for Issyvoo’s new friend Sally.

“Sally Bowles,” the first story in the collection, has been subjected to extensive scholarly and critical scrutiny, due in large part to its adaptation for stage and screen: John Van Druten’s play (1951) and Henry Cornelius’s film (1955), both entitled I Am a Camera, and Joe Masteroff’s stage musical (1966) and Bob Fosse’s film (1972), both entitled Cabaret. As Linda Mizejewski explains, “The Sally character herself is the century’s darling of divine decadence, an odd measure of how dear to us is the fiction of the ‘shocking’ British/American” vamp in Weimar Berlin.”76

Isherwood built the Sally character based on Jean Ross, a British actress whom he befriended in Berlin. Peter Parker recounts that Ross lived with a morphine addict named Erika who was the mistress of Richard Crossman, “a future cabinet minister” whose correspondence with Erika she translated. Isherwood was as captivated by stories of their love affair as he was by the storyteller, Jean:

Isherwood . . . cultivated his acquaintance with this remarkable young woman, part of whose attraction was that she appeared to represent “the whole idea of militant bohemia.” This, as far as Isherwood was concerned, made them soul-mates. Their relationship had a great deal of “the prep-school atmosphere” about it, and if Ross was not precisely one of the boys, her independence and her air of the would-be demi-mondaine made her a forceful, though unthreatening, equal. Isherwood said of Sally Bowles that she “is not an obvious tart. She is a little girl who has listened to what the grown-ups have said about tarts, and who was trying to copy those things.” The same might have been said of Ross. Part of Isherwood and Ross’s mutual attraction was that each of them was playing a role—that of promising young novelist and promising young actress, sexually sophisticated free spirits in wicked Berlin—and each of them needed an audience. In a curious way, they believed in each other.77

75 Ibid, p. 17.
76 Mizejewski, Divide Decadence, p. 4.
77 Parker, Isherwood, pp. 80–81.
Positioned first in the collection of stories, “Sally Bowles” opens the door to “militant bohemia,” leading the reader on a journey that does in fact treat many of the same themes explored in *The Last of Mr. Norris* at the same time that it challenges the very notion of the author’s capacity to impact the world, either for good or for ill.

Sally is a cabaret singer, of decidedly little talent. And though she harbors fantasies of artistic success and personal fame, she nonetheless does little to advance her career. As Chris observes, “She talked incessantly about getting work, but made no effort to do so.”

Rather, she devotes much of her energy to meeting men with money and indulging them. For Sally, as for Mr. Norris, personal relationships are commercial transactions: “And then there is the awful old Jew who takes me out sometimes. He’s always promising to get me a contract; but he only wants to sleep with me, the old swine. I think the men in this country are awful. They’ve none of them got any money, and they expect you to let them seduce you if they give you a box of chocolates.”

She embraces as hers a credo of Weimar Germany: “Everyone’s got to look after themselves.”

Sally’s gig at The Lady Windermere comes to an end. In an effort to economize and live on the small stipend she receives from her mother in England, Sally moves into Frl. Schroeder’s boarding house on New Year’s Eve. Following a dinner at home, Sally and Chris go as revelers to The Lady Windermere, where she takes up and leaves with Klaus Linke, her former accompanist at the cabaret. The next morning she returns to Frl. Schroeder and declares to Chris: “I’m most terribly in love with him.” Her love for Klaus, though, is childishly romantic and detached from reality. When he announces

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78 Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin*, p. 44.
79 Ibid., p. 31.
80 Ibid., p. 28.
within a couple of weeks after New Year’s Eve that he is leaving Berlin to take on a technical job on a film in London, “there was a positively surgical atmosphere in the flat, as though Sally were undergoing a surgical operation.” The next day, she spent “curled up on the sofa in her room,” and when urged to eat by Chris, she demurs: “I feel all marvelous and ethereal, as I was a kind of most wonderful saint, or something.” Oddly, she admits that she “shall never marry him” and explains that “it would ruin our careers.”

Chris presses the point:

“You might marry after you’re both famous.”
Sally considered this:
“No. . . . That would spoil everything. We should be trying all the time to live up to our old selves, if you know what I mean. And we should both be different. . . . He was so marvelously primitive: just like a faun. He made me feel like a most marvelous nymph, or something, miles away from anywhere, in the middle of the forest.”

Sally puts a romantic spin on her affair with Klaus. Art has summoned him to London. Love has confined her to the chaise, where she idles away, a “most wonderful saint” writing poetry throughout the day. In Sally’s “ethereal” configuration, the affair cannot admit material concerns. She can’t marry Klaus now because doing so would take the relationship outside the bedroom and force them to confront their poverty and lack of commercially viable artistic talent, not to mention the deteriorating world around them. She can’t marry in the future, should fame and financial security come their way, because the relationship is little more than a diversion sustained by the myth of the struggling artists joined together as kindred spirits in bohemia. In marriage, a contractual arrangement that is decidedly unromantic and fundamentally material, the “nymph” and
the “faun” vanish, replaced by two financially strapped people whose employment opportunities are limited.\textsuperscript{81}

And while Sally’s affair with Klaus “transports her miles away from anywhere, in the middle of the forest,” Klaus realizes in England that it does nothing to address the basic questions of material survival. In his second letter to Sally, he breaks off their affair. At first, he postures romantically: “I see now . . . that I behaved very selfishly. . . . My dear little girl, you have adored me too much. If we should continue to be together, you would soon have no will and no mind of your own.’ Klaus went on to advise Sally to live for her work. . . . ‘You must be brave, Sally, my poor darling child.’” He goes on, though to explain that ultimately his motivation for ending the affair is material. He reports that at “a party at the house of Lady Klein, a leader of the English aristocracy,” he met “a very beautiful and intelligent young English girl named Miss Gore-Eckersley,” who is “related to an English Lord.” Klaus has traded sex for status, poverty for money, anonymity for standing. In so doing, he reaffirms the commercial nature of personal relationships, as Sally does in her next tryst.\textsuperscript{82}

Sally puts down the letter from Klaus and immediately licks her wounds by dodging reality: “During the weeks that followed, Sally and I were together most of the day. Curled up on the sofa in the big dingy room, she smoked, drank Prairie Oysters, talked endlessly of the future.”\textsuperscript{83} Both envision a future marked by artistic success as well as personal fame and fortune. And yet, Chris fails to write and Sally fails to look for work. Neither does a thing to change their lot, until they meet the millionaire Clive one night at the bar at the Troika.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., pp. 37–39.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p. 41.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., p. 43.
Sally latches on to Clive instantly, spending every day with him, usually in the company of Chris. He falls prey to her seduction in large part because she is alive in ways that he is not:

Clive was a very big man, good looking in a heavy Roman way, and just beginning to get fat. He had about him that sad, American air of vagueness which is always attractive; doubly attractive in one who possessed so much money. He was vague, wistful, a bit lost: dimly anxious to have a good time and uncertain about how to set about getting it. He seemed never to be quite sure whether he was really enjoying himself, whether what we were doing was really fun. He had constantly to be reassured.  

Clive is a gentleman of a certain age—“just beginning to get fat”—who has spent the better part of his life preoccupied with making money rather than enjoying the privileges to which it entitled him. He is out of place in the Weimar cabaret—“vague, wistful, a bit lost”—and vulnerable to the nineteen-year-old vamp Sally Bowles, who is all too pleased to offer him the reassurance he craves.

Sally is at once cunning and innocent in her pursuit of Clive. When the two return from a day trip by air to Dresden, Clive presents Chris with six silk shirts, a choice influenced by Sally: “‘He wanted to get you a gold cigarette case,’ Sally whispered in my ear, ‘but I told him shirts would be better. Yours are in such a state. . . . Besides we’ve got to go slow at present. We don’t want him to think we’re gold-diggers.’” Sally’s success with Clive depends on appearance: Chris needs new shirts to improve his station in life (“yours are in such a state”) and both need to appear earnest in their affection for Clive, in order to avoid being found out as “gold-diggers.” On the one hand, Sally is shrewdly controlling Clive. She tells him what he wants to hear and feigns affection by manipulating appearance. On the other, Sally’s emotional fluidity allows her to love him genuinely—or as genuinely as Sally can love anyone: “‘I adore him,’ Sally told me,

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84 Ibid., p. 46.
repeatedly and very solemnly. . . . She was intensely earnest in believing this. It was like a dogma in a newly adopted religious creed: Sally adores Clive. It is a very solemn undertaking to adore a millionaire.”85 Sally is a captivating character because she is neither sinner nor saint--con artist nor paramour. Sally is both. She manipulates people and events to take care of herself financially; self-interest is forthright. At the same time, her emotional responses to people are stirred subconsciously by a deeply felt sense of material deprivation and greed. She “adores Clive” quite genuinely because she needs to adore him. In this respect, she resembles the endearing Mr. Norris.

Clive promises to be Sally’s ticket out of Berlin and the poverty it entails. Shortly after meeting her, he announces that he is taking Sally and Chris away for good: “The Orient Express would take us to Athens. Thence, we should fly to Egypt. From Egypt to Marseilles. From Marseilles, by boat to South America. Then Taiti. Singapore. Japan. . . . His matter-of-fact boredom gradually infused reality into the preposterous conversation. After all, he could do it. . . . With a mere gesture of his wealth, he could alter the whole course of our lives.” The envisioned trip is epic in scale, with the travelers moving luxuriously from one storied place to another in search of the material security that eludes them in Berlin. Clive and Sally would marry; Chris would tag along, “a kind of private secretary without duties.”86 The arrangement is simple and straightforward, clearly imagined and easily effected given Clive’s vast wealth. Clive is a transformative force with the power to save Sally and Chris.

The fiction he writes, though, is just that—a tale that never comes true. His fantasy is as detached from reality as the trio is from the world Sally so desperately wants

85 Ibid, p. 47.
86 Ibid., p. 48.
to escape. After announcing his plan, Clive draws attention to “a most elegant funeral”
taking place below his hotel balcony: “They were burying Hermann Muller. Ranks of
pale steadfast clerks, government officials, trade union secretaries—the whole drab weary
pageant of Prussian Social Democracy—trudged past under their banners toward the
silhouetted arches of the Brandenburger Tor, from which the long black streamers stirred
slowly in an evening breeze.”

Muller had been elected chancellor in 1928, presiding
over the Grand Coalition formed in the Reichstag and composed of the SDP, German
People’s Party (DVP), German Democratic Party (DDP), Bavarian People’s Party (BVP),
and Catholic Center. The coalition was the last to preside as a majority over the
Reichstag, and its dissolution on March 27, 1930, is regarded as the beginning of the end
of the Weimar Republic. And yet, no one in the group knows who Muller was: “‘Say,
who was this guy anyway?’ asked Clive, looking down. ‘I guess he must have been a big
swell?’ ‘God knows,’ Sally answered, yawning. ‘Look Clive darling, isn’t it a marvelous
sunset.’” Passing before the eyes of Clive, Sally, and Chris is the funeral procession for
the Weimar Republic, and yet not one of them recognizes the gravity of what is
happening. They are all three lost in Clive’s fairy tale; as Chris observes: “She was quite
right. We had nothing to do with those Germans down there, marching, or with the dead
man in the coffin, or with the words on the banner. In a few days, I thought, we shall
have forfeited all kinship with ninety-nine per cent of the population of the world. . . .

87 Ibid.
88 Evans, The Coming of the Third Reich, p. 245. “The Depression’s first political victim was the Grand
Coalition cabinet led by the Social Democrat Hermann Muller, one of the Republic’s most durable
governments in office since the elections of 1928. The Grand Coalition was a rare attempt to compromise
between the ideological and social interests of the Social Democrats and the ‘bourgeois’ parties left of the
Nationalists. . . . Following the onset of the Depression in October 1929, the People’s Party broke with the
coalition over the Social Democrats refusal to cut unemployment benefits, and the government was forced
to tender it resignation on 27 March 1930.” See also Palmer and Neubauer, eds., The Weimar Republic, pp.
68, 292, and 395.
Perhaps in the Middle Ages people felt like this, when they believed themselves to have sold their souls to the Devil.\textsuperscript{89}

Clive, the spinner of tales, proves himself to be as wantonly cruel as the Devil. The next morning Sally and Chris arrive at Clive’s hotel only to learn that he had left Berlin for Budapest, with no intention of returning. The stunned pair is presented with a note in the lobby:

“Dear Sally and Chris,” it said, “I can’t stick this darned town any longer, so am off. Hoping to see you sometime, Clive.”

“(These are in case I forgot something).”

In the envelope were three hundred-mark notes. These, the fading flowers, Sally’s four pairs of shoes and two hats (bought in Dresden) and my six shirts were our total assets from Clive’s visit. At first, Sally was very angry. Then we both began to laugh:

“Well Chris, I’m afraid we’re not much use as gold-diggers, are we, darling?”\textsuperscript{90}

They spend the money on clothing for Sally and a lavish dinner that evening. And yet, neither the clothing nor the food cheer because neither is permanent. Rather, both are glimpses of the luxury and material comfort beyond their reach.

Sally and Chris play with the rhetoric of romantic loss. “You know, Chris, I’m beginning to think that men are always going to leave me.” “I’ll never leave you.”

“Won’t you darling?” This verbal banter, though, gives way to revelation as Sally regrets the way she treated Clive:

“I could kick myself, the way I behaved to Clive. I ought never to have bothered him about money, the way I did. I expect he thought I was just a common little whore like the others. And I really did adore him—in a way. . . . If I’d married him, I’d have made a man out of him. I’d have got him to give up drinking.”

“You set such a good example.”

We both laughed.

\textsuperscript{89} Isherwood, \textit{Goodbye to Berlin}, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., p. 50.
Sally is neither devastated nor emotionally disturbed by Clive’s departure. Rather she is troubled by her shortcomings as a con artist. She gives up: “I’ll never look at a man with money again,” And yet in spite of this protestation, Sally is incapable of abandoning her rabid pursuit of gentlemen of means.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 50–51.}

Following Clive’s departure Sally learns that she is pregnant by Klaus. She swiftly sets out to get an abortion, refused at first by a reputable physician and performed ultimately at a “nursing home” recommended by Frl. Schroeder. She needs to rid herself of the child, as she explains to the doctor who refuses to perform the abortion: “My dear man, what do you imagine would happen to the unfortunate child if it was born? Do I look as if I’d make a good mother?”\footnote{Ibid., p. 52.} Sally would fail as a mother on the one hand because she can barely provide for herself, let alone a dependent. In this light her choice to abort the baby is benevolent; she is acting in the interests of another. On the other hand, Sally’s refusal to have the child reflects her unequivocally self-centered approach to life. A child simply has no place in framework of Sally’s life. The tables turn on Sally, though, as the story draws to a close.

Admitting that “since Christmas, I had hardly written a word,” Chris decides to leave Berlin and “go to some place on the Baltic.” He returns in July to Schroeder’s flat and learns that Sally has relocated to another apartment. Delighted by his return, Schroeder encourages Chris to be in touch with Sally: “The other gentleman came and went, but you were her real friend, Herr Issyvoo. You know, I always used to hope that you two would get married. You’d have made an ideal couple.” Chris visits Sally, who greets him jovially—“Hilloo, Chris, you old swine!”—and after breezily mentioning the

\footnote{Ibid., pp. 50–51.}
new friends she has made, dismisses him perfunctorily—“Well, good-bye, darling, I’ll see you sometime.”93 When she does ring him up a week later, she does so because she needs something.

Sally has been commissioned to write an article on England for a travel magazine and she wants Chris to ghostwrite it for her. He agrees, but she rejects his piece as too serious and incapable of engaging the general reader. She turns instead to Kurt Rosenthal, a hack who is a professional scene writer and “novelist”: “Kurt’s an absolute genius. . . . He’s writing a novel in his spare time. He’s so fearfully busy, he can only dictate it while he’s having breakfast. He showed it me the other day. Honestly, I think it’s easily the best novel I’ve ever read.” Stunned and somewhat humored, Chris presses Sally to say more: “He’s not a bit stuck-up about it either. Not like these young men who, because they’ve written one book, start talking about Art and imagining they’re the most wonderful authors in the world. . . . They make me sick.” Chris rightly infers that Sally is talking about him; he has “written one book” and fashions himself a serious artist. As Sally rejects his magazine piece—his art—she also rejects him. Neither is of any use to her. In self-defense, Chris rejects her as the gold digger he knows her to be, a vamp who chooses her friends because they have ambition and money. They can do something for Sally; Chris cannot.94 The row ends, and with a rift in the “friendship,” the two part, only to be reunited by a scam of Chris’s creation that ultimately challenges Schroeder’s claim that he is Sally’s “real friend.”

Ten days after his fight with Sally, Chris is visited by George P. Sandars, a con artist of the first order. He chats with Chris about the United States and asks if he knows

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93 Ibid., pp. 56–60.
94 Ibid., pp. 62–63.
James L. Schraube of Chicago. Chris says no, and Sanders strikes an “air of being very patient” with Chris and “with the world in general.” He explains that Schraube is a successful businessman who owns a chain of restaurants and cinemas and assures Chris that “Mr. Schraube, had I known him, would certainly have vouched for his friend Sandars’ respectability.” Undeterred, he asks Chris if will loan him two hundred marks, and Chris refuses. He presses on, explaining that he also represents a face cream popular among Hollywood actresses, but unknown by their counterparts in Europe. He inquires: “Did I happen, by any chance, to know some film actresses?” Chris gives him Sally’s address.\textsuperscript{95}

Sanders is transparent, using all the conventions of the con artist. He attempts familiarity with Chris by dropping names. He hopes, on the one hand, that Chris knows Schraube well enough to be impressed by the declared connection, but not so well that he could challenge Sandars’s claim of friendship. On the other hand, he hopes that if Chris does not know Schraube he won’t admit, but rather feign recognition in order to preserve his own social and/or professional standing. The ploy fails on both fronts when Chris flatly denies knowledge of Schraube. As with all good con artists, Sandars presses on and asks for the money nonetheless, explaining that a business opportunity awaits him and assuring Chris that he will pay him back in three days and return that evening with a contract that vouches for him. Chris refuses and Sandars presses on, presenting yet another business opportunity: face cream. Chris is not taken in by Sandars, and while he reasons with himself that Sally won’t be either, he nonetheless freely admits that he

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., pp. 66–67.
surrendered her address “out of malice. It would do Sally no harm to have to put up with his chatter for an hour or two: she had told me she liked men with ambition.”

The depth of Chris’s malice surfaces only a few days later when Sally tells him of her encounter with Sandars. Unaware that Chris had sent him her way, Sally begins at the start. Sandars contacted her using the name Paul Rakowski and presenting himself as a European agent for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. She was immediately taken in by him, impressed that “he seemed to know my name and everything” and tricked by the names he drops: “He was frightfully convincing about it all; he told me who the director was and the camera man and the art-director and who’d written the script. Naturally, I hadn’t heard of any of them before. But that didn’t seem so surprising: in fact, it really made it sound much more real because most people would have chosen names you see in the newspaper.” Rakowski assured her, pending a screen test in a day or two, that she was perfect for a part in a new movie being made by MGM. His stories of Hollywood and the United States endeared him to Sally, who was unfazed by his shabby appearance once she learned that he was freshly off the boat from the United States but that his luggage was still in Hamburg. Intimacy established, Rakowski “started making the most passionate love to me.” At this juncture, Sally was lost.

She accepts his invitation to dine, and upon finishing a sumptuous meal at Horcher’s, he asked her for a loan of three hundred marks, claiming that he has to change his dollars in the morning. Sally freely gives him the money and then springs for the bottle of champagne suggested by Rakowski. She goes with him to his hotel in the Augsburgerstrasse and in the morning begins to regret the evening before.

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96 Ibid., p. 67.
97 Ibid., p. 69.
When Sally wakes, she sees a different Rakowski. Stunned by the coarseness of his underwear, Sally measures Rakowski’s wardrobe: “His underclothes . . . gave me a bit of a shock. You’d expect an important film man to wear silk next his skin, wouldn’t you? Well his were the most extraordinary kind of stuff like camel-hair or something. . . And then he had a regular Woolworth’s tin clip for his tie. It wasn’t so much that his things were shabby; but you could see they’d never been any good, even when they were new.” Sally’s expectations are undone. “An important man” should wear a certain kind of clothes, look a certain way. Moreover, Rakowski’s behavior is as jarring as his costume. “He ate his jam off the blade of the knife, and of course most of it went on the sheets. And he sucked the insides out of the eggs with the most terrific squelching noises.” Rakowski the seducer has vanished in the night, only to be replaced in the morning by a “common guttersnipe.” Insisting that he needs beer and unable to have it sent up from the hotel restaurant, Rakowski goes out. Time passes, and when Sally calls down to the lobby, she learns that he has paid the bill and left. She goes to her purse and finds that “he’d helped himself to all the rest of my money.”

Sally and Chris report the incident to the police. Sally tells the story with “such brisk bright matter-of-factness that one might have supposed she had come to complain about a strayed lapdog or an umbrella lost in a bus.” The officers are shocked; Sally is not. Her treatment at the hands of Rakowski is familiar; he is yet another gentleman who makes promises on which he can’t deliver. Rakowski a.k.a. Sandars falls in line with Klaus, Clive, and an undoubtedly long line of con artists. Each dangles a carrot before Sally; each represents an opportunity by which the forever optimistic Sally is seduced. When asked by the stunned officers why she accompanied a stranger back to his hotel

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98 Ibid., pp. 70–71.
room, Sally offers the correction: “He wasn’t a perfect stranger. He was my fiancé.” They press her for further explanation: “You mean to tell me that you became engaged to this man when you’d only known him a single afternoon?” She replies:

“Certainly.”

“Isn’t that, well—rather unusual?”

“I suppose it is,” Sally seriously agreed. “But nowadays, you know, a girl can’t afford to keep a man waiting. If he asks her once and she refuses him, he may try somebody else. It’s all these surplus women.”

Sally approaches Rakowski in the same way that she approaches all men. She sizes him up, estimating what he can do for her, how he can advance her ambitions. When let down, she moves on. Sally is inured to disappointment.99

Sally’s approach to human relationships is entirely pragmatic. She latches on to Clive because he has the money to make her aspirations real. She aborts a fetus because single motherhood is incompatible with her theatrical ambitions and delusions. And she accepts Rakowski’s proposal because he promises her a part in a film. Sally’s whimsy is entertaining. As the story draws to a close, Chris observes: “You know, Sally . . . what I really like about you is that you’re so awfully easy to take in. People who never get taken in are so dreary.”100 Sally’s antics delight in much the same way as those of Mr. Norris do. At the same time, they are emblematic of her despair. Sally has a small stipend from home, but she is otherwise incapable of gainful employment because she lacks talent and because she lives amid devastating poverty, unemployment, and economic ruin. Her only recourse is to entrust her material welfare to others. For her and the whole “bankrupt middle class”101 of Weimar Germany, human relationships are meaningful only in the

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99 Ibid., pp. 72–73.
100 Ibid., p. 76.
101 Ibid., p. 1.
context of how they advance the interests of the separate parties involved. Self-interest prevails because it must.

Sally accepts the world at face value; she believes what people tell her because she has one goal in mind—namely, her financial security and material comfort. She approaches the world as a reader does a text: objects and people are what they appear to be; language conveys rather than conceals meaning. And while her experiences with the con men in her life do nothing to alter her world view, they do challenge the reader to question the integrity of language and the redemptive capacity of the author.

On the one hand, that Chris chooses to steer Sandars in Sally’s direction can be read as the petty revenge of a peeved friend. Sally rejects the article Chris writes on her behalf and triggers an argument in which she cites his shortcomings as an author and criticizes his lack of commercial ambition. In retaliation, Chris gives Sally’s address to Sandars, knowing full well that she will be duped. Quite simply, Chris fails as a friend. On the other hand, the incident dilates, as so many do in Isherwood’s fiction. Chris represents the author; Sally the reader. The story he writes—a fiction that features Sandars as its central character—is a con game. Appearance is detached from reality. Language cannot be trusted to convey meaning. The author lies rather than tells the truth, destroys rather than redeems.

VII

Of the four collected stories, “Sally Bowles” and “The Nowaks” are the two that call on the reader to reflect most deeply on the role of the author in Weimar Germany.
“On Ruegen Island,” inserted immediately after “Sally Bowles,” is a thematically scattered piece. Chris visits the island and lives with Peter Wilkinson, a decidedly intellectual Englishman, and Otto Nowak, a working-class boy from Berlin. The plot centers on the interaction between Peter and Otto: “It is Peter’s will against Otto’s body. Otto is his whole body; Peter is only his head. Otto moves fluidly, effortlessly; his gestures have the savage, unconscious grace of a cruel, elegant animal. Peter drives himself about, lashing his stiff, ungraceful body with the whip of his merciless will.”

Peter is sexually infatuated with Otto, who toys with him in exchange for gifts of clothing and money, but who abandons Peter first for the company of women and next for Berlin. The romp is set against the political backdrop of Weimar Germany, but missing is the subtly nuanced connection between sex and politics, most notably between sadomasochism and the Nazi rise to power, that is worked out in The Last of Mr. Norris:

There were a good many summer visitors to the village. . . . Each family has its own enormous hooded wicker beach-chair, and each chair flies a little flag. There are the German city flags . . . as well as the National, Republican, and Nazi colours. Each chair is encircled by a low bulwark upon which the occupants have set instructions in fir-cones: Waldesruh. Familie Walter, Stahlhelm. Heil Hitler! Many of the forts are also decorated with the Nazi swastika. The other morning I saw a child of about five years old, stark naked, marching along all by himself with a swastika flag over his shoulder and singling “Deutschland uber alles.”

The personal story of Peter and Otto is separate and almost entirely detached from the political play enacted on the beach. The two intersect simply because the boys visit the beach, but there is no thematically dynamic interchange between the two. The story fails, in large part because it never dilates as the best of Isherwood’s fiction does.

102 Ibid., p. 78.
103 Ibid., p. 86.
The final story in the collection, “The Landauers,” is similarly lacking in complexity. The opening lines summarize the preoccupying theme of the work: “One night in October 1930, about a month after the Elections, there was a big row on the Leipzigerstrasse. Gangs of Nazi roughs turned out to demonstrate against the Jews. They manhandled some dark-haired, large-nosed pedestrians, and smashed the windows of all the Jewish shops. The incident was not, in itself, very remarkable; there were no deaths, very little shooting, not more than a couple of dozen arrests. I remember it only because it was my first introduction to Berlin politics.”

Like the incident, the story is “not . . . very remarkable” either because it sheds little light on the complexity of “Berlin politics” of the period. Nonetheless it does work as a straightforward, yet solemn meditation on the Nazi demonization of the Jews. Christopher tutors Natalia Landauer, daughter of Herr Landauer, the Jewish owner of the department store by the same name. Through her he meets her cousin Bernhard Landauer, a brooding aesthete who retreats further and further into the world of the refined in order to avoid the brute reality of the Nazi rise to power. What results is a sober work that is remarkable in large part because it evokes a sense of the “passive waiting for disaster,” which Hynes isolates as a characteristic of English poetry of the period.

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104 Ibid., p. 139.
105 “The Munich Crisis of September 1938 was a symbolic event equal in its effect on literary consciousness to Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, or the beginning of the Spanish Civil war in 1936. After Munich, writing in England had a different tone: the last calls to political commitment had been sounded, and had failed, and there would be no heroic actions. The waiting for the end could begin in earnest.” “A clear example of this change in tone is in the reception given to Day Lewis’ new book of poems, Overtures to Death, when it appeared in October. Like the earlier collections of his short poems, this one shows the two conflicting sides of the poet’s mind: his Georgian, nature-poet sensibility, and his political militancy. But it also contains a third kind of poetry—poems of passive waiting for disaster.” Samuel Hynes, The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s (New York: Viking Press, 1972), pp. 334–335.
The third story in the collection, “The Nowaks,” has the same tempered complexity as “Sally Bowles,” built up around the question of the author’s capacity to act as a social agent. Christopher decides to leave of Frl. Schroeder’s flat and move to the working class Wassertorstrasse, “a deeply cobbled street, littered with sprawling children in tears. Youths in woolen sweaters circled waveringly across it on racing bikes and whooped at girls passing with milk jugs.”\textsuperscript{106} While he explains the move as an effort to save money, he is by no means indigent. Christopher receives a fixed allowance from his family back in England, the value of which is decreasing with the hyperinflation of the period and with the devaluation of the pound against the mark. Nonetheless, he still has a steady income that he complements with cash earned tutoring the children and idle wives of the moneyed. Christopher’s move to the Wassertorstrasse is voluntary, an effort to increase his discretionary income. The Nowaks, on the other hand, are in an entirely different situation.

Christopher arrives to find the Nowak flat in a state of cramped disarray. Frau Nowak begs his pardon, “I’m afraid it’s terribly untidy.” The air is close and permeated with putrid odors: “a stifling smell of potatoes fried in cheap margarine filled the flat” The stench of mold no doubt hangs thick: “The living-room had a sloping ceiling stained with old patches of damp.” In fact, the small apartment in a shambles, cramped with furniture and people: “The living-room . . . contained a big table, six chairs, a sideboard and two large double-beds. The place was so full of furniture you had to squeeze your way into it sideways.” The Nowaks and their possessions have been literally shoved into an attic in a decrepit part of Berlin, stored out of sight to rot away. In fact, Frau Nowak is gravely sick and doing just that. When Christopher arrives he is at first taken aback by

\textsuperscript{106} Isherwood, \textit{Goodbye to Berlin}, p. 100.
her appearance: “She looked far iller than when I had seen her last, with big blue rings under her eyes.” She suffers from an unspecified lung disease that is aggravated by her surroundings: “Sometimes it seems to me it’s worse than ever. I get such a burning, just here. And when I finish work it’s as if I was too tired to eat. I become ever so bilious. . . . the flat’s so damp this time of year.” With shrugged shoulders, Frau Nowak complains mildly and then resigns herself: “They’ve no right to let these attics as dwellings at all, really. The Inspector’s condemned them time and time again. But what are you to do? One must live somewhere. We applied for a transfer over a year ago and they keep promising they’ll see about it. But there’s a lot others worse off still, I dare say.”¹⁰⁷

Frau Nowak gives voice to a refrain that she sounds throughout the story and that ultimately buoys—and yet blinds—her. The plight of many others is worse than hers and she does what she has to do to survive in a dire world. The latter lesson in survival is one that her children Otto and Lothar have learned. Aged and worn beyond his years, Lothar “had a lean, bony peasant’s face, soured by racial memory of barren fields.” He works by day as a garage mechanic and he studies at night, hoping to earn an engineering diploma. He is under the rhetorical spell of the Nazis, as Frl. Nowak observes: “He’s going round to the Nazis, I suppose. I often wish he’d never taken up with them at all. They put all kinds of silly ideas into his head. It makes him so restless. Since he’s joined them he’s been a different boy altogether.”¹⁰⁸ By contrast, Otto is a reckless anarchist who discards order of all varieties—sexual, domestic, and political—in rabid pursuit of his own self-interest. His sexual conquests include men and women. There is Peter from Ruegen Island and a Dutchman who sends him money and who has “the biggest car I ever saw in

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 101–102.
¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 109.
my life.\footnote{Ibid., p. 115.} In turn, there is Hilde whom he met dancing and Marie with the beautiful eyes. Ultimately, though he settles on Trude, who has removed him from Wassertorstrasse and whom he hopes to marry in the spring because “her uncle’s left her some money.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 131.} The sons share but one thing in common—namely, an entirely self-directed survival instinct. Like their baby sister Grete, who Frau Nowak describes as “a lazy great lump,”\footnote{Ibid., p. 101.} the boys do nothing to improve the collective lot of the family.

Herr Nowak is equally disengaged. He works a blue-collar job and drinks for the better part of the day. When Christopher first sees him, he is drunk and entering the flat from work to find a boisterous squabble between Frau Nowak and Otto: “He was a powerful, dumpy little man, with pointed mustache, cropped hair and bushy eyebrows. He took in the scene with a long grunt which was half a belch. He did not appear to understand what had been happening; or perhaps he merely did not care. Frau Nowak said nothing to enlighten him.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 107.} Like his pet Grete, Herr Nowak is an oblivious blob, who does “not appear to understand” and whom no one “enlightens.” He is passive, doing nothing to quiet the uproar at hand and even less to sustain the family. Rather he plods through the day, working, it seems, to earn enough money to keep himself plied with beer, dulling his senses to escape the poverty at hand.

The whole lot does nothing to help Frau Nowak, as she struggles to improve her health and provide for the family. In a moment of weakness, Otto acknowledges her: “Poor mother. . . . It’s terrible. I can’t bear to think of her working like that, every day. You know Christopher, she’s very, very ill. Often at night, she coughs for hours and
hours. And sometimes she spits out blood. I lie awake wondering if she is going to die.”

His sympathies are hollow, though; his ways are set. As Christopher observes, “In spite of myself I began to smile. Not that I disbelieved what he said about Frau Nowak. But Otto himself, squatting there on the bed, was so animally alive, his naked brown body so sleek with health, that his talk of death seemed ludicrous, like the description of a funeral by a clown.”

For Frau Nowak, life is a repetitive encounter with material ruin and deteriorating health. “In the Wassertorstrasse one week was much like another. Our leaky stuffy little attic smelt of cooking and bad drains. When the living-room stove was alight, we could hardly breathe; when it wasn’t we froze. The weather had turned very cold. Frau Nowak tramped the streets, when she wasn’t at work, from the clinic to the board of health offices and back again: for hours she waited on benches in draughty corridors or puzzled over complicated application-forms. The doctors could agree about her case. One was in favour of sending her to a sanatorium at once.” Frau Nowak’s life is circumscribed by work and the search for a cure. She trudges on, refusing to surrender to the decay around her.

In contrast, Christopher finds himself worn down by the conditions to which he has voluntarily removed himself. “Slowly but surely the Nowaks were breaking down my powers of resistance. Every day I found the smell from the kitchen sink a little nastier: every day Otto’s voice when quarrelling seemed harsher and his mother’s a little shriller. Grete’s whine made me set my teeth. When Otto slammed a door I winced irritably. At

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113 Ibid., p. 114.
114 Ibid., pp. 123–124.
nights I couldn’t get to sleep unless I was half drunk.” Nerves frayed, Christopher’s attempts to write are thwarted by his surroundings:

I was sitting on the opposite side of the table, frowning at a piece of paper on which I had written: “But Edward, can’t you see?” I was trying to get on with my novel. It was about a family who lived in a large country house on unearned incomes and were very unhappy. They spend their time explaining to each other why they couldn’t enjoy their lives; and some of the various reasons—though I say it myself—were most ingenious. Unfortunately I found myself taking less and less interest in my unhappy family: the atmosphere of the Nowak household was not very inspiring.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 121–122.}

As a writer, Christopher is defeated. His fiction is frivolous, detached from the actual world. His failure to find inspiration in the “Nowak household” is an acknowledgment of the writer’s inability to be an effective social agent. The act of recording does nothing to change the observed world; the writer fiddles “while Rome burns.”

Christopher removes himself to the Alexander Casino, the bohemian dive where he is joined by Pieps and Gerhardt. “We all sat around or lounged at the bar, waiting for something to happen.” In fact, nothing does. The door opens and closes, turning heads and yet admitting no one who can change the world in which they are trapped. The cocaine addict who comes and goes each night speaks for many for whom denial is their only recourse: “The old man had a nervous tic and kept shaking his head all the time, as if saying to Life: No. No. No.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 125.}

In contrast, Frau Nowak is persistently optimistic. The doctors concur that Frau Nowak should be sent to the sanatorium. She welcomes their decision: “As soon as she heard this she ordered a new dress from the tailor. She was excited and pleased as if she had been invited to a party. . . . In the evenings she spent hours stitching warm flannel underclothes, smiling to herself, like a woman who is expecting a child.” For her doctors,
the sanatorium is a last resort from which she is not likely to return healed, given the gravity of her lung condition. And yet to Frau Nowak, that sanatorium is a sign of hope. There, removed from the rotting mainstream of Berlin, she hopes to restore her health and save her family, if they don’t perish in her absence: “What they’ll do when I’m gone, goodness only knows. They’re as helpless as a lot of sheep.”\textsuperscript{117} The imagery is transparently messianic: her family is a “helpless” flock; she is the savior whose redemptive power depends in this configuration on her removal to the margin: the sanatorium. In the end, though, she and the world around her are doomed.

Christopher and Frau Nowak leave the Wassertorstrasse flat shortly before Christmas, he to a new apartment in the nicer West End of Berlin, she to the sanatorium. “A few days after Christmas,” Christopher decides to pay a holiday visit to Herr Nowak. Little has changed in the Wassertorstrasse, with one exception: Frau Nowak is no longer there. The approach to the Nowak flat is dark: “The lights on the Nowaks’ staircase were out of order: it was pitch-dark. I groped my way upstairs without much difficulty and banged on their door. I made as much noise as I could because, to judge from the shouting and singing and shrieks of laughter within, a party was in progress.” When Herr Nowak opens the door he sways drunkenly at the entrance and tells Christopher that the electricity has been turned off in the flat because he has not paid the bill. Frau Nowak’s worst fears have materialized; in her absence, her home and family have fallen into utter ruin. “The whole place was fearfully untidy. Clothing of various kinds lay in a confused heap on one of the beds; on the other were scattered cups, saucers, shoes, knives, and forks. On the sideboard was a frying-pan full of dried fat.” Domestic anarchy prevails;

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., pp. 126–127.
nothing is placed where it belongs. And, Lothar and Otto have abandoned the flat, leaving behind the drunken Herr Nowak and the dull-witted and easily amused Grete.\textsuperscript{118}

The absence of light signals the literal and figurative absence Frau Nowak. On the one hand, she alone is the breadwinner and bookkeeper; without her there is neither the money nor the person to pay the household bills. On the other hand, she alone is the figurative promise of salvation; without her, “the Christmas tree was the smallest I had ever seen. It was so tiny and feeble that it could only carry one candle, at the very top. A single thin strand of tinsel was draped around it. Herr Nowak dropped several lighted matches on the floor before he could get the candle to burn.” As the light cast by the barely lit, single candle atop the tree diminishes, so to does hope. The Nowak flat is cluttered with ruined lives and the junk they have accumulated. All within will disintegrate; nothing will survive.

Christopher’s visit comes to an end when he flees while Grete and Herr Nowak amuse themselves with a clockwork mouse he brought as a present. In fact, “the mouse was such a success that my departure was managed briefly, without any fuss.” As he realized upon his arrival in the Wassertorstrasse that day, he neither has anything in common with the people who live there nor the wherewithal to change their lot: “Crossing the muddy courtyard, inhaling the moist, familiar rottenness of the tenement buildings, I thought: Did I really ever live here? . . . I had become a stranger to the slum.” The darkened Nowak flat is, on the one hand, a particular space inhabited by particular people and, on the other hand, a metaphor for a blighted Berlin at the end of the Weimar Republic. Christopher the author turns his back on both spaces, conceding the inability of

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., p. 130.
art to change either fundamentally. In turn, Frau Nowak’s removal to the sanatorium reveals an even darker truth.

Shortly after his Christmas visit to the Nowak flat, Christopher is contacted by Otto, who asks him to accompany him on a visit to his mother. They arrive at the sanatorium by bus on Sunday at midday, setting a sacred tone for the closing scene of the story: “There was a bumpy cart-truck winding for several kilometers through snowy pine-woods and then, suddenly, a Gothic brick gateway like the entrance to a churchyard, with big red buildings rising behind. . . . We stood stretching ourselves and blinking at the bright snow: out here in the country everything was dazzling white.” The scene is a stark contrast with the “muddy courtyard” and the “familiar rottenness of the tenement buildings” on the Wassertorstrasse. The sanatorium is a holy place, with grounds that resemble a “churchyard.” This world is pristine, pure, and restorative. Frau Nowak “looked years younger. Her plump, oval, innocent face, lively and a trifle crafty, with its small peasant eyes, was like the face of a young girl. Her cheeks were brightly dabbed with colour. She smiled as though she could never stop.”

The sanatorium agrees with Frau Nowak, or so it seems. In fact, the redemptive power of the place is illusory, a truth revealed to Christopher as the afternoon unfolds. He is at first struck by the sanatorium’s scent: “The smell of the warm, clean, antiseptic building entered my nostrils like a breath of fear.” The prevailing “antiseptic” odor triggers “fear” because it recalls the steady spiral downward from birth to death. From the moment of birth, people deteriorate, a process we try to slow with “antiseptic” tinctures that cure one ailment or another, but that never halt the slow steady progress to death.

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119 Ibid., p. 133.
The sanatorium provides its patients with only temporary relief. In fact, two of Frau Nowak’s roommates have been in the place before. Old Muttchen, the three-time veteran of the sanatorium, “seemed a nice old lady, but somehow slightly obscene, like an old dog with sores . . . Each time she had been discharged as cured, but within nine months or a year she would have a relapse and have to be sent back again.” Erna has returned to the sanatorium for a second time, driven there by the blows of her physically abusive husband: “Now, in her extreme emaciation, she seemed possessed by a kind of desperate resolution, a certain defiance. She had immense, dark, hungry eyes. The wedding-ring was loose on her bony finger. When she talked and became excited her hands flitted tirelessly about in sequences of aimless gestures, like two shriveled moths.” And while Frau Nowak’s third roommate, Erika, is at the sanatorium for first time, she is destined to return—if ever released—given the allusions to her likely intractable sexual psychosis.

The space in which they are enclosed is suffocating rather than nurturing. The “women being shut up together in this room had bred an atmosphere that was faintly nauseating, like soiled linen locked in a cupboard without air.” Old Muttchen proudly displays “photographs of her children and grandchildren on the table beside her, like prizes she had won.” She lives in the past, clinging to fixed images of people whose inevitable changes she refuses to admit. Erna yearns for a future that will never materialize, envisioning a time when her husband’s strength will sexually satisfy rather than physically ruin her. So too does Erika dream of a future she will never have, one in which a real man will replace the “manikin . . . she takes . . . to bed with her every night because she says she must have a man in her bed.” And Frau Nowak seals herself off in
the past, talking of her childhood, “when she had lived with her parents on a farm in East
Prussia. ‘We had a saw mill of our own . . . and thirty horses. . . . And in the summer time . . . we used to go dancing in the big barn down by the river.” Now, she has nothing. 120

In the sanatorium, the women stagnate rather than rejuvenate. As the time draws near for Otto and Christopher to leave, desperation grips the women. Old Muttchen simply disappears. Erna presses her “hot, dry lips” next to Christopher’s and whispers in his ear, “I’m so happy, this evening.” Her affection is unrequited. Erika and Otto engage in frenzied sexual foreplay on her bed which means more to her than it does to him. And Frau Nowak’s smiles give way to tears, triggering a consumptive bout: “Suddenly she started coughing—her body seemed to break in half like a hinged doll. Clasping her hands over her breast, she uttered short yelping coughs like a desperate injured animal.” The image of the “plump, oval, innocent face . . . of a young girl” is replaced by that of a dying woman. 121

The sanatorium neither heals nor restores. In fact, it destroys. As the bus prepares to leave, the patients crowd around it. “They all thronged around us for a moment in the little circle of light from the panting bus, their lit faces ghastly like ghosts against the black stems of the pines. This was the climax of my dream: the instant of nightmare in which it would end. I had an absurd pang of fear that they were going to attack us—a gang of terrifyingly soft muffled shapes—clawing us from our seats, dragging us hungrily down in dead silence.” The sanatorium is a threatening space. It promises to

120 Ibid., pp. 135—137.
121 Ibid., p. 138.
heal, yet cheats its patients because it can do nothing to stem their rot. In this promise lies the darkest truth Isherwood reveals throughout the Berlin stories.\textsuperscript{122}

The very hope that drives Frau Nowak to the sanatorium is the same hope that drove people to complicity as the Nazis rose to power and ruled Germany. Faced with ruin, Frau Nowak flees the mainstream hoping to heal. She is seduced by hope and yet lured thereby to a place where she would rot away, melding into “a gang of terrifyingly soft muffled shapes.” Faced with certain physical harm, first thousands and ultimately millions complied with rather than resisted a range of Nazi directives, including orders deporting them to “work camps.” They boarded the trains in fear and yet clinging to the hope that if they went quietly to another place, they would be saved.

They weren’t, and Isherwood’s stories tell of the coercive power of hope.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., p. 139.
CHAPTER 2

I

On January 19, 1939, Isherwood and Auden set sail for New York. According to Parker, when Isherwood departed he was somewhat unsure of his motivation and yet, in time, his own understanding of why he left Europe eventually became clear: “He was in no psychological state to make any rational decisions about his life. It would take several months, but eventually he would be able to acknowledge that he had got into a terrible muddle, both in his beliefs and in his personal relationships.” He had spent the better part of the previous six years attempting in vain to help his German boyfriend Heinz evade conscription into the German army. With Heinz legally barred from living elsewhere in Europe and Isherwood incapable of returning to Berlin, their relationship was doomed. Moreover, the anti-Fascist struggle no longer engaged Isherwood as it had preoccupied him earlier in the 1930s. He was in a “terrible muddle,” having essentially lost faith in the left-wing political causes and parties to which he had once been stridently loyal.1

1 Parker, *Isherwood*, pp. 363–365. In fact, Parker goes on to question the depth if not the sincerity of Isherwood’s political commitments in the 1930s: “The real question, however, is not whether he suddenly stopped believing in the united front, the party line and the anti-fascist struggle, but whether he had ever really believed in any of it in the first place. Throughout the 1930s he frequently gave the impression that he was not so much a fellow traveler as someone who was simply coming along for the ride. The friends he made during his youth undoubtedly influenced his political opinions, such as they were, but his social outlook was intimately bound up with his own family background. He was always a great deal more interested in attacking the class he came from than in alleviating the lot of the people that class had supposedly oppressed and exploited. By removing himself from his mother’s sphere of influence, he was in
In 1939, Isherwood abandoned his political convictions and lover alike. He also left behind a burgeoning literary reputation. As Parker explains, “throughout 1938 [Isherwood and Auden] had been very much in the public eye, both in print and in person, and were regarded as ‘the heavenly twins of the avant-garde in English literature.’” Isherwood had lectured extensively, and excerpts from *Goodbye to Berlin* “had been published to considerable acclaim.” Moreover, “Auden had been described as the country’s ‘one poet of genius’ and Isherwood had been hailed as ‘the hope of English fiction.’”

While neither could know that in time they would both be labeled defectors with varying degrees of approbation, both were clear about what they were forsaking. When Isherwood sailed for New York, he knew that he was leaving behind not only a lover, a cause, and a mother who represented all that was ossified in England, but also a budding literary reputation. He turned his back on the establishment and yet, ironically, Isherwood neither knew what awaited him nor imagined what he would create in the new world.

Isherwood had first visited New York a year earlier, in 1938, as he and Auden were returning from their widely reported trip to China, out of which grew their collaborative work, a chronicle of the Sino-Japanese war entitled *Journey to a War*. Then, Isherwood was mesmerized by the city: “Our first visit had been a tourist visit, uniquely magic. As far as I was concerned, it could never be duplicated. The tension of New York life had been thrilling when it had had a time limit.”

In 1939, though, New York was effect becoming apolitical. His principal interest was always people rather than politics, effects rather than causes. He was in Berlin not as a political commentator but as someone observing the consequences of politics quite literally at street level. Although he had seen the rise of fascism at first hand in Germany and had every reason to oppose it, his opposition was personal rather than strictly political and chiefly motivated by Heinz.”


3 Isherwood, *My Guru and His Discipline*, p. 3.
enervating rather than exciting. While Auden worked energetically, Isherwood floundered. The very public attention that Auden welcomed, Isherwood shunned. He avoided speaking engagements, wrote little, and earned even less.\(^4\) Income was sparse, and while the shortage of money proved problematic, Isherwood was completely undone by his lack of ideological conviction: “I despaired and did nothing, blaming New York for my jitters. I now realize that they weren’t caused by New York, or by my money worries, or even by the probability of war in Europe, but by an emptiness inside myself, of which I wasn’t yet fully aware.” The “political faith” and “left-wing slogans” that had sustained him earlier no longer nourished. And yet, he wrote, “It wasn’t that I had lost all belief in what the slogans stood for, but I was no longer wholehearted. My leftism was confused by an increasingly aggressive awareness of myself as a homosexual and by a newly made discovery that I was a pacifist. Both of these individualistic minority-attitudes kept bringing me into conflict with the leftist majority-ideology.”\(^5\)

Splintered, Isherwood sought a vehicle for becoming “wholehearted.” His new starting points—both of which were outside the prescribed liberal agenda or “the leftist majority ideology” of the period—were pacifism and homosexuality. While he had been a practicing homosexual for quite some time, his activity was largely confined to the bedroom. In seeking refuge for Heinz, however, Isherwood brought his homosexual relationship into the public arena only to confront the challenges that faced homosexuals in search of the domestic arrangements and legal rights available to heterosexuals. His stinging failure to establish a home with Heinz gave rise to the very “aggressive awareness” that not only would color his personal relationships from that point forward,

but would also inspire his later work in the movement for gay rights. His relationship with Heinz also gave rise to his pacifism.

When he labeled himself a pacifist, Isherwood’s conviction was neither nuanced, nor mature: “I called myself a pacifist because Heinz, the German boy I had lived with for five years during the nineteen-thirties, was about to be conscripted into the Nazi army and I found it unthinkable that I should ever help to cause his death, however indirectly.” Viewed as such, his pacifism was nothing more than a refusal to partake in a war; it was “merely a negative decision.” Thus, he challenged himself: “What I now needed to learn were positive pacifist values, a pacifist way of life, a Yes to fortify my No; it was the lack of values which was making me feel so insecure.” Auden had his “Christian values; Isherwood had “a violent prejudice . . . against the whole concept of religion as I then understood it.” Ultimately, his search for “a pacifist way of life” would lead Isherwood to Vedanta, a “whole concept of religion” that was new to Isherwood and that was nourishing rather than draining.

Vedanta is one of the six orthodox approaches to Hinduism. In the early 1930s, there were an estimated 240 million Hindus in India and yet only 150,000 in the whole of North America. Among that number, there were 628 Vedanta Hindus in the United States, with only 191 in California, most of which were located in Southern California. Once again, Isherwood sought redemption on the margin. His involvement with Vedanta would persist throughout his life, and while he found the faith spiritually fulfilling, he was in the end troubled by moral questions implicit in the system’s basic tenets.7

7 According to the World Almanac and Book of Facts for 1940, which reports statistics for the 1930s, the 1931 census reports that there were 239,195,140 Hindus in India. The same source indicates that there were 150 Hindus in the whole of North America. The 1936 U.S. Census, the last year in which data on religious
II

In the spring of 1939, Isherwood met the popularly successful British playwright John van Druten, who had recently moved to the United States after dividing his time between England and the states for most of the 1930s. Van Druten had already become a pacifist, and together he and Isherwood put three challenging questions before three of the leading pacifists of the time: “the MP George Lansbury, Runham Brown of War Resisters International, and the wealthy journalist and landowner Rudolph Messel.” Parker summarizes the questions, which cut to the essence of pacifism:

1. What is a pacifist to do in wartime (apart from merely refusing to fight) and what activities are permissible to him, by way of defence or otherwise, if he is (a) in England, or (b) in a non-combatant country?
2. What permissible alternative is there to war in opposing an aggressor whose pledge cannot be relied upon?
3. If none, does one open all doors to the aggressor and let him take everything he wants?

According to Parker, Messel was most strident insofar as he advocated an unequivocal refusal to cooperate in any aspect of a war effort even if doing so resulted in capitulation to a Nazi aggressor. Lansbury and Brown were more “pragmatic . . . suggesting that pacifists should carry on with their civilian jobs and ‘do relief work, but not under government auspices, and not as an alternative to military service.’ They should ‘practice civil disobedience to the aggressor no matter what the consequence.’”

Moved though he was by the responses as well as the “dedication and courage of these three men,” Isherwood remained troubled spiritually. “They couldn’t help me much identification was collected, reports that there were 628 Vedanta Hindus in the United States, 191 of whom lived in California.

8 Parker, *Isherwood*, p. 373.
in my present condition. They were in England, preparing to play their part in the expected war crisis. Even if I were to go back there, I shouldn’t be able to discuss my personal problems with them; they would be far too busy. They might give me work to do, but I wasn’t yet sufficiently sure of myself to become their follower. I needed a lot more time to think, and someone to help me clarify my thoughts.”

And so, Isherwood turned to his friend Gerald Heard, who had moved to Los Angeles in 1937 with his friends Aldous and Maria Huxley. Heard was a pacifist, as was Aldous Huxley, whose work *Ends and Means*—a pacifist’s primer of sorts—was published in 1937. To Isherwood’s surprise and satisfaction the correspondence focused on pacifism and did not venture into “the cult of Yoga, or Hinduism, or Vedanta” to which Heard and Huxley had committed themselves. Isherwood was relieved because at the time his contempt for religion was broad and indiscriminate: “To me, all this Oriental stuff was distasteful in the extreme. . . . The Hindus I saw as stridently emotional mysterymongers whose mumbo jumbo was ridiculous rather than sinister. That Heard and Huxley could have been impressed by such nonsense was regrettable. . . . I intended to avoid discussing the subject with them, as tactfully as I could. After all, it was their intellects that I needed to consult.”

As Isherwood recalls in *My Guru and His Disciple*, the correspondence avoided Vedanta altogether. Instead, Heard focused on the dynamics of “group formation.” He advised Isherwood: “Pacifists must be organized into groups which were small enough to be cohesive, every member accepting total responsibility for every other. Order and creative accuracy must be opposed to disorder and destruction.” Heard’s emphasis on the

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10 Ibid., p. 7.
group appealed to Isherwood. Having repudiated the past, turned his back on Europe and withered in New York, Isherwood was looking to become “wholehearted” again. “The idea of belonging to a likeminded group appealed to me strongly. Since my decision to become a pacifist, I had felt isolated, fearing that many of my friends must disapprove.”

Yearning for communion, Isherwood set off on May 6, 1939, for California to visit Heard and Huxley, a mere five months after relocating to New York with Auden. The two parted company in New York on a cool note, making Isherwood’s removal to California and his search for “likeminded” people ever more urgent. On April 6, 1939, Isherwood and Auden had participated in an evening of readings and talks alongside Louis MacNeice and “the American poet and novelist Frederic Prokosch” for the League of American Writers. At the end of the evening, they were approached by Chester Kallman and Harold Norse. Kallman was then a student at Brooklyn College, and Norse a graduate of that same institution. Ostensibly they wanted to interview the two literary luminaries for a school publication, but in fact they simply wanted “to view two famous British homosexuals at close quarters.” Auden fell for Kallman; Isherwood disliked him. “Kallman was quick and witty and good company, but he could also be condescending and sarcastic.” The two never got along, an impasse that at the time strained Isherwood’s relationship with Auden. According to Parker, “the relationship was being unraveled by circumstances.” In New York, Auden was a success, while Isherwood was miserable.

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11 Parker cites a letter from Isherwood to John Lehman dated May 2, 1939. After a little less than five months of living in New York, Isherwood was at his breaking point. “Oh God, what a city!” he complained to Lehmann. “The nervous breakdown expressed in terms of architecture. The skyscrapers are all Father-fixations. The police-cars are fitted with air-raid sirens, specially designed to promote paranoia. The elevated railway is the circular madness. The height of the buildings produces visions similar to those experienced by Ransom in F6.” Parker goes on to explain that by May, Isherwood’s relationship with Auden had “undergone a significant change” when Auden took up with Chester Kallman, who would not only supplant Isherwood in a manner of speaking, but would also become Auden’s longtime lover. Parker, *Isherwood*, p. 375.
12 Ibid.
Moreover, “Auden had not become a pacifist, had no interest in Eastern mysticism, and would have been temperamentally unsuited to sun-drenched California. The parting, even if it was to be only temporary, was inevitable.”

As Isherwood set out, he did so in the hope of finding people who shared his commitment to pacifism as well as his piqued interest in Eastern religion. He also boarded the Greyhound bus with his lover Vernon Old in tow. The spirit and the flesh were bound together from the start of Isherwood’s journey. And in fact, the two impulses would remain entwined throughout the remainder of Isherwood’s life, giving rise to a range of challenges that would preoccupy him not only in his daily life but also in his writing about Vedanta.

III

Isherwood and Vernon arrived in Los Angeles on May 20, 1939, having made stops in Washington, D.C., Memphis, New Orleans, El Paso, Albuquerque, the Grand Canyon, and Flagstaff, Arizona. In L.A. the two spent their first night in “a downtown hotel in an area where drunks thronged the streets.” The next day they moved into a place at the Rose Garden Apartments, located in Hollywood on Franklin Avenue, coincidentally “just around the corner from the Headquarters of the Vedanta Society of Southern California on Ivar Avenue. It was here that Gerald Heard had found his Swami.” Heard was living at Arlene Terrace in Hollywood with his partner Chris Wood.

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13 Ibid., pp. 375–376.
14 Ibid., pp. 366–367, 371. Isherwood met Vernon during his 1938 trip to New York and the two became ready lovers. When Isherwood arrived a year later with Auden, Vernon met them when the boat docked. The two shared a room at the George Washington Hotel located at 23rd Street and Lexington Avenue, where Auden also had a room. On March 31, 1939, the three moved out of the hotel and into an apartment located in the German section Yorkville, located at 237 East 81st Street.
an independently wealthy aesthete whom Isherwood slept with once and liked a great deal. Wood technically employed Heard as his secretary, but “since Wood didn’t actually do anything, Heard’s duties were negligible.” Heard lived in a small annex to Wood’s house, and together the two spent a great deal of time in the company of Isherwood and Vernon.\(^\text{15}\)

Upon seeing him for the first time in Los Angeles, Isherwood was undoubtedly stunned by Heard’s appearance. “In London he had been something of a dandy (Joe Ackerly recalled him turning up for dinner in purple suede shoes and a leather jacket with a leopard-skinned collar), but in California he had embraced asceticism with characteristic zeal. Gaunt and bearded, he reminded Vernon of an El Greco saint—but this was a saint whose robes were a painter’s smock worn over blue jeans and sneakers.”

Over the next several months, Isherwood turned to Heard as a pupil turns to a teacher, looking for him to illuminate the ways of pacifism. More than happy to play the role of spiritual guide, Heard began with pacifism and then gradually introduced Isherwood to the teachings of Vedanta. In time, though, “Heard outlined an alarming spiritual regime, in which six hours a day were devoted to meditation, celibacy was embraced, stimulants were outlawed, and the principal sources of physical sustenance were raisins, raw carrots, and innumerable cups of tea.” For Isherwood, the regimen posed an enormous challenge, given his contempt for organized religion as well as his love of the finer comforts of life, drink, and sex.\(^\text{16}\)

Aware, Heard proceeded cautiously. “He was careful to avoid any mention of ‘God’ knowing that this would merely remind Isherwood of the Christian God he had

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 376–377.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 377.
long since rejected.” Repulsed by the idea of an all-knowing and forever judgmental Divinity, Isherwood was nonetheless receptive as “Heard spoke instead of the need to explore one’s own nature and discover what it really is, something Isherwood had been trying to do in his diaries during his final year in England.” Using the rhetoric of self-discovery to thinly veil what is indisputably an organized religion, Heard lured Isherwood to the study of Vedanta, a faith and institution that would guide him to varying degrees throughout his life.

Isherwood soon learned that “the two basic tenets of Vedantian philosophy are that man’s real nature is divine and that his aim in life should be to realize this divinity.” For him, these tenets were alluring in so far as they forcefully challenged the Judeo-Christian tradition of his youth, which was dualistic, distinguishing as it did between divinity and humanity and asserting the supremacy of the former over the latter. By 1939 he had long since rejected that tradition on both psychological and political grounds. In Vedanta, he found a spiritual alternative that was immediately appealing. And yet, Vedanta challenged him as well. In order to discover the divinity within, Vedanta teaches that the individual needs to turn inward, away from the world of appearance. In doing so, the individual must subordinate or reject altogether the needs of the physical self. As Parker explains, “This clearly presents a problem for someone whose work was based so closely

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17 Ibid., pp. 377–378.
18 Ibid., p. 378.
19 Isherwood, My Guru and His Disciple, pp. 7 and 11. Isherwood summarizes his psychological contempt for Christianity in the following terms: “The Christians I saw as sour life-haters and sex forbidders, hypocritically denying their rabid secret lusts.” He goes on to condemn Christianity in particular and religion in general in Marxist terms: “My interpretation of the word ‘God’ had been taken quite simplmindedly from left-wing anti-religious propaganda. God has not existence except as a symbol of the capitalist superboss. He has been deified by the capitalists so that he can rule from on high in the sky over the working-class masses, doping them with the opium of the people, which is religion, and thus making them content with their long working hours and starvation wages.”
on his own life and personality. ‘How can I stop being myself’ Isherwood wondered. ‘I’m Christopher Isherwood or I’m nothing.’  

While Isherwood found the very notion of self-denial vexing, he nonetheless pressed on with his spiritual journey. Heard introduced him to yoga, “a Sanskrit word for ‘yoking’ or ‘joining.’” Through the daily practice of yoga and meditation, he strove to discover the universal Atman, the divinity within the individual self. “According to yoga philosophy, the two selves are the ‘outer’ or ‘apparent’ self, which makes people think of themselves as individuals, subject to external stimuli; and the ‘inner’ or ‘real’ self, which is part of a larger consciousness shared by everyone and everything alike.” The spiritual exercise to which Isherwood had committed himself involved the daily and ritual denial of the physical, an odd choice for Isherwood to have made given his passion for sex and worldly comfort.

At this point in his life, though, Isherwood was “ripe for conversion.” While Heard was the catalyst for Isherwood’s conversion, Swami Prabhavananda proved to be his most powerful and enduring spiritual guide. Prabhavananda was born in Bengal in 1893. “He had become interested in the teachings of Ramakrishna (1836–1886), the

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20 Parker, Isherwood, p. 378.
21 Ibid., pp. 379–380. By 1939, the Judeo-Christian tradition had failed Isherwood as had the world of the cabaret. He was spiritually and physically unfulfilled. “He had become increasingly disillusioned with his ‘outer self,’ the Christopher Isherwood who traded upon his reputation as one of the leading young stars of Britain’s left-wing intelligentsia. It might bring some money, and the sort of fame that made young men fall at his feet, but what was the lasting value of any of this? Ever since Heinz had been arrested, Isherwood had pursued the sort of life that suggested its principal motive had been the staving off of boredom and despair. Humphrey Spender had been right when, back in 1936, he had prophesied that in losing Heinz, Isherwood ‘would lose the decisive factor in his life.’ Without Heinz, there was no cause or pattern; actions became meaningless. Work, cigarettes, drink and sex got him through each day, but his discontent was palpable. Coming to America had been a way of breaking with the role he had been expected to play, but New York had shown him very quickly that he could not get by in this country by reputation alone. He was unable to work, he was short of money, he was worried about the war, he was guilty about abandoning his mother, his brother, and Jack Hewit. . . . to face whatever Hitler had in store for them. He had just parted from his closest friend, the person with whom he had intended to establish himself in a new country. . . . He was ripe for conversion. . . . Vedanta offered a way out of this cul-de-sac.”
avatar who was responsible for the 19th-century revival of Vedanta.” After becoming a monk, Prabhavananda was sent to the Vedanta Center in San Francisco and in 1929 he established the Vedanta Society of Southern California at the home of Carrie Mead Wyckoff, which was located at 1946 Ivar Avenue in Los Angeles.22

Isherwood first met Swami—as he would be known to Isherwood throughout his life—in July of 1939, a meeting that was arranged by Heard. As described by Parker, the conversation between Swami and Isherwood was narrow in focus, centering on two issues. First, “Isherwood was concerned that he wouldn’t be able to combine meditation with his proposed career in the distinctly worldly atmosphere of the Hollywood studios.” Swami reassured Isherwood that he could reconcile the demands of the world and the demands of the spirit, for a time. He explained that as long as Isherwood remained steady in his search for “God” he would not fail; the journey would ultimately lead to the discovery of spiritual truth and the attendant realization that he should detach himself from the demands of a physical world that is illusory. Second, when Isherwood bristled at the mention of the word God, a word that evoked the dualistic Judeo-Christian tradition on which he had turned his back, Swami “explained the three tenets of Vedantan philosophy: ‘First, that Man’s real nature is divine. Second, that the aim of human life is to realize this divine nature. Third, that all religions are essentially in agreement.’”23

Isherwood embraced the first tenet almost immediately. The second triggered his lifelong spiritual journey through Eastern religion. And the third sustained him as he was pulled back and forth between the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit.

22 Parker, Isherwood, pp. 385–386.
23 Ibid., p. 386.
While relatively little time lapsed between Isherwood’s first meeting with Swami and his formal initiation into the order in 1940, the period was a turbulent one for both Isherwood and the world. “By the summer of 1939 it became clear to even the most optimistic observers that a world war had become not only inevitable but imminent.” Concerned for the welfare of his mother Kathleen and brother Richard, Isherwood urged them to leave London, which they did, removing themselves to Brabyns Hall near Marple Hall, the Isherwood estate in Cheshire. Shortly after England declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939, Isherwood and Auden alike came under fire from the intellectual and literary left in England. They were essentially labeled traitors to the anti-Fascist cause and accused of idling in America, Auden preoccupied with his verse and Isherwood with yoga. Given the horror unfolding in Europe, Isherwood was drawn to yoga and meditation in large part because they were vehicles that removed him from the physical world. Nonetheless, at the same time that he was withdrawing from the world, he was also securing his footing in it: “By the end of 1939, Isherwood had started to take his place in the California film colony, and had met several stars whose careers he followed during his youth.” He rubbed shoulders with Greta Garbo and went to work on a film for Samuel Goldwyn, a job that would eventually led to a full-time position at MGM.24

He also befriended the screenwriter/director Berthold Viertel and his writer/actress wife Salka, two friends with whom he would remain close throughout their lives. The two had fled Germany and transplanted themselves to a home at 165 Mayber Road in Hollywood, where they created a community of European expatriates into which they welcomed Isherwood. In fact, Viertel ultimately inspired one of Isherwood’s most memorable characters, Frederick Bergmann in the novel *Prater Violet* (1945), an

24 Ibid., pp. 390–404.
endearingly temperamental director whose artistic values clash with and are ultimately compromised by the commercial exigencies of the newly emerging and rapidly expanding film industry.

In less than a year, Isherwood had rooted himself in two worlds, the world of film and the world of Vedanta:

Maybery Road and Arlene Terrace soon became the two fixed points in Isherwood’s Hollywood life, and they represented different aspects of his existence. Maybery Road was distinctly European in atmosphere . . . it was here that Isherwood could discuss the vanished past with other exiles. . . . His spiritual future, however, lay at Arlene Terrace where he continued his long conversations with Heard. Maybery Road was grounded in the everyday world of the film industry and contemporary politics, whereas at Arlene Terrace what most people regarded as the “real” world was dismissed as illusion.25

In fact, Isherwood was at odds with himself and quite painfully so. He was on the one hand clear about the irreconcilability of life at Maybery Road and life at Arlene Terrace, between the “everyday world of the film industry” and the demands of a spiritual quest to discover the Atman within. And yet, on the other hand he was ever hopeful that the two lives could ultimately be reconciled and rendered compatible.

Isherwood approached his formal initiation by Swami on November 8, 1940, in doubt rather than with confidence. The day before, he registered his concern in his diary: “Tomorrow morning, I’m going down to the temple, to be initiated by Swami. I know he is only doing this to encourage me (because, he told Gerald, I am ‘earnest’ [sic]) but I feel terribly inadequate. Lately, I’ve been getting up too late and missing my morning hour.”26

As Isherwood’s initiation neared, the demands of the body (“getting up too late”) were at odds with the demands of the spirit (“missing my morning hour”). The initiation would

25 Ibid., p. 382.
26 Isherwood, Diaries, p. 124.
be a first step rather than an end in itself, Isherwood reasoned, a ritual intended to “encourage” him in his spiritual quest. In fact, the initiation only heightened Isherwood’s anxiety, further casting into relief the difference between the spiritual and the material worlds.

Isherwood describes his initiation with comic resignation. On the one hand, he simply tells what he did, recording what happened on November 8, 1940. The day begins routinely and unfolds smoothly:

Picked up Gerald in the car and was down at the temple by seven-thirty. When I went into the shrine, the Swami was already seated. I took my place on his left, holding a little tray with the flowers I had been given, by one of the women, to offer: two red roses, a white rose, and a big white daisy. First the Swami told me to meditate as usual. Then I had to offer the flowers—the red roses to photographs of Ramakrishna and his wife, “Holy Mother,” the daisy to the icon of Christ, the white rose to the Swami himself, as my guru, my teacher. Next, he told me to meditate on Ramakrishna in the central cavity of the heart. Then he taught me my Sanskrit mantram (which I must never repeat to anybody) and gave me a rosary, showing me how to use it, repeating the mantram and meditating on Ramakrishna’s body—“a thousand times more brilliant than the sun, but mellow”—the feet, the navel, the heart, and the head. I worked on this for a time. Then I went into the house and had coffee and toast.27

Isherwood appears to have been late for his own wedding, so to speak, rushing “into the shrine” where the Swami was waiting, “already seated.”28 He brings nothing with him by way of an offering, but rather accepts what he is handed, “a little tray with the flowers” from “one of the women,” a generic character straight out of central casting. His offering

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27 Ibid., p. 125.
28 In fact, Isherwood likens his bond with Swami or the bond between guru and disciple to that of the marriage bond. When recalling his initiative many years later in My Guru and His Disciple, he writes: “I had just entered into a relationship with this little Bengali and his establishment which was far more binding and serious than marriage—I who had always had such an instinctive horror of the marriage bond! . . . Prabhavananda must have known very well what he and I were letting ourselves in for. According to Hindu belief, the tie between the guru and his initiated disciple cannot be broke, either in this world or on any future plane of existence, until the disciple realizes the Atman within himself and is thus set free. Meanwhile, the disciple may neglect, reject, or even betray the guru, but the guru cannot disown him. In such cases, the guru must continue to guide the disciple mentally, from a distance, and protect him through prayer.” Isherwood, Guru, pp. 66–67.
is both choreographed and scattered; Swami directs the distribution of flowers, and yet his choices appear random. Any one flower could be easily interchanged with another.

The gallery of saints is odd: Christ, Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother Sandra Devi (Ramakrishna’s wife), and Swami Prabhavananda. Images from the past are paired with holy embodiments of the present. Time frames converge as do spiritual traditions. Isherwood’s meditation is bizarre and inaccessible, centered “in the central cavity of the heart” and focused on “the feet, the navel, the heart and the head” of Ramakrishna. The ritual begins and ends with little fanfare, “picked Gerald up in the car” and “went into the house and had coffee and toast.” Falling far short of a conversion, the initiation simply marks the starting point. In many ways, it marks the ending as well.

Isherwood intends for the reader of this entry to chuckle. The humor evoked draws attention to the simple fact that while he is being initiated into a group, he is not being transformed. He remains essentially who he was when he started the day, a man with physical and spiritual needs. When recording the very moment in the ceremony at which he becomes an initiate, Isherwood dwells not only on the spiritual, but he brings the physical into focus as well: “Then he taught me my Sanskrit mantra (which I must never repeat to anybody).” His parenthetical emphasis on the need for privacy has two effects. On the one hand, it points to the spiritual self, emphasizing as it does the significance of the deeply private moment at which the Disciple becomes a person of faith devoted to spiritual practice guided by the Guru. On the other hand, it points to the physical self, revealing as it does that Isherwood intended his diary to be read, otherwise he would have recorded the mantra for private recollection. For Isherwood, the physical
and the spiritual were equally present on the day of his initiation, and they would remain so for the rest of his life.

At the end of the day on November 8, 1940, Isherwood departed the shrine as he had arrived. “Drove Gerald home. We agreed that this sort of thing could never be transplanted to the West. Ritual is valuable, certainly—but perhaps only for the person who actually celebrates it.”29 He and Gerald left the center together, returning to the world rather than retreating or detaching themselves from it, as the monks and “householders” at the Center had done. Isherwood had participated in a “ritual” which had, in fact, marked a spiritual awaking of sorts. Nonetheless, he goes out of his way in his diary entry to separate himself from this ritual and the tradition it represents: “this sort of thing could never be transplanted to the West.” Isherwood’s stance had nothing to do with his well-worn repudiation of religion; Vedanta and Swami had indeed begun to stir him spiritually. Rather, he was anxious about dedicating himself wholeheartedly to the search for the Atman within because to do so would call on him to detach himself gradually, but nonetheless ultimately, from the very physical world that he loved and that Vedanta rejects as illusory. Thus, he is driven to distinguish sharply between the East and the West, planting himself firmly in the latter while cautiously exploring the former.

IV

Five days after his initiation in a diary entry dated November 13, 1940, Isherwood paraphrases a conversation he had with Swami about sex. Often quoted, the passage brings into sharp focus the key stumbling block for Isherwood in his spiritual journey: “I also asked Swami about sex. He said that all sex—no matter what the relationship—is a

29 Isherwood, Diaries, p. 126.
form of attachment, and must ultimately be given up. This will happen naturally as you make progress in the spiritual life.” In fact, Isherwood’s entire spiritual journey thereafter tested this very assertion.

On February 17, 1941, Isherwood and Vernon ended their sexual relationship and domestic experiment. They moved out of their apartment into separate quarters. On the one hand, Isherwood indulged his sadness to the point of self-pity in conversations with Gerald Heard. On the other, he took refuge in the shrine, meditating in silence on the way of Prabhavananda and the teachings of Vedanta. The world of the body opposed the world of the spirit:

> When I sat in the shrine room, the smell of stale incense made me drowsy, and occasionally I dropped off into a doze. Yet the time didn’t seem wasted. It was like being on a long railroad journey in a foreign country at night. At least, I said to myself, the train must be taking me somewhere.
>
> No doubt. But I knew it wasn’t taking me toward Vernon. In facing the shrine, I was turning my back on him. How cruelly unnatural this seemed. For I was disowning not only our sexual relationship but something more precious to me—our daily and nightly togetherness and the comfort of its contacts, its exchanged smiles and words of intimacy.

At this juncture, Isherwood’s footing appeared firm. His choices were deliberate, though new and foreign. He had repudiated Vernon both sexually and domestically, favoring instead a spiritual journey through Eastern religion to a place as yet unknown.

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30 Ibid., p. 127.
31 Isherwood recalls the period and his feelings many years later in My Guru and His Disciple: “We moved out of our house; I went to a hotel, Vernon found rooms not far off. I wished he would go back to New York and thus put a barrier between us. While he remained in Los Angeles there was a danger that we might settle for a truce which wasn’t a reconciliation and couldn’t last. I missed him horribly. Without him, everything, from the war to my job at M-G-M became less bearable. I saw Gerald nearly every day largely because I could talk about Vernon to him. He did his best to be a sympathetic listener, which only made the situation more painful. My real support came from visits to Prabhavananda, because I couldn’t talk to him about Vernon—or at least not in the same self-pitying, self-tormenting way; I would have been ashamed to.” Isherwood, Guru, p. 78.
32 Ibid., p. 79.
In earnest, he submerged himself in the life of the Vedanta Center and undertook a rigorous spiritual regimen. In March of 1941, he moved into a new apartment on Green Valley Road near the home of Gerald Heard and Chris Wood. He meditated extensively throughout the day, worshiped frequently at the shrine, attended lectures delivered by Prabhavananda, and stopped smoking—demonstrating in Parker’s words that “he could renounce worldly pleasures.” When Heard severed his relationship with Swami and separated himself from the Center, Isherwood assumed Heard’s duties: “Gerald’s break with Prabhavananda had a side effect; it made me more valuable to the Vedanta Center. Not that I could ever make good the loss of Gerald’s spellbinding lectures and the increase they had caused in attendance and in cash donations. But I could at least give readings whenever the Swami was unable to appear, and I could take over the assistant editorship of the magazine.”

Shortly after moving into the apartment on Green Valley Road, Isherwood’s friend Denham “Denny” Fouts returned to L.A. from Pennsylvania. Isherwood had met Fouts first in 1938, “but only in passing,” and was reintroduced to him in 1940 by Tony Bower. Young, beautiful, and loose, Fouts had a reputation for promiscuity that spanned the United States and Europe alike. Born in the South, Fouts’s first sexual experience was with his younger brother. According to Parker, “He never lost a taste for young boys, but for substantial remuneration was prepared to have sex with wealthy older men.”

Somewhere around the age of eighteen or nineteen, his parents had sent him to Washington, where they planned for him to work for his uncle and hoped that he would modify his behavior. He soon moved to Manhattan, “where his exceptional looks attracted so much attention that he decided he should capitalize on them.” Soon he met a

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German baron and moved to Europe. According to Parker, “subsequent lovers reputedly included a Greek shipping magnate; Lord Tredegar, who as the Hon. Evan Morgan had been the unresponsive object of Ronald Firbank’s passion; Prince Paul of Greece, before he married and became king; and finally, Peter Watson.”

When Isherwood and Fouts became reacquainted, Fouts immediately took an interest in Vedanta, becoming intent on changing the way he lived his life. Isherwood was impressed and eventually arranged a meeting with Swami, who was underwhelmed and dubious about the sincerity of Fouts’s spiritual commitment. Rejected by Prabhavananda, Fouts turned to Heard, who eagerly agreed to serve as Fouts’s spiritual teacher. Soon thereafter, Heard “sent [Fouts] off for five months to work on a ‘biodynamic’ farm in Pennsylvania.” When Fouts returned to L.A., he almost immediately moved to the center of Isherwood’s life. While the two were never lovers, though Lincoln Kirstein had suspected that Isherwood was in love with Fouts, Isherwood welcomed Fouts into his home to live and the two set out on a spiritual quest of their own.

Fouts had been classified as a conscientious objector, and Isherwood knew that he “would be called up to work in a forestry camp in the fairly near future.” In the interim, Isherwood welcomed him into his apartment, and the two “decided to try an experiment in intentional living, following a relaxed version of Gerald’s schedule—three hours of meditation, instead of six.” Their days were highly regimented and were devoted to spiritual practice. They woke “in silence” and meditated for one hour in separate rooms. They bathed and then ate breakfast, at which time they “broke their silence by saying

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35 Ibid., p. 419.
'Good Morning.’” Breakfast was followed by domestic chores, which once completed gave way to “reading aloud to each other from some ‘religious’ book.” At noon, they meditated for a second hour and then ate lunch. They read in the afternoon either at home or in the car, where the “nondriver read to the driver.” From six to seven, they meditated for a third hour and then ate supper. Upon cleaning the dishes, they went to bed by 9:30 p.m.  

The structured day the two carved out for themselves was designed on the one hand to lend discipline to their spiritual practice and on the other to detach themselves from the physical world and its pleasures, most notably sex. They avoided the movies altogether. Their practice of reading while they drove was intended to avert their gaze away from “sexy pedestrians,” though “it didn’t, but it did divide the driver’s attention by three—book, pedestrian, road—instead of by two, and was therefore the cause of several near accidents.” Moreover, Isherwood noted they “had agreed that we would give up sex, including masturbation. This was made easier by the fact that we didn’t find each other in the least sexually attractive. However, while keeping the agreement, we talked about sex constantly, boasting of our past conquests and adventures.” By talking about sex, Isherwood reasoned, the two could diffuse their sexual energy: “We might have built up a far greater lust pressure if we had strictly refrained from mentioning the subject.”

The chastity pact between Isherwood and Fouts was fragile from the start. The spiritual devotion implied by their antiphonal reading in the car is undercut by their own admission that they still looked at “sexy pedestrians” and by the comic image of the two careering through the streets of L.A., narrowly avoiding “several near accidents” in their

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37 Ibid., pp. 82–83.
efforts to remain chaste. Moreover, Isherwood’s talk of “lust pressure” and his pseudo-psychological defense of the telling of titillating tales are quite simply ludicrous, making it clear that neither would ever be able to turn their backs entirely on the world of physical pleasure. And while the experiment in “intentional living” was successful and “unexpectedly happy” for a time, it remained just that—an experiment doomed to fail from the start.  

“On July 7, [1941,] my monastic experiment with Denny was cut short by the opening of the La Verne Seminar,” Isherwood reports in My Guru and His Disciple. The seminar had been organized by prominent Quakers from Pennsylvania with the assistance of Gerald Heard. Located close to Los Angeles, La Verne was home to a Baptist college that rented a dormitory to the Quaker group for a month-long communal experiment. The day was structured and exacting. Seminar participants woke at 5:00 a.m., meditated as a group for an hour, and ate breakfast at 7:00 a.m. The morning was given over to discussion, and the topics under consideration were in fact many of those that had been preoccupying Isherwood since he was first seduced by Vedanta:

Is the life of prayer a form of escapism, or is it, perhaps the most direct form of action? Can the other world religions, taken together with the findings of modern science, help us revise our cosmology? Granted that the present order of things is in a state of chaos due to the war, what could be the structure and sanctions of a new order of society? Can we produce an order in which man’s spiritual growth is fostered, not hindered? What have history and science to teach us about the nature and power of non-violence.

38 Ibid., p. 83. Parker comments in similar terms on the relationship and living arrangement between Fouts and Isherwood: “The notion of Isherwood sharing his life, and his bedroom, with a celebrated male whore in an atmosphere of innocence struck some people as unlikely. Isherwood insisted, however, that their life was celibate—though he added that ‘this austerity was purely technical. We didn’t give up thinking about sex, talking about sex, even boasting about our glamorous [former] lives.’”
39 Isherwood, Guru, p. 87.
The subcommittees formed to address these and other topics met after lunch was served at 12:30 p.m. The entire group reconvened at 4:00 p.m. when the subcommittees reported on their findings, sparking further discussion that lasted until 5:30 p.m. A period of group meditation followed, and dinner was served at 7:30 p.m.40

Isherwood’s removal to La Verne marks a point in time—namely, the end of his “monastic experiment with Denny.” It also signals his return to the world. True, he exchanged an apartment on Green Valley Road where he lived in relative isolation with Denny, a fellow aspirant, for a secluded Quaker commune inhabited by like-minded people engaged in a spiritual and philosophical quest. Nonetheless, exchanging the company of one for the community of many was all that Isherwood needed to revive his humanity. As he reports in My Guru and in his Diary, Denny joined him at La Verne, having not yet been called to report to the forest service. “This he did unwillingly and with a bad grace, bringing his hostility to Gerald along with him.” Isherwood was torn: “I felt obliged to cooperate with Gerald publicly and also to join Denny in bitching him behind his back.” Connected to rather than detached from the physical world, the two “bitched nearly everybody at the seminar.”41

If La Verne was to have advanced Isherwood’s spiritual struggle to rise above the concerns of the physical world, the experiment failed. In fact, the experience seemed to confirm Isherwood’s need to be a part of the physical world. In his Diary, he recalls that “Denny was my great problem at La Verne and I, no doubt, was his. Our influence upon each other was disastrous. I think the breakdown of our chastity resolutions had a lot to do with this. As soon as we would be left alone together, we would begin picking

41 Isherwood, Guru, pp. 88–89.
everybody to pieces, from Gerald downwards; Gerald, of course, was our special
victim.” Parker draws the obvious conclusion from the diary entry that the two of them
had sex with each other while living at La Verne. If they did break with their chastity
vows, the breach is odd because it indicates that while the two were able to remain chaste
when they were isolated at Green Valley Road, they were unable to do so when they were
living in the company of others at La Verne. One would have thought the reverse to have
been the case.

At the end of their month-long stay at La Verne, Isherwood and Fouts parted. A
registered conscientious objector, Fouts went on August 21, 1941, to a forestry camp in
San Dimas, close to La Verne. “The next day,” Isherwood reports in Guru, “I flew east to
visit Wystan and to be interviewed by Caroline Norment, who was about to open a hostel
for refugees from Nazi Europe under the auspices of the Friends Service Committee.”
The meeting with Norment went well, and it was agreed that starting in October 1941
Isherwood would work at the Friends hostel located in Haverford, Pennsylvania. Home to
approximately thirty refugees, the hostel was a place devoted to easing the refugees’
transition into American life. Isherwood spent his time there teaching English and going
to social events with the refugees. When released from his duties, though, he occupied
himself differently: “At the end of those long long workdays, I was usually eager to drop
into bed and sleep. But, later on, when I had discovered a sexual playmate, I would take
an occasional evening off with him in Philadelphia. This seemed to me just fun, well
earned.” By the time he arrived in Haverford, Isherwood had fully revived his sexuality,
now indulging himself freely in large part because Quakerdom endorsed rather than
shunned sex: “I had never felt that Quakerdom demanded celibacy of me; they all

42 Isherwood, Diaries, pp. 170–171.
approved of sex, even if it was only the lawful kind. I made one little concession to respectability, however; I always removed my Friends Service Committee button from my jacket before we went into bars where we would get drunk and the steam bath where we would sober up again.”

For Isherwood, “Quakerdom” differs from Vedanta in one key respect. In Vedanta, the individual’s spiritual search for the Atman or Truth within ultimately demands a separation from the physical world and the repudiation of that world as illusory. “Quakerdom,” on the other hand, obliges adherents to discover the “Inner Light” or Truth within and heed its call to do good works in the world. In Vedanta, the spiritual and the physical separate; in “Quakerdom” they unite. Thus, as a Quaker, Isherwood could heed the demands of the spirit and the demands of the flesh, within the boundaries of decorum—“I always removed my Friends Service Committee button.”

Unwilling to abandon Vedanta, though, Isherwood found a way to reconcile the fundamental difference between Vedanta and “Quakerdom.” Given one of the three basic tenets of Vedanta laid out for him by Gerald Heard—“all religions are essentially in agreement”—Isherwood found that he could live both as a Quaker and a Vedantist. In a passage justifying the ease with which he began to use the Quaker idiom (“Caroline, I have a concern”; “Caroline, does thee want me to take thy letters to the mail”), Isherwood argues that “there is no reason why you can’t equate the Quaker Inner Light with the Hindu Atman. I was really talking about Vedanta to them, but in their idiom, not mine.” “Quakerdom” and Vedanta are one and interchangeable. Adherents to either dogma devote themselves primarily to the search for absolute Truth within the self—the “Quaker Inner Light” or the “Hindu Atman.” How one lives in the physical world is of secondary

43 Isherwood, Guru, pp. 90–93.
importance; one can live as a Quaker or a Vedantist, attached to or detached from the physical world. Either way of living is sanctioned because both lead to the discovery of Truth and, in the end, neither views living in the world as fundamentally important.

In “Quakerdom,” Isherwood discovered a faith and an ethical framework within which he could satisfy both his spiritual and sexual yearnings. Both faiths freed Isherwood from the Judeo-Christian dualism that had tortured him oppressively as a child and young adult. In Vedanta and “Quakerdom” alike, the Divine and the human are one, rather than separate entities. Both faiths thus stirred him spiritually. “Quakerdom,” however, gave Isherwood permission to have sex; it “endorsed rather than shunned sex.”

Regrettably, for Isherwood, his time with the Quakers was limited. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government “restricted the movements of ‘enemy aliens’ to very small areas around their domicile.” And while Caroline Norment successfully petitioned the local District Attorney to exempt the camp from enforcing these regulations, the number of refugees in need of the camp’s services dwindled relatively quickly. Many of those who had come to Haverford before Pearl Harbor had been absorbed into “the rapidly expanding wartime labor market.” Moreover, fewer new refugees were allowed to leave Europe—a downturn that contributed to the camp’s existing financial trouble. The Friends Service Committee decided to close the hostel, and Isherwood left Haverford in July of 1942.44

Earlier in that year, the U.S. government had raised the maximum age for draft eligibility, placing Isherwood firmly within the bracket. In June of 1942, Isherwood filed for 4-E classification as a conscientious objector. He heard nothing from the draft board, and instead, on September 25, 1942, he received a “letter from one of the boys at the

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44 Ibid., p. 95.
forestry camp, saying that they had been expecting me to arrive some days previously.”
Alarmed that he might have been ruled AWOL, he contacted the head of the camp, who advised him not to report without papers from the draft board directing him to do so. In the interim, Swami Prabhavananda encouraged Isherwood to apply for reclassification as a 4-D theological student, a suggestion that appealed to Isherwood even though he appears not to have entirely understood what Swami had in mind when he asked Isherwood to promise him that as a student of Vedanta he would agree to become a monk. In a diary entry dated September 28, 1942, and cited in My Guru and His Discipline, Isherwood reports that before Swami would write a letter supporting his appeal for reclassification, “he wanted me to reassure him that I really intend to become a monk. I said yes of course—but later I was bothered by all kinds of doubts. Just what does Swami mean by ‘monk’? One who takes the vows of chastity and poverty? Or one who belongs, specifically, to the Ramakrishna Order, conducts lecture courses, officiates at the rituals, and goes to lunch with the householder devotees in their expensive houses.”45

Once again the carnal and the sacred were at odds for Isherwood. On the heels of his more permissive experience with the Quakers, Isherwood was “bothered by all kinds of doubts” when Swami insisted that he become a monk. What, after all, were the parameters within which a monk was expected to live? Did a monk reject the worldly and remain true to “vows of chastity and poverty,” or did a monk make his way in the world, affiliating himself with an institution (“The Ramakrishna Oder”), working a trade (“conducts lecture courses”; “officiates at rituals”), and enjoying the fruits of labor (“lunch . . . in their expensive houses.”)? Bothered though he was, Isherwood was

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persuaded by Swami, and on February 6, 1943, he moved into the Center on Ivar Avenue, cautiously intent on becoming a monk.

V

Confused about the precise nature of monastic life, by the exact boundary between the spiritual and the mundane, Isherwood nevertheless entered the monastery with a certain sense that he was being sealed off, separated from the world:

against my will, terrified, helplessly attracted, I cross the vast empty courtyard in blazing sunlight, pull the bell chain—clang, the grim ironbound wicket opens. They are all inside, in the shadows, cowled and black-robed, waiting for me. I stammer the irrevocable vow. I vanish into silence and an eternal indoors, trapped by the Trappists, a monk. This youthful fantasy farce—inspired by The Garden of Allah and the anti-Catholic horror tales of my Protestant upbringing—kept recalling itself to my mind and making me grin as I took part in the events of February 6.46

By comparison, Isherwood’s actual initiation on February 6, 1943, was quite bland, marked as it was by a simple service, plain suits, a routine dedication of Brahmanda Cottage, newly erected at 1942 Ivar Avenue, and a relatively lively reception. What weighed heavily on Isherwood, though, was a very real sense of having been imprisoned, “trapped by the Trappists,” and locked away from the world that he loved only to “vanish into silence and an eternal indoors.”47

46 Ibid., p. 100.
47 In his diary entries leading up to February 6, 1943, Isherwood is preoccupied with the renunciation implicit in becoming a monk. On January 29, 1943, he asks, “What keeps me from my prayers? The poorest, most compulsionistic daydreams of ‘a last fling.’ Some part of me is secretly, irrationally convinced that somehow someone will show up to give me a glamorous final twenty-four hours in the best Elinor Glyn style.” On February 3, 1943, he reports, “The time is running short. . . . I’m still in a dither, still banking on some last minute adventure,” and he laments, “We went to the Club Gala on the Strip. My farewell visit to the End of the Night. I haven’t been to a place of this sort in ages, and it was so nostalgically reminiscent of other times—the baroque decorations and the cosy red velvet corner, the sharp-faced peroxide pianist with tender memories and a tongue like an adder, the grizzled tomcat tenor, the bitch with the heart of gold, the lame celebrity, the bar mimosa, the public lovers, the amazed millionaire tourist, the garland cow, the plumped serpent and the daydream sailor. . . . I have loved them all very much and learnt something from each of them. I owe them many of my vividest memories of awareness. But enough is enough. And here we say goodbye.” And as a man condemned might prepare for the gallows, so Isherwood opened his diary entry on February 5, 1943, with a sigh: “last day.” Clearly Isherwood was far
Two days after his initiation, Isherwood dwelled upon this sense of isolation in his
diary: “As a matter of fact, my unconscious hasn’t even cocked an eyebrow or twitched
an ear, yet. And, for the next two or three weeks, it probably won’t. Like a drunk who has
been pitched into the lockup, it just lies there snoring, quite unaware that it can’t get out.
When it begins to wake up, I suppose the trouble will start.”\(^\text{48}\) And soon it did, for while
Isherwood was sincere in his spiritual aspirations, he was constitutionally incapable of
living cut off, “pitched into the lockup.”

Isherwood’s time in the monastery spanned only two and half years, from
February 1943 to August 1945. On the one hand, he was a devoted monastic, observing a
daily regimen of meditation and study that was notably rigorous. He rose early,
worshiped in the Shrine, meditated throughout the day, attended lectures usually given by
Swami, and edited the Center’s newsletter. Simultaneously, he worked on translations of
Vedic texts with Swami, most notably the \textit{Bhagavad-gita}. And while Isherwood loved
the world outside Ivar Avenue, he was nonetheless drawn to a life of monastic seclusion.
In fact, Isherwood reports in his diary that for the first few weeks of his time there his
“unconscious” was “snoring, quite unaware,” making it possible for him to boast on
March 26, 1943, that “I’m still keeping all the rules.”\(^\text{49}\)

Setting all other proscriptions aside, Isherwood was most proud of having
remained faithful to his vow of celibacy because in doing so he could reassure himself
that he had held fast to the central tenet of Vedanta: human relationships and the physical
world alike are transient; “Man’s real nature is divine . . . and the aim of human life is to

\(^{48}\) Ibid., pp. 270–271.
\(^{49}\) Ibid., p. 276.
realize this divine nature.” He nevertheless rejected the position adhered to by some of his fellow initiates—namely, that “the world’s pleasures” are “wretched and tasteless.” In his diary entry of April 6, 1943, he allowed that these “pleasures” were enormously satisfying in the moment, conceding that “they have extraordinary beauty and significance.” However, he simultaneously rejected preoccupation with those pleasures: “The pursuit of worldly pleasures as ends in themselves is madness, because it disregards the real situation, which is that we are living a life that has only one thing to teach us, how to know God in ourselves and in other people.”

Faith affirmed in fact and deed, Isherwood nonetheless strayed in thought from the very beginning of his time at the Center.

As predicted, the trouble did start soon after he had entered the monastery. The diary entries from this period refer regularly to “sex thoughts,” “sex fantasies,” and “sex memories.” Just three weeks after his arrival, Isherwood admitted that he was struggling and yet “still hanging on by the eyelids.” Subordinating the flesh to the spirit was his daily trial, and yet he never entirely subordinated the former to the latter. Sex was ever present. On March 26, 1943, he recorded in his dairy that he “woke murmuring a line from Yeats’s translation of the chorus from Oedipus at Colonus: ‘Even from the delight memory treasures so. . .’ I am reading and thinking often of Yeats, just now: he represents a most elegant kind of sexual sublimation.” Drawn as he was by the “world’s pleasures,” Isherwood was preoccupied by its worries as well. On March 18, 1943, he visited Chris Wood at Laguna Beach, where they were joined by Gerald Heard, Aldous Huxley, and Karl Hoyt; the stay overnight away from the Center—his first since he arrived on February 6, 1943—proved unsettling: Wood was in a dark mood and “even

50 Ibid., p. 280.
Aldous seemed less of his kind, decent self than usual.” In its pleasure and pain, the world pulled on Isherwood in ways that threatened the very spiritual quest he had undertaken, leading him to conclude at the end of the Laguna visit that “I shouldn’t have come down here. Perhaps I shouldn’t leave Ivar Avenue at all just now. I feel shaken and insecure.”

Isherwood soon discovered, however, that the choices before him were not as sharply delineated as might have liked. For him it was not simply a matter of living in the world or at the Center, of flesh versus spirit. The human condition was far more complicated. In a letter dated April 24, 1943, and addressed to Caroline Norment, Isherwood first thanked her for “asking me such clear, answerable questions” and then went on to display the very muddle in which he found himself at the time. “I think you know me well enough to know that I am not the sort of person to be interested in renunciation for renunciation’s sake,” Isherwood asserts, no doubt in response a query from Norment about Vedanta’s view of the physical world. “If anything, I err in the other direction, because I am perpetually reacting from my puritan family background: I can never feel that the pleasures of the world are either sinful or tasteless, and I could never get much nourishment from a religion which said they were. . . . At the same time, I have always felt the need, in life, for some sort of dedication and meaning—as who doesn’t.”

On the one hand, Isherwood implies that “dedication and meaning” are not to be found in the “pleasures of the world.” On the other, he claims that these very “pleasures” are neither “sinful or tasteless.” In fact, when Isherwood asserts that he is not “interested in renunciation for renunciation’s sake” he cuts to the heart of his struggle at the time: he is trying to work out a concept of “renunciation” that is nuanced rather than absolute, one

51 Ibid., pp. 270–280.
that would allow him to live in the world and enjoy its fruits while drawing spiritual
strength from the Divine force within.

For Isherwood, the boundary between the flesh and the spirit needed to be fluid.

In the letter to Norment, he compares the Friends hostel in Haverford with the Center at
Ivar Avenue:

To people trying to lead the life of prayer and mediation in a monastery or
retreat, the danger is, no doubt, that they may become insensitive or
callous, and lose their sense of the world’s suffering and need. But for the
people who lead the life of social work and active relief in the world there
is equally the danger, as you and I well know, that one may become so
deeply involved, so eager to achieve certain results, that one loses
altogether the sense of what it is all for, the sense of God, in fact. And so
the two lives are complementary. Whether one stays in one, or the other,
or switches back and forth, must be an individual matter dictated by
circumstance and what we can guess of God’s will for us. 52

The spiritual and ethical choices before Isherwood were not straightforward; they did not
reduce themselves into two poles: the “life of prayer and meditation in a monastery” or
the “life of social work and active relief” in the world. Rather, for Isherwood the “two
lives are complementary,” calling on the individual to move “back and forth” at the
“will” of the Divinity or “God” within. With less than four months of monastic life under
his belt, Isherwood had discovered that while he could not live exclusively as a monk cut
off from the physical world and its pleasures, he nevertheless could not turn away from
the search for the Atman inside himself. The discovery, most clearly articulated first in
the letter to Norment, not only marked the beginning of the end of his monastic
experience, but also further clarified for him the dilemma that would preoccupy him for
the rest of his life: how does one reconcile the life of the spirit with the life of the flesh,
particularly in a religion that dismisses the latter as transitory and without value.

The diary entries of May and June reveal that Isherwood was being pushed and pulled between life in the monastery and life in the world; in fact, he was almost frantic in his attempts to strike a balance between the two.\textsuperscript{53} He was still in a state of “technical celibacy,”\textsuperscript{54} a phrase he does not really define, and yet he was keenly aware of his own sexuality. In \textit{Guru}, he reports that on August 17, 1943—a little more than six months after entering the Center—he “began what I described to myself as a few days’ rest from the Center.” He rented a room at a home in Santa Monica across the street from the Viertels. Swami did not object to Isherwood’s time away, though he might have had he “realized . . . that Santa Monica was an area of special danger to me because of the erotic magic of the nearby beach.”\textsuperscript{55} Precisely what Isherwood means by “erotic magic” is difficult to pinpoint. In \textit{Guru}, he elaborates on the phrase by citing a piece from his diary dated May 14, 1943:

\begin{quote}
Down to Santa Monica to have lunch with the Viertels, then went on the beach with Garbo and Tommy Viertel. We walked along the shore, right to the pier. The sun was brilliant, with a strong wind—the palms waving...
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., pp. 304–305. Isherwood bounces back and forth between spiritual practice and worldly care in the diary entries of the period. One in particular reveals the frenzy in which he found himself: “Overstimulated by two and a half cups of coffee, I’ve been running around since breakfast. I’ve just been talking to Swami. I feel such a deep relationship with him. ‘Love’ is too possessive a word to describe it. It’s really absence of demand, lack of strain, entire reassurance. I can’t imagine being jealous when he seems to favour one person, because it’s so obvious that his attitude toward each one of us is special. He touched my cheek with his finger and giggled, because \textit{The New Republic} had referred to me as a ‘prominent young writer.’ I told him how free I’ve been from sexual thoughts and fantasies during the past weeks and he said, ‘Yes, I saw that in your face yesterday, but don’t get too confident, they will come back. Vishwananda came into ‘my’ washroom this morning, spilled water on the floor, and left a brownish gob of spittle in the basin. This is just the sort of thing I’ve got to take, and like. Later, Vishwananda got hold of me and put me through a regular examination, making me show him the madras we use in the ritual. Then I had to talk on the telephone to Joan, one of the M-G-M secretaries, who had called up out the blue to gossip. When we were through, I rushed into the shrine room, prostrated, rushed out again, had lunch, slept till four, hurried down to the boulevard with Swami’s watch to be repaired and a letter to Willie Maugham about the exact translation of a verse in the \textit{Katha Upanishad} from which he wants to take a title for his new novel—the Razor’s Edge or The Edge of the Razor—nearly lost Dhruva in the crowd, got home, sawed some wood, joined in a discussion as to whether or not Richard should forget about the Marine Corps and try to get classified as a conscientious objector, had tea, translated a verse of the \textit{Gita}, ate too many peppermint drops, and am now late for vespers. This is what they call an escape from the world!”

\textsuperscript{54} Isherwood, \textit{Diaries}, p. 308.

\textsuperscript{55} Isherwood, \textit{Guru}, p. 134.
all along the cliff, and the ocean dazzling with light and foam. The air was full of spray and falling light; it was beautiful beyond all words. The afternoon had an edge of extra-keen, almost intolerable sensation on all its sights and sounds and smells. Seeing a human body in the far distance, you wanted to seize it in your arms and devour it—not for itself, but as a palpable fragment of the whole scene, of the wildness of the wind and foam, and of the entire unseizable mystery and delight of the moment. I glimpsed something, for an instant, of the reality behind sex. Something which we reach out toward, as we take the human body in our arms. It is what we really want, and it eludes us in the very act of possession.\textsuperscript{56}

The passage has an ethereal feel to it which is quite uncommon in Isherwood’s prose. The “ocean dazzling with light and foam” and “the air . . . full of spray and falling light” create images which recall the paintings of Botticelli. Both share their power to evoke that which is “beautiful beyond all words.” Both offer mystical experiences that unite the human with the divine. Isherwood’s meditation on the scene in Santa Monica lays bare “the reality behind sex.” At the most fundamental level, sex is erotically pleasurable, taking one as it does to “an edge of extra-keen, almost intolerable sensation.” At the most profound level, sex is a vehicle that transports the human spirit beyond the physical world and unites it with the Divine, that which “eludes us in the very act of possession.”

For Isherwood, there would be no turning away from the experience on Santa Monica beach, no denying his discovery of the “reality behind sex.” From that point forward, sex would figure into his life both as an animal impulse that produced physical pleasure and as a spiritual exercise that had the power to transport.

Seven days after arriving in Santa Monica for his break from the Center, Isherwood enjoyed “the absurd little climax of August 24.” In \textit{Guru}, he reports that in the morning he went to the ocean for a swim and found the beach nearly empty. He entered the water, and once he was waist deep, he removed his swim trunks and slung them

\textsuperscript{56} Isherwood, \textit{Diaries}, p. 290.
around his neck: “I loved to swim naked, although/because, while doing so, I always felt
the excitement of a flirtation with Sex.” The capital S once again indicates that during the
short time at the Center, Sex had acquired new meaning. It was now a proper noun that
referred to an act of physical pleasure that led to mystical union. And while Isherwood
had not yet comfortably reconciled the two (“although/because”), he was nonetheless
emboldened and a bit more daring:

a man appeared, walking along the tide line. As soon as he saw the trunks
around my neck, he began to grin, with pleased amusement. He stripped
off his own trunks and came up to me through the water. He handled my
body. I made no resistance. We were both sexually aroused and both
laughing. I laughed because this wordless encounter seemed odd and
dreamlike; I had already realized that he was deaf and dumb. Finding
myself on the verge of an orgasm, I stopped him. He didn’t seem
disappointed or offended. He let go of me at once. Still laughing, he turned
and waded away. . . . I went back to my room in a state of incredulity. Was
this tiny push all that had been needed to throw me off balance? I was
partly horrified, partly amused, entirely bewildered. As I stood naked in
the bathroom, a voice said to me: Did you think it wouldn’t count, as long
as you didn’t go all the way? That was the same thing as doing it and you
know it was. Well, go ahead—finish it off. I did so, with difficulty. The
act gave me no pleasure. It seemed idiotic.

The temptation on the beach was entirely too enticing for Isherwood to ignore. And while
he “made no resistance,” he nonetheless “didn’t go all the way.” Clearly, his chastity oath
restrained him in the moment and yet his fleeting regard for or changing view of the
importance of that very oath prompted him to “finish it off.” Ironically, though not
surprisingly given his most recent meditations on sex, “the act gave . . . no pleasure.” In
fact, “it seemed idiotic” and it did so precisely because it did not involve another person
and the promise of a glimpse of the “reality behind sex” and that union that “eludes us in
the very act of possession.”

Isherwood was unsettled by the experience on the beach, prompting him to return to the Center two days earlier than he had planned.\textsuperscript{58} In his diary entry of August 31, 1943, Isherwood reports that he “told Swami, vaguely, that I’d had trouble with sex, he smiled patted my head. ‘It’s a hard life,’ he said: ‘Just pray for strength. Pray to become pure.’ So there we are. I’ve got to become pure.”\textsuperscript{59} The resolution was easier to articulate than realize; in fact, Isherwood had discovered that he was constitutionally incapable of devoting himself to a life of celibacy; he needed the very kind of connection with other human beings that only sex could provide. In earnest, though, he worried over how to reconcile a life devoted to Vedanta with a life that was full of the “pleasures of the world.” In \textit{Guru}, he tells that by September of 1943, less than a month after returning from Santa Monica, he “was carrying out my monastic duties with a fair show of diligence—running errands, correcting the proofs of our magazine, and performing the ritual worship quite often. Then, on September 20, I went to lunch with the Viertels in Santa Monica and had another sex encounter on the beach. This time, it was neither absurd nor unreal; I simply met an attractive young man who wanted exactly what I did.” That encounter was immediately followed by another with a former lover who had traveled to California to bid farewell to his family and Isherwood alike before he shipped out to serve in the Army overseas. “I realized that he expected our goodbyes to be said in bed. Was I going to refuse him—knowing that we might never see each other again? Of course not.”\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{58} Parker dwells on the encounter at the beach as well, noting that it set in relief all that Isherwood had renounced in his pursuit of a monastic way of life: “The encounter with the swimmer, insignificant in itself, was the first serious breach in the wall Isherwood had built to surround and protect his spiritual intentions. It reminded him of the world he had give up to follow the paths of Vedanta.” Parker, \textit{Isherwood}, p. 452.

\textsuperscript{59} Isherwood, \textit{Diaries}, p. 313.

\textsuperscript{60} Isherwood, \textit{Guru}, p. 143.
In the spring of 1944, Isherwood reconnected with the “beautiful young man Denny had introduced me to in Santa Monica the previous August,” when he was on what would prove to be his life-altering break from the Center. Upon first meeting the man, whom he dubbed Alfred, Isherwood was gripped by lust:

Describing the scene later, I used to say that my first glimpse of him had hit me “like a shot from an elephant gun” and made me “grunt” with desire. When Denny and I were alone, I accused him of having maliciously introduced me to this beautiful temptation in order to seduce me away from the Vedanta Center. . . . I knew that this man’s image had been stamped upon my mind and would reappear at inconvenient moments, in the shrine room and elsewhere. It would be all the more disturbing because I realized already that he himself wasn’t unattainable.

During this period of sexual turbulence, Isherwood had been thrust into the presence of a “beautiful temptation” and was unsettled because on the one hand, his resolve to preserve his chastity was weakening, and on the other, Alfred was entirely available to Isherwood sexually. The stage was set for a sexual encounter when they reconnected in the spring of 1944; Isherwood had already broken his vow on more than one occasion and his thoughts on the connection between spirituality and sexuality had already become more nuanced.

At first, Isherwood pursued Alfred sexually. In time, he developed an emotional bond with him that he labeled love, but which in reality was something entirely different. “Alfred and I started seeing each other often, and soon I felt very much involved with him emotionally. This I called being in love with him, but it would have been truer to say that I identified him with my desire to escape from the Center; he embodied the joys of being on the Outside.” By the spring of 1944, Isherwood had resolved that he would not become a monk; the world “Outside” was too powerfully alluring to him. At the same time he refused to abandon Vedanta. He had found a system of belief that gave spiritual meaning to his life, and his bond with Swami was clearly one that would never be
broken. Thus, while he divided his time between worship and sex for the better part of 1944, between the “Center” and the “Outside,” he nonetheless struggled to bridge the two. In Vernon he saw an opportunity to reconcile the appeal of these two worlds. “At vespers, a sudden thought: a way of leaving this place without abandoning everything. Why couldn’t Vernon and I live together somewhere in the neighborhood, not too much involved in the Center but keeping all the rules? I must have a stricter check on my life than Swami. I needed someone like Vernon—someone who’d have a stake in my life, so my failures would be his failures, too.”

Vernon moved back to California from New York on August 12, 1944. Isherwood had written to him about Vedanta, and Vernon was interested, intent on studying the life of the Center from a proximate distance. When he arrived, he moved into “one of the rooms at Brahmananda Cottage. Then he moved into a tiny apartment near the Center” that Isherwood had rented in the hope of living there with Vernon, “not too much involved in the Center but keeping all the rules.” Neither Vernon nor Isherwood remained at the apartment long. “Old Mr. Kellog,” a wealthy disciple of Swami, donated a house in Montecito to the Vedanta Society of Southern California, and Swami decided that it would become the new home for the Center after the war. Vernon immediately accepted Swami’s invitation to live at Montecito as an initiate, and while Isherwood “didn’t want him to plunge into the family so quickly,” he “didn’t altogether realize how sold he [was] on Vedanta.” And so Isherwood resolved, “Why hesitate? We have to try it.”

Isherwood should have heeded his instinct to move cautiously. All began well, with Vernon taking to the spiritual regimen of the Center. On August 29, 1944,

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Isherwood noted in his diary that “Vernon came out of the temple to tell me that he’d had the best meditation of his whole life. It makes me so wonderfully happy, having him here.” The relationship between the two had seemed to have reformed “in less than a month” into an “entirely new relationship.” They were “like two different people” when, in fact, little had changed: “We still squabble; and Vernon still sulks.” And within little more than a month of Vernon’s return to California, Isherwood began to despair: “There is somehow a cloud between me and Vernon—so faint that I can’t define it. He isn’t exactly sulking, but he avoids talking to me and we aren’t gay. . . . Part of him actually hates me, I believe. Because I’m identified with the Vedanta Society, and the minority in him is already rebelling against it.” Having given over the majority of his life to spiritual devotion, Vernon was clearly struggling with the very dilemma that continued to trouble Isherwood—namely, the pull between the Center and the world, between the spirit and the flesh.  

In *My Guru*, Isherwood tells of the unraveling of his spiritual experiment with Vernon. “It now became increasingly obvious that everything was going wrong between Vernon and me,” he writes, reasoning that everything had moved too quickly. Rather than observing life at the Center from a distance for a period of time, Vernon had been immersed in that life from the start: “Swami immediately took control of him. . . . I didn’t even try to prevent it. . . . No wonder if Vernon had felt trapped.” In fact, the undoing of the experiment had more to do with Isherwood’s lingering sexual attraction to Vernon. “I was still strongly attracted to Vernon sexually. Therefore, I wanted to use him to neutralize my sex drive. As long as I had him with me and knew that he was getting no sex, I didn’t so much mind not getting any myself. . . . I also had a fantasy . . . of a

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63 Ibid., pp. 363, 372.
sublimated love affair between us. We would be monks for each other’s sake; this would be our way of loving each other.” Vernon figured out Isherwood’s motivation, and “it scared and repelled him.” From Vernon’s point of view, Isherwood was using monistic fealty “to make him remain with me.” Vernon rebelled, asking Isherwood to leave Montecito, which he did. 64 On November 11, 1944, Isherwood declared in his diary that “the Vernon experiment has failed.”65 And shortly after Isherwood’s permanent departure from Montecito, Vernon moved back to L.A., abandoning Vedanta and the monastic life altogether.

The end of 1944 found Isherwood still struggling and yet persistently hopeful that he could heed the call of the flesh and the call of the spirit alike. On December 31, 1944, he wrote in his diary, “Something has happened. Or rather, nothing has happened but I accept that nothing. Suddenly, I feel quite calm. Sure the situation is impossible. Sure, I ought to stop seeing X [Bill Harris], or leave Ivar Avenue, or both. . . . Nothing that is happening or may happen really prevents me from doing the one thing that ultimately matters. Make japam, watch and wait. . . . Stop trying to tidy up your life. Stop making vows—you’ll only break them. Less fussing and more faith.”66 The diary entry marks a significant turning point in Isherwood’s spiritual journey, recording as it does his complete resignation to the reality of “faith.” At first acknowledging the complexity of being human, pulled as we are by physical pleasure and spiritual impulse alike, Isherwood rejects once and for all the compartmentalization of body and spirit. Life joins the body and the spirit; Life forces the two to coexist, making it impossible “to tidy up your life.” Isherwood implies that renunciation of the body is impossible in a life of faith;

64 Isherwood, Guru, pp. 177–178.
65 Isherwood, Diaries, p. 375.
66 Ibid.
in fact, the human body and the physical world it inhabits are the very starting points for the spiritual quest for the Atman within. When trouble brews, when the demands of the body appear to be at odds with the demands of the spirit, prayer or making “japam” steadies the rudder, affirming as it does the central conviction in the life of faith—namely, that the Divine will prevail over all. The challenge: “watch and wait.”

Isherwood was no longer preoccupied with renouncing the physical world, nor would he be so ever again. In fact, the end of his monastic journey neared when he inserted himself anew into the film industry, accepting a job on February 21, 1945, at Warner Brothers as a script writer, a position he would hold until the end of September 1945. “The return to screenwriting was the beginning of the last phase of my stay at the Center. Up to that point, I had been a monastic despite my backslidings. Now I became a screenwriter who happened to be living in a monastery.” By 1945, Isherwood was no longer a monastic. True, he continued to make “japam”—as he would for the rest of his life—but, he “still managed to find time for quite a lot of play.”

VI

When the day came for Isherwood to leave the monastery in August of 1945, he was simply acting on a resolution he had made to himself months earlier, and he did so, not surprisingly, to pursue a relationship with a man seventeen years his junior. Unlike the sexual playmates with whom he had had “a lot of fun,” William Caskey promised more: “When I did finally move out of the Center . . . it was for a reason which had

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67 Isherwood, Guru, pp. 184–185. Isherwood lived away from the Center for nearly seven years before he declared definitively in his diary on May 12, 1952: “I don’t consider seriously for a moment the idea of becoming a monk again. I don’t consider anything except getting my novel done. My only worries are connected with money . . . and what is to be done with Sam Costidy.” Isherwood, Diaries, p. 446.
nothing to do with the Vedanta Society. I had recently met a man with whom I wanted to settle down and live in what I hoped could become a lasting relationship.  

Caskey awakened anew Isherwood’s yearning for domesticity, a feeling that had largely lain dormant since he had been separated from Heinz Neddermeyer on May 12, 1937.

The two set up house together, living first in the chauffeur’s apartment at the home being rented at the time by Isherwood’s close friends Alec Beesley and his wife Dodie Smith Beesley, the English writer whose most famous book is *The One Hundred and One Dalmatians*. Two months later, they moved into Denny Fouts’s apartment at 147 Entrada Drive in Santa Monica while Fouts was traveling in the East.  

My home life with Caskey was lively, noisy, drunken, sometimes full of laughter, sometimes quarrelsome, with head-on clashes of temperament. Caskey cooked well and loved to entertain. My only contribution to this was chiefly dishwashing—the only activity which linked me to my Quaker and Vedanta days. I couldn’t regard anything we were doing as evil. It could sometimes be called shocking, but that was only in the language of others, whose business it wasn’t. I was simply glad to be living out in the open at last, with no appearances to be kept up and no need for pretenses.

The arrangement was entirely satisfying to Isherwood because it allowed him to live an unconventional life in a conventional, domestic setting. In Caskey, he sought a “lasting relationship” that produced a “home life” filled with cooking, entertaining, and “dishwashing.” With Caskey, Isherwood could live as any other couple lived, with “no appearances to be kept up” and “no need for pretenses.”

However, Isherwood and Caskey were unlike conventional couples. Nothing that they did together could properly be labeled “evil,” but they were nonetheless “shocking.”

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To start, they were both men, living quite openly in Hollywood as a romantic and domestic couple at a time when few did so successfully. Moreover, they were not sexually monogamous, with each straying from the relationship increasingly as time wore on. In addition, they were notorious drinkers, and Caskey had a short fuse, often triggering “head-on clashes of temperament.” And finally, Caskey had decided to become a professional photographer, which meant that neither he nor Isherwood had structured professional schedules, leaving them both free to drink to excess with little regard for the morning-after hangover. For Isherwood, the period with Caskey was marked by sexual promiscuity and drunken rows, neither of which nurtured Isherwood’s writing.

In My Guru, Isherwood reports that in January 1947 he traveled to England for his “first postwar visit.” While there, he visited his mother and brother twice at Wyberslegh Hall, but spent the majority of his time in London, socializing with old friends, meeting new ones, and having sex with men other than Caskey. “He stayed a night with his old boyfriend, Jackie Hewit, and he also renewed other once romantic friendships.” On April 18, 1947, he set sail aboard the Queen Elizabeth to return to the United States, and while traveling, he “befriended” John Holmes. On April 25, 1947, he docked in New York where Caskey was waiting for him and where the two had decided to try to live for a period of time. The two remained in New York for five months, dividing much of the summer between Fire Island, Montauk, Nantucket, and Provincetown. Nonetheless, “it wasn’t long before New York had convinced us both that it wasn’t for us.” Isherwood consequently accepted his publisher’s offer to write a travel diary about South America.

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71 Isherwood, Diaries, pp. 384–385.
72 Isherwood, Guru, p. 193.
On September 19, 1947, he and Caskey “sailed at midday on the *Santa Paula* for South America.”

They docked later in the month at La Guaira, Venezuela. From there they went to Cartagena, Colombia, traveling through Bogota and stopping along the way until they reached Quito in Ecuador. In Peru, they stopped in Lima, Machu Picchu, and Lake Titicaca. Their travels then took them “across the southwest corner of Bolivia by way of La Paz and south again through Argentina to Buenos Aires.” The journey through South America ended in March of 1948 and resulted in *The Condor and the Cows*, the travel diary written by Isherwood and illustrated with Caskey’s photographs.

From Buenos Aires, Isherwood and Caskey sailed to Europe, docking at Le Havre, France, on March 22, 1948. As Katherine Bucknell points out in her editorial notes to Isherwood’s *Diaries*, “The next few years with Caskey—1948 to 1951—were to be increasingly confused and unhappy.” The two journeyed first to Paris, where they stayed for a week and visited Denny Fouts for what would prove to be the last time Isherwood would see him. Fouts was in grim shape by that time, though he was not disagreeable:

Denny was then smoking opium whenever he could afford to. When he couldn’t, he had to content himself with a kind of tea brewed from the dross out of his opium pipe; from this he got small pleasure and violent stomach cramps. He didn’t give the impression of being depressed or debauched or down-at-heel, however. He was dressed with extreme elegance when he came to have dinner with us at a restaurant—or rather, to watch us eat. He did so with an air of controlled distaste, as though our addiction to solid food were a far more squalid vice than his. Now and then, his manner became a trifle vague, but his wit was as sharp as ever.”

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73 Isherwood, *Diaries*, p. 386.
74 Ibid., p. 393.
With only his “wit” intact, Fouts had dissolved into a drug addict, brewing an opiate tea “from the dross” of his pipe and turning up his nose at “solid food.” Isherwood and Caskey left Fouts behind and in the late spring and early summer of 1948 the two traveled in England, and while the time they passed together was stimulating and pleasant enough, the experience and the memories of the trip would do little or nothing to sustain them during the difficult times that followed.

In July 1948, Isherwood and Caskey sailed for New York, where Caskey stayed behind, while Isherwood went on to L.A. to work on the screenplay for *The Great Sinner*, which was being made by MGM. As Bucknell points out, Isherwood “had begun to spend time with Jim Charlton, with whom he found he could be exceedingly happy.” Nevertheless, when Caskey came to L.A. in late September, Isherwood and he resumed their domestic relationship, moving into “a little house together on East Rustic Road.”

Isherwood continued to see Charlton intermittently, but even these interludes did little or nothing to alleviate the strain in his relationship with Caskey or to temper the disappointments that awaited him at the end of the year. In his diary entry of November 6, 1948, Isherwood records that he “had to drag himself to Vernon’s wedding with Patty O’Neill.” And on December 16, 1948, Denny Fouts died “almost instantly, of a heart attack, in Rome.” The marriage of Vernon and the death of Denny sealed off an early and meaningful chapter in Isherwood’s American life.

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Isherwood, *Diaries*, pp. 387, 934. Bucknell speaks of Charlton in greater detail in her glossary to the *Diaries*. Charlton was an American architect who had been “trained at Frank Lloyd Wright’s other center, Tiliesin, in Wisconsin. . . . Isherwood was introduced to him by the Masselinks in August 1948, and they established a friendly-romantic attachment that lasted intermittently through a number of years during which each had various lovers. Towards the end of the 1950s Charlton married a wealthy Swiss woman called Hilda, a mother of three, and had a son with her in September 1958. The marriage ended in divorce. Afterwards he lived in Hawaii until the late 1980s, and he wrote an autobiographical novel called St. Mick. Charlton was a model for Bob Wood in ‘The World in the Evening.’”

Ibid., p. 407.
The diary entries of 1949–1951 tell of Isherwood’s struggle to maintain a relationship with Caskey. Isherwood wrote infrequently in his diary in 1949, but the entries that were written center on Caskey. The year opens with an entry dated February 20, 1949, in which Isherwood resolves that he will make “an attempt at a new deal. It is absolutely useless and self-destructive to get mad at Caskey about his all-night record playing. Never mind why he does it, either. I must simply take precautions and try to stay away whenever a party of this kind seems to be forming.” In choosing to avoid that which annoys him about Caskey, Isherwood adopts a strategy for coping with his irksome daily habits, but rather than bringing them closer together, the strategy separates the two. Hence, it is not at all surprising that by March, Isherwood discovered that the “new deal” didn’t work: “Caskey went out late, and we had another mild scene about the record playing in the middle of the night. He absolutely cannot understand why I mind being kept awake. And I absolutely cannot understand how he can keep me awake, even if he doesn’t understand why.”

Isherwood and Caskey were moving in the direction of an inevitable and final split. Nonetheless, for the moment Isherwood resolved to put up with Caskey and stick it out, frightened—perhaps terrified—as he was by the prospect of living alone. By mid-May 1949, Isherwood was in “a strange condition . . . and verging on some kind of a nervous breakdown.” His feelings of resentment resembled those he had felt toward Vernon nearly ten years earlier:

Now Caskey is the victim. And, of course, I have built up a rational case against him as well-documented as the prosecution’s case in the Nuremberg Trials. He is lazy. He won’t earn money. He won’t even try to draw his pension. He stays out late. He is cold, bitchy, selfish, etc. etc. I rehearse bits of this great accusation as I lie in bed in the morning, until it seems as if my thoughts would wake him up, they are so loud. Sometimes,
I actually tell him what I am thinking—but I never do this the right way: either I’m cold and spiteful, or I shout and thump my fist. . . . Well—there are two alternatives: either I leave Caskey, or I don’t. Leaving Caskey—quite aside from being terribly painful—wouldn’t really solve anything. Unless there were someone else to go to—which there isn’t. Or unless I were prepared to return to Ivar Avenue—which I’m not. Therefore we have to stay together.

At this juncture, “leaving Caskey” outright was not an option for Isherwood. He needed to establish himself in a single, structured space, be it a domestic setting (“someone else to go to”) or a spiritual center (“Ivar Avenue”). Moreover, Isherwood appears to have grown increasingly incapable of connecting these two spaces; for him, life divided into poles, the sacred and the profane, and he was perfectly happy to live in the world of the flesh almost exclusively for a bit longer.78

Thus, as 1949 wore on and life with Caskey deteriorated even further, Isherwood found comfort and reassurance in the bed of Jimmy Charlton rather than in the shrine at the Center. On November 8, 1949, Isherwood returned to his diary and reported, “I don’t think I can ever remember having been so idle, dull, resentful and unhappy. . . . My life with Bill has reached such a point of emotional bankruptcy that he is leaving, by mutual consent, in a day or two to hitchhike to Florida to see his sister.” When Caskey did leave a few days later, Isherwood was relieved though he was also “somewhat dumb and dazed. I only want to sleep—although I slept nearly ten hours at Jimmy [Charlton]’s last night: it was so wonderfully peaceful, we just dozed off after supper and only woke long enough at 3:00 a.m. to get into bed.”79 In addition to Charlton, there were other sexual playmates

78 Ibid., p. 411.
79 Ibid., pp. 415–416. In the reconstructed diaries, Isherwood recalls the day that Caskey left. “Caskey left on November 11. I can’t remember any details of a parting scene; no doubt it all happened very quietly. What I do remember is that that night, after Christopher had returned from a party and gone to bed, he was awakened out of a doze by Jim Charlton. Jim came bounding up the stairs in the darkness, stripping off his clothes, and jumped naked upon Christopher, panting and laughing. Christopher was amused, sexually
during this period. Don Coombs entered Isherwood’s life on December 9, 1949. An English teacher at UCLA, “Coombs was a pretty blond with big lips. . . . He was lively and shameless and he loved to be fucked. He had big firm, hotly inviting buttocks.” On December 17, 1949, Isherwood met Michael Leopold, whom he added to his collection of young sex partners. “Michael was then about eighteen; a Jewboy with thinning hair. . . . He was intelligent, ardently literary, a tireless talker and sex partner.” Michael very much wanted to become a literary protégé of Isherwood, though Isherwood valued him chiefly for his talents in bed: “It was easy to love Michael in bed, he enjoyed himself so heartily, he gave his body so completely to the experience—kissing, wrestling, rimming, sucking, being fucked and fucking with equal abandon.” While Isherwood’s use of language to describe these two relationships is deliberately graphic and so intended to shock his contemporary readers of the 1970s, it is also used to convey a sense of the sexual fervor that preoccupied him during the late 1940s and early 1950s and that was an antidote to the spiritual zeal of the early 1940s. By 1950, Isherwood’s world was as polarized as it would ever become and his devotion to the pleasures of the flesh, inspired at first by Caskey, was now all-consuming.

For 1950 there are only fifteen entries in Isherwood’s Diaries, none of which reveal his abiding preoccupations of the year: sex and booze. The reconstructed diaries, on the other hand, offer graphic accounts of time spent with a number of different sex

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81 In her introduction to *Lost Years*, Katherine Bucknell observes that “During the war years, when Isherwood lived among the Quakers and refugees in Haverford, Pennsylvania, and later when he tried to become a Hindu monk, he kept his sexuality quarantined from his everyday life. In Haverford he had concealed it; as an aspiring monk at the Vedanta Center he had tired during months of celibacy to rise above it. But once he fell in love with Caskey, everything changed; for a time he allowed his sexuality to shape his life as a whole.” Isherwood, *Lost Years*, p. xvii.
partners, including recurring playmates Mike Leopold, Don Coombs, Rus Zeininger, and Peter Darms. August 1950 marked the beginning of “a social, sexy period, during which Christopher enjoyed himself a good deal.” His occasional partners included Brad Saurin and the composer Barry Taxman as well as pseudonymously named Keith Carstairs, Bertrand Cambus, Donald Pell, and Mitchell Streeter. Oddly, August found Isherwood spending little time with Caskey; their relationship was clearly in freefall.

On August 11, 1950, Isherwood left L.A. to travel to New Mexico with Peggy Kiskadden to visit Kiskadden’s friend Georgia O’Keeffe. Caskey headed off to Baja, California, to spend time with friends. En route, Isherwood and Kiskadden spent the evening with Bob and Mary Kittredge at their home in Oak Creek Canyon, Arizona, where Jimmy Charlton was also staying on “a secular-monastic ‘retreat’ from his life in Los Angles.” Isherwood reportedly did not sleep with Charlton that night, though Isherwood recalls in the reconstructed diaries that “Jim was cockteasing Christopher outrageously. And the cockteasing was most effective, for Christopher found himself getting an absurdly violent crush on Jim, all over again.” The next morning Isherwood and Kiskadden set out for New Mexico, driving through Santa Fe to Abiquiu, where O’Keeffe’s home was located. Isherwood reports that he and O’Keeffe were “natural enemies from the moment they met,” in large part because she was “an archfeminist, a pioneer women’s libber.” Nonetheless, Isherwood settled into life at O’Keeffe’s home, which “represented a way of life you just had to adopt as long as you were living in it.” Over the ten-day visit, Isherwood was compliant, doing O’Keeffe’s bidding. He commented on the art work O’Keeffe showed him, including “a couple of hundred classical Japanese paintings of bamboo” and the photographs of Alfred Stieglitz,

O’Keeffe’s dead husband. He traveled to O’Keeffe’s ranch, visited the Indian cliff dwelling at Puye, and drove to Taos to visit friends of O’Keefe. When he and Kiskadden departed Abiquiu on August 21, 1950, they did so not expecting what they would find waiting for them at the East Rustic Road house that Isherwood shared with Caskey.83

Isherwood arrived home on August 22, 1950, to find “a wild mess. But what made this mess special and a bit spooky was its antique appearance. There were spider’s webs on some of the glasses and drowned insects in others.” Clearly, Isherwood deduced, Caskey had decided to have a party before departing for Baja and had neither cleaned up nor arrived home before Isherwood returned from New Mexico. The next day, he learned the truth in a letter from Caskey that had been “written from the Santa Ana jail.” After the party on August 11, 1950, a drunk Caskey was driving to San Diego when he was arrested in San Clemente. Brought before a judge, he was offered a fine, but Caskey refused, and the judge sentenced him to three months in jail. Isherwood visited Caskey in jail on August 26, 1950, and pleaded with him to appeal the unduly harsh sentence with the aid of a lawyer. Caskey refused: “He was so vehement about this that Christopher finally gave way. By then, it had become obvious that Caskey actually wanted to stay in jail and serve out his sentence. His Catholic conscience imposed this penance, to some extent; he felt that it was time for him to be punished for his drunkenness.” Isherwood acquiesced to Caskey’s wishes and promised to visit him on a weekly basis.84

Initially alarmed by Caskey’s incarceration, Isherwood was, in fact, relieved to have him out of the way: “Though Christopher didn’t admit this to any of his friends, he felt a great a great deal of relief. The Caskey problem was shelved for at least two

83 Ibid., pp. 249–256.
84 Ibid., pp. 256–257.
months.”85 The very man with whom Isherwood had hoped only five years earlier he would “settle down and live in . . . a lasting relationship” had become “the Caskey problem.” Thus, when Isherwood returned from his August 26 visit to the jail, he celebrated his birthday by spending the night with Mike Leopold. In fact, Caskey’s confinement triggered the very “social, sexy period” in Isherwood’s life, marked by promiscuity and ever-present drink. Isherwood was clearly disinclined to take on and solve “the Caskey problem.”

Caskey was released from jail on October 27, 1950, and the two resumed their life together, though neither was monogamous.86 Mired in “misery-sloth induced by the Korean War and the gradual breakdown of my relationship with Caskey,” Isherwood convinced himself and Caskey that the “breakdown” had been brought about by “the pressures of life in Los Angeles.” Thus, they moved to Laguna Beach, hoping to revive their relationship. By December of 1950, though, Isherwood had become wistful; their new home held the promise of new possibilities that would never be realized: “I know that he means to make this ‘a new start,’ though we don’t discuss it much, and I’m eager

85 Ibid., p. 258.
86 Ibid., pp. 275–286. The reconstructed diaries tell of multiple sex partners for both Isherwood and Caskey. On March 25, 1951, Isherwood reports that he topped Lennie Newman in a bed adjacent to another bed in which a drunk Caskey slept. In fact, Lennie “was the companion whom Caskey usually chose when he wanted to get away from Christopher and go off on a binge.” Isherwood reports in the reconstructed diaries that “Lennie was a marvelous lay. . . . As a fuckee, he couldn’t have been less passive. . . . He had developed such control of his sphincter muscle that he could massage and milk his partner’s cock most excitingly.” The technique is one that Isherwood used a short time later when being topped by Jim Charlton, who while visiting Isherwood and Caskey in Laguna came into the pair’s bedroom and carried Isherwood away in his arms while Caskey slept. As Isherwood submitted to Charlton, he “began flexing and unflexing his sphincter muscle in imitation of Lennie Newman. It was an amateur performance but it impressed Jim. ‘Where did you learn that whore trick, for Christ’s sake?’ he growled. The fuck was a huge success.” The diaries refer to Caskey’s “nights at Camp Pendleton” and of “various acquaintances and sex mates (of Caskey chiefly).” They “came by for drinks or meals or to stay the night. The nicest of the sex mates was a herculean boy,” whose name has been redacted from the reconstructed diaries. The boy was a “navy frogman, stationed at San Diego, who had been over to Korea several times. . . . His way of introducing himself to you was to get you into bed with him. When he came to the house he went to bed with Bill, Christopher and any of their guests who were available; and he made them all love him a little.”
to meet him three quarters of the way. Sometimes I begin to venture to say to myself that maybe we have passed some kind of danger point and are now on our way to better times. But that’s still wishful thinking. I do know that if it were true, and if the political situation improves, and if we can get enough money to live on, this might be the start of one of the happiest periods of my life. In the end, it was not; the two “soon began to jar upon each other again,” and by the beginning of 1951, it was clear to both parties that the relationship was ending.  

Booze and sex played predominant roles in the couple’s life at Laguna Beach, no doubt hastening the deterioration of what was left of their domestic arrangement. In April 1951 Caskey brought everything to a head with his declaration: “I’m not in love with you anymore. I’ve been in love with you for a long time, but now it’s over.” The feeling was mutual, as Christopher admits in the reconstructed diaries: “Christopher, at the time, really rather hated Caskey but he wouldn’t admit to it.” With concessions from both sides, Isherwood was free to move on, and he did; quite simply, “life with Billy had become unbearable.”  

For Isherwood, the period from 1940 to 1951 was marked by two experiments, one monastic, the other domestic. Both failed. On the one hand, Isherwood found it constitutionally impossible to devote himself exclusively to life at the shrine, cut off from the world and denied the pleasures of the flesh. On the other, Isherwood failed to create a

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88 Isherwood, *The Lost Years*, p. 281; *Diaries*, Vol. 1, p. 436. In the reconstructed diary, Isherwood reasons that Caskey never stopped loving him, but rather he allows that Caskey “no longer felt romantically toward Christopher.” The declaration was intended to stir Christopher: “He wanted Christopher to admit, now, that he wasn’t any longer in love with Caskey. I don’t believe he made this declaration in order to cause a permanent break between them, or even to stop Christopher wanting to have sex with him now and then. Caskey, as he later proved, continued to want to have sex with Christopher when he was in the mood. Quite possibly, however, Caskey was beginning to feel that he would like to get right away from Christopher for a longish spell (Not long after they split up, he decided to go to sea.) After that, he was ready to resume a loving friendship, unromantic but occasionally sexual, for the rest of their natural lives.”
human relationship that could satisfy him both domestically and sexually. In many respects, throughout the better part of the decade Isherwood was living at one extreme or the other, entirely devoted to the sacred or hopelessly mired in the flesh. Moreover, he was never fully satisfied. When he broke with Caskey, he reflected back on the period and discovered the need for a middle ground, so to speak. In a diary entry dated August 29, 1951, he records that “there must be no more categorical relationships, as far as I’m concerned. I believe that’s what went wrong between Caskey and me, and the Center and me—trying to ensure permanence by getting yourself involved, that’s no good. No good saying, ‘Now I’m married’ or ‘Now I’m a monk,’ and therefore I’m committed.”

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CHAPTER 3

Isherwood’s final novel, *A Meeting by the River*, was published in 1967, twenty-one years before his death. The novel is brief; the storyline is deceptively straightforward. In a letter from Oliver to Patrick, the reader is introduced to two English brothers. Oliver writes from Calcutta, where he lives “in a Hindu monastery a few miles outside the city, on the bank of the Ganges.” Patrick is “in the United States on business,” working on a film project in Los Angeles. Oliver has learned from his mother that Patrick plans to travel to East Asia. His letter is intended, on the one hand, to preempt a visit to the monastery from Patrick and, on the other, to disclose the truth about his life in order to prepare Patrick in case the two should nonetheless meet. Quite simply, Patrick learns that Oliver is living as a monk and plans to take his “final vows” (*sannyas*) within the next two months.¹

In subsequent letters and journal entries, the novel unfolds. Patrick does travel to Calcutta, where he visits Oliver at the monastery and stays with him through his final initiation. Patrick writes to his mother, reassuring her that Oliver is in good health and well fed, all the while putting a picturesque spin on India and the condition in which he finds Oliver. Patrick also writes to his wife Penelope, and his letters to her appear more candid, disclosing as they do Patrick’s suspicions about Oliver’s chosen path. And

finally, Patrick writes to Tom, a young man back in Los Angeles with whom he is having a passionate sexual affair. For his part, Oliver keeps a journal in which he meditates throughout upon Patrick’s intrusive visit as well as their fraternal relationship, his former and perhaps still abiding love for Penelope, and his present and future life as a monk.

From this easy narrative emerges a novel of dazzling complexity, one that probes clearly the very moral challenges Isherwood confronted only vaguely in the period from 1940 to 1951. Then, his world divided into polar opposites: Swami vs. Casky, sacred vs. profane, abstinence vs. overindulgence. In many respects, he lived in the extreme only to discover his personal need to repudiate “categorical relationships” and to discover instead a way of living that incorporated his yearning for the divine with his passion for all that is human. Vedanta Hinduism provided him with a philosophical framework within which he could do just that—namely, construct a life of meaning. *A Meeting by the River* examines that framework and reveals that while Vedanta nourishes the spiritual quest for Truth present in the lives of some, it nonetheless endorses an ethical system that can justify good and evil in equal measure. Phrased differently, *A Meeting by the River* reflects on Isherwood’s embrace of Vedanta and his discovery that on the very margin of the American religious landscape where he sought Truth and peace, he discovered the potential for deceit and calamity.

I

Apart from Carolyn Heilbrun, who in 1970 declared “Isherwood’s most recent novel, *A Meeting by the River* (1967), a failure, an attempt to use insufficiently digested material gathered on a visit to a monastery in India,”^2^ the few scholars who write about the novel regard it highly, reading it as a thinly veiled autobiographical account of

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^2^ Heilbrun, *Christopher Isherwood*, p. 44.
Isherwood’s spiritual quest that culminated in his commitment to the teachings of Vedanta. Indeed, the novel can be read as a conversion narrative; it tells of Oliver’s journey to becoming a monk and of Patrick’s break—albeit temporary—from the Western world and his preoccupation with material prosperity. According to Claude Summers, “In its fascinating account of two brothers, apparently polar opposites in temperament and belief, who finally reveal their essential similarity, the novel explores two convergent paths to the goal of self-knowledge and finds an ideal of brotherhood essential to both. . . . It affirms the Vedantic road to enlightenment.” In fact, the novel examines the premise central to Vedanta and first explained to Isherwood by Swami

3 Summers, Christopher Isherwood, p. 122.

In his 1978 study entitled Christopher Isherwood: Myth and Anti-Myth, Paul Piazza notes that in the novel “two brothers hold another ‘dialogue’ which is vividly reported through the book’s epistolary format. The sparks struck by the clashing diary entries of Oliver, preparing to take vows in a Hindu monastery, and the letters of Patrick, his entrepreneur brother, kindle the reader’s awareness of the suprasensible. Here both brothers seek religious experience. Oliver deliberately and Patrick unwittingly.” And he continues: “What begins in a dispute ends in a fraternal dialogue as Isherwood deftly manipulates the double viewpoints to fulfill his chief requirements for a religious novel. He makes his saints-to-be very much like Messrs. Jones, Smith, and Brown. More important, Isherwood surpasses his own expectations, for the novel’s thrust is that both Oliver and Patrick are incipient saints, brothers in the deeper sense that both are seeking sanctity.” Piazza, Christopher Isherwood, pp. 150–151, 162.

David Garrett Izzo approaches the novel as a metaphor for conversion as well: “The real story is not about two brothers at all; the tale of Oliver and Patrick functions primarily as a symbolic parable. Isherwood was deeply cognizant of the duality within individuals. In Meeting by the River the conflict between the ostensible brothers is really between the two halves of Isherwood’s self during his trip to India: saint versus sinner.” In fact, according to Izzo, “Through Oliver, Isherwood is also asserting the sincerity of his faith” and the power of that faith to reconcile the opposing pull of the spirit and the flesh: “Oliver takes his vows with a somewhat chastened Patrick as proud witness. The ostensible brothers—saint and sinner—have come to a truce with the transcendent aid of Oliver’s Swami. The actual Isherwood’s soul and body had already come to this truce.” What separates Izzo’s reading from that of his predecessors, though, is his assertion—shared with Colin Wilson—that the novel is not in the end a celebration of religion, but rather a celebration of humanity and its capacity to integrate the spirit and the flesh: “The idea for the novel had come from his conflicted Indian trip in 1963, but it was written later while he was making the transition to his more even-tempered Self. Colin Wilson wrote . . . ‘Its ending carries deep conviction. . . . [It] seems a triumph of decency and common sense more than religion—and this is surely Isherwood’s point. He is not suggesting that the answer to human misery and stupidity lies in sainthood or mysticism—only in decency and common sense, and also a certain optimism. For this is the thing that comes over most clearly from A Single Man and A Meeting by the River, that Isherwood’s integrity is born of hope.’ And while I disagree with this reading of the novel as well as the assertion that hope gives rise to a kind of ethical fortitude for Isherwood, as I will argue in this chapter, it is Izzo who steered me in the direction of a more secular reading of A Meeting by the River. Izzo, Christopher Isherwood, pp. 242, 244, and 246.
Prabhavanada, that “all religions are essentially in agreement” because they all lead to “enlightenment” or the discovery of Truth.\(^4\) The paths are many; Truth is one.

In this reading of the novel, Oliver’s conversion is at the heart of the story. His eight journal entries tell of the struggles he confronts in the final days leading up to his taking of sannyas at the same time that they serve as a medium for self-reflection and spiritual affirmation. In addition, the entries record what Oliver perceives as Patrick’s journey toward enlightenment or self-awareness.

Central to the teaching of Vedanta is the “ideal of moksa, or man’s release from his involvement in the phenomenal world and the realization by him of the identity of his essential self with the cosmic reality.”\(^5\) Realizing the “ideal of moksa” is the endpoint of Oliver’s spiritual journey. For Oliver, removal to the monastery in India is an attempt to seal himself off from the West and all that it represents: material prosperity and physical well-being. Accordingly, Patrick’s request to visit the monastery is unsettling and threatening; it represents an intrusion by all that Oliver is struggling to leave behind.

“The truth is,” Oliver writes in his first diary entry, “that I’m unspeakably humiliated and shocked to discover that I, who am supposed to be spiritually advanced to the level at which I can take sannyas, still feel these primitive spasms of sheer hatred toward my own brother! That stabs my ego in the very heart of its vanity. It was already beginning to pose in its swami’s robes and admire itself as a budding saint. Now it gets a glimpse of its unchanged unregenerate vicious monkey-face, and it’s shocked.”\(^6\)

Patrick’s visit revives Oliver’s ego. It brings to the surface the primal emotions that brand Oliver as quintessentially human (“unregenerate vicious monkey-face”). He

\(^4\) Parker, *Isherwood*, p. 386.
\(^6\) Isherwood, *Meeting*, p. 35.
resents his elder brother’s teasing: “It’s obvious to me now that he was just playing with me, as he always used to. He hasn’t changed a bit. . . . All the same, quite unreasonably, I can’t help feeling furious with him.” He sneers at his elder brother’s attempt to stir him with maternal guilt: “He’s still playing all his old tricks, including that blackmailing sobstuff about Mother. Not that that in itself makes me angry any more, he’s so obviously just trying to get a rise out of me.” Hoping to distance himself from his mother and eventually separate from her altogether, he is clearly grasping at straws when he muses that “actually Mother can’t possibly care much about me now. She must be forgetting me already, which is as it should be and as I want it to be. She only needs to keep being reassured that I’m all right, so she can comfortably dismiss me from her mind for longer and longer periods. That’s what old ladies are like, and why be sentimental and lie about it? If Mother really cares for anything now I’m sure it’s her cats and her grandchildren, in that order.” And finally, he is rattled to the point of being undone as he confronts the reality that he is jealous of Patrick because he still harbors feelings for his brother’s wife, with whom he may have had an affair: “There was a lie, or at least an evasion, in what I wrote to Patrick. It wasn’t because of him that I didn’t visit them in England, it was because of Penny. I was afraid to see her then. I didn’t trust myself. . . . All right, perhaps I am still a bit in love with her.”

Patrick, in short, forces Oliver to acknowledge his ego and to focus on the essential challenge of Vedanta, the mortification of that ego:

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 ought to have learned by this time, after all Swami’s teaching and training, to live with this monkey and refuse resolutely to be impressed or shocked by its postures and greeds and rages. Its whole effort

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7 Ibid., pp. 34–35.
is directed toward making me identify myself with it, when I know perfectly well that I ought to be continually dissociating myself from it, calmly and firmly and with complete good humor—if you get angry with it, you identify automatically. That’s what self-discipline means. The monkey must be made to face its ugliness again and again. That’s why I should keep on with this diary and even write it in more detail than usual throughout these next weeks, being as frank as I can. It’s absolutely necessary to bring everything out into the open at last, in the little time I have left before sannyas.8

Oliver’s reasoning is straightforward. The ego is the core of his worldly self—“the Oliver in me”—and that which makes him human—“a vain little monkey.” It stirs the emotions and impedes the realization of \textit{moksa}—“if you get angry with it, you identify automatically.” Only through “self-discipline” and the steady refusal to be stirred by the ego will Oliver be able to separate from his particular self as well as the physical world at large and discover the universal truth that is absolute and without boundary.

The task before him in “the little time . . . left before sannyas” is “to bring everything out into the open at last”; he must welcome Patrick to the monastery and use his visit to confront his humanity face to face in ways that he has failed to do thus far so that he can finally dissociate from his ego. “Patrick must come here, and I must face him and our relationship. I must accept him with all his arts and tricks, all the good, all the bad, everything. What’s the use of me, if I can’t pass this test? What kind of a swami am I going to be.”9 For Oliver, Patrick is more than a simple manifestation of the western world and its regard for the material: “all his art and tricks.” Rather, Patrick calls forth all that is fundamentally human: “all the good; all the bad, everything.” He stirs a range of emotions in Oliver—hate, rage, envy, jealousy, lust, and even love—and the subsequent journal entries reveal Oliver’s struggle to defuse these emotions by confronting them—

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8 Ibid., p. 36.
9 Ibid., p. 37.
“the monkey must be made to face its ugliness again and again”—so that he can ultimately separate from the material world.

Anticipating Patrick’s arrival, Oliver is thrown into a spiritual maelstrom. In his second diary entry, composed the day before Patrick is to arrive in India, he reports that he “went into the Temple extra early, I must have been there three hours at least. In the state I was in, it was impossible to meditate. . . . I tried to offer the whole situation up and say, Your will, not mine. But all the filth out of the past kept backing up on me, like a choked sewer, it was foul beyond words. I felt I could remember every single grudge I’ve ever harboured against Patrick . . . and I still hated him for all of them.” Patrick is lost. He is mired in the human, preoccupied by “filth out the of the past,” “every single grudge,” and hatred; he is nothing but a “choked sewer.” Adrift, Oliver seeks spiritual refuge, but he does so reflexively in the Western tradition; his rhetoric is decidedly Christian: “I tried to offer the whole situation up”; “Your will, not mine.” Anticipation of Patrick’s arrival has unsettled Oliver completely: “There was such a storm going on inside my head it seemed strange the other people in the Temple couldn’t hear it.”

Oliver does manage to calm himself, though, when he recalls Swami and, in so doing, returns to the Eastern tradition he has chosen. Three thoughts quiet him: (1) “I have known a man who said he knew that God exists”; (2) “I’m able to say that I believe (nearly all the time) that he really did know. I also believe in the possibility of my having the kind of experience which gave him that knowledge”; and (3) “That man chose me for his disciple. I may be poisoned with hatred and half mad, but nevertheless I’m his disciple.” When Oliver speaks of God he does so in decidedly Eastern terms; God is not a being, but rather a synonym for Truth that is absolute and without boundary. Swami has

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10 Ibid., p. 51.
glimpsed that Truth and reassured Oliver that he too may one day do the same. He has chosen Oliver to be his disciple. And the relationship between guru and disciple is permanent and enduring: “Don’t you know the Guru can never run away from his disciple, not even if he wants to, not in this life, not in any other!” The relationship reassures Oliver; the love and encouragement of the Guru will be steady and constant. Moksa is attainable.\textsuperscript{11}

Yet, the road leading to release from the phenomenal world is neither straight nor smooth. The journal entry concludes: “\textit{Later.} The storm is on again, and now I don’t feel sure of anything. I feel I don’t know what I believe, or why I’m here in this Monastery. Perhaps I have gone mad. Perhaps Swami was somehow deluding himself. Perhaps he is quite dead and doesn’t exist anywhere. Perhaps all those millions of people are right, who say that there’s no God and that life has no meaning. Why should they be the insane ones? They are the majority.”\textsuperscript{12} Doubt battles with belief. Nothing is certain and everything is “perhaps.” Oliver wavers. He believes “(nearly all of the time)” and he is pulled between the spiritual (Swami) and phenomenal (Patrick). In the face of that calamity, Oliver perseveres, sure of one thing: the Guru is always with him.

Patrick’s arrival in India proves as unsettling as Oliver had feared. When he received Patrick’s first letter announcing that he would visit him in India, Oliver was duped: “Patrick’s first letter fooled me completely to begin with, because it worked on my guilty conscience. I was ashamed of my silly childish secretiveness. I wanted him to tell me he understood perfectly what made me behave like that, and then assume the responsibility for putting everything right again, like a true Elder Brother. So, I accepted

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., pp. 52–53.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 53.
what he wrote at its face value and believed what I wanted to believe.” Patrick’s first letter seduced Oliver into believing that Patrick cared for him and understood his motives for becoming a monk by virtue of the simple fact that Patrick is “a true Elder Brother.” The arrival of Patrick’s next letter, though, dispels Oliver’s illusions: “But the second letter shows the first one up. It’s obvious to me now that he was just playing with me, as he always used to. He hasn’t changed a bit.”

As feared, the Patrick who stepped off the plane is the Patrick whom Oliver expected. In the third diary entry, Oliver observes, “He hasn’t really changed. I was right about that. I knew it before we’d even left the airport. But he is more everything. He has more assurance. He’s slyer. He’s more on his guard. Also, he’s much more tired.” Patrick is confident, cautious, and clever; he has mastered the skills needed to succeed in the world of business, the world of the West. And he uses these skills to considerable effect. He is “tired” and yet he is still engaging:

I’d forgotten how powerfully charming he is. Even when you know all his tricks, he can still charm you. Anyone would have to admit that he looks marvelously young for his age. That black floppy hair with hardly any grey in it, those bright clear eyes with only the tiniest wrinkles showing white against his tan, those firm brown cheeks only slightly too heavy, and those beautiful teeth—they must certainly have had something done to them since I saw them last, they’re unnaturally regular. Perhaps one of the dentists in Los Angeles put crowns on them. That’s what they do to movie stars, and Patrick is a kind of star, he’s fighting middle-age just as they do.

Patrick is surface appearance. Like his teeth, he is neither authentic nor real. He has “black floppy hair” and “bright clear eyes” that show little or no sign of aging. Hints of growing older—“the tiniest wrinkles”—vanish when set alongside a robust physique—“firm brown cheeks.” Patrick, in short, represents the phenomenal world at its finest, and

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13 Ibid., pp. 33–34.
14 Ibid., p. 69.
like that world he is pure *maya*, a cunning illusion with the power to deceive: “Even when you know all his tricks, he can still charm you.”

Patrick is a seductive distraction who delights in his coercive power over Oliver. In fact, he deliberately and abruptly yanks Oliver back into the phenomenal world, stirring feelings in him that are primal and incestuous. On the morning after Patrick’s arrival at the monastery, Oliver went to visit him in the guest house, and as he neared, he heard Patrick “moving about inside the room.” Patrick summoned him to enter and when he did, Oliver “found him stark naked” and exercising:

He proceeded to do a lot of pushups, forty at least, and then about a dozen jumps, raising his arms and landing with his feet apart, then jumping to bring them together again. He did these jumps very deliberately, facing me and grinning at me, with his teeth looking whiter than ever in his flushed brown face. And I couldn’t help being aware of his rather big penis slapping against his bare thigh as he jumped. Patrick always had a beautiful body and it is still in perfect shape, he must exercise all the time. You can tell that he’s been lying in the sun completely nude. He’s dark brown all over, with only the faintest trace to show the part the swimming-trunks have covered. I was embarrassed and wanted to look away. But Patrick was grinning at me as if he was challenging me to admit that I felt awkward about looking at him, so I had to go on doing it. And I knew that he was sort of testing me—to see if I’d risen above the flesh, I suppose, and was so pure I wouldn’t even notice if he was naked or not! It would have been ridiculous if it hadn’t been rather obscene. God, he is just like a woman, sometimes! It was like some corny scene in an old Russian novel, where the woman tempts the young monk. I wanted to laugh out loud but I couldn’t because I *did* notice and I *was* embarrassed, and that made me...

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15 The concept of *maya* is central to Hindu philosophy and a preoccupation of Isherwood’s writing about Vedanta. According to the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, “The term can be used in several connotations implying a power, a process, and the result of that process.” All of these uses are key to the Hindu conception of the physical world: “In the history of Indian thought the term *maya* is used with remarkable consistency, to express, define and explain the enigma of life and the material world.” *M*aya is the power that produces the phenomenal world: “The Upanisads develop a metaphysical notion of *maya* as the emanation of the phenomenal world by brahmin, the cosmic Self. . . . *M*aya is the metaphysical principle that must be assumed in order to account for the transformation of the eternal and indivisible world into the temporal and differentiated.” Because the finite cannot contain the infinite, *maya* has the power to delude; one seeking Truth or “the cosmic Self” in the material world will catch only a glimpse and will be misled: “*M*aya deludes cosmic consciousness into associating itself with individuality, sense perception, and the sensory objects of the phenomenal reality. Gaudapada interprets this process as a misconception (*vikalpa*) of the pure and undivided self-consciousness of the atman, just as in darkness a rope is mistakenly perceived as a snake. To dispel false perception is to attain true insight into the undivided Absolute.”
angry with him. So I walked away and stood looking out the window, and needless to say as soon as I did he stopped exercising at once and put a towel around his waist and went into the bathroom.

Patrick lives in the world; he is one with nature as his young, nude, and tanned body suggests. He is physically fit and capable of vigorous and frequent exercise. Patrick is body and not spirit; his “rather big penis” catches Oliver’s eye and the two stare at each other with the locked eyes of seducer and seduced. Patrick forces Oliver to admit—if only to himself—that he has not “risen above the flesh.” Patrick stirs in him the full range of human emotions, including the sexual fascination of an adolescent boy fixated on his older brother, a fascination which would be innocent and unthreatening if in fact it weren’t darkly incestuous.¹⁶

For Oliver, Patrick recalls the past and the world Oliver left behind when he joined the monastery. While Patrick dresses in another room, Oliver sees a sealed envelope addressed to their mother and an unsealed letter written to Penelope, Patrick’s wife and an object of Oliver’s former affection. Reading only the postscript of that letter, Oliver is unsettled. Patrick has lied to his wife, telling her that Oliver asked for her welfare when in fact not only had he not done so, but he had deliberately planned to steer clear of the topic—leaving Penelope and his physical attraction to her in the West and in the past. Once again, Patrick proves to be a distraction; he challenges Oliver’s capacity to repudiate the world: “Why did Patrick lie? Was it for Penny? . . . Or was it for me? Patrick is anything but a careless person. His very indiscretions are calculated; he doesn’t leave things laying about that he wants hidden. I’m nearly sure he meant me to read the

postscript—just to tease me, disturb me, keep me puzzled and guessing. So, now I must try to forget all about.‖

And yet he can’t forget. The allure of Patrick is too powerful. Rather than retreating in his faith, Oliver becomes preoccupied with the world around him. He looks at his physical surroundings as he assumes Patrick must be looking at them. The two walk to the post office, which is located “near the main gate of the Monastery,” in order to mail the two letters that will connect them to the outside world, the past, and the West. As they near the gate they confront the “public” that is allowed to visit the monastery at certain times of the day, and Oliver allows in his diary that he “had some private fun observing Patrick’s reactions” to the rush of humanity crowding the streets. In fact, Oliver observes, “Patrick has already created for himself a special way of behaving in India. He created one specially for the Congo too, but that was crude by comparison. Here he is super-benevolent and super-diplomatic.” He “steps aside and pauses just for an instant” when he confronts an Indian. He meets the giggles of passing girls with knowing smiles. And “once he met a cow and stepped aside for her too, and you could almost hear him murmuring deferentially . . . you are Mother India Herself.” Patrick, in short, is preoccupied with manners and mannerisms; he is fastidious in his regard for the “rules.” And that preoccupation is a threat to Oliver. “He was exceedingly polite and tactful, but all the time his eyes had a teasing sparkle in them which meant, be frank, Brother dear, you’ve had to pretend to swallow this mumbo-jumbo, I quite understand that, but surely you can admit to me that you don’t believe it any more than I do.”

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17 Ibid., p. 72.
18 Ibid., pp. 73–74.
Over and over again, Patrick is a challenge to Oliver’s faith. His presence forces Oliver to stare at the physical world around him as he did when he first came to India:

Showing the Monastery to Patrick brought back to me so many things I’d almost succeeded in putting out of my mind—I’ve certainly tried to, hard enough—all of the negative reactions I had to this place when I first came here. Those crippled children begging outside the Main Gate, those visitors and hangers-on who sit day and night in the Lodge, lounging and gossiping their lives away, the general messiness and casualness of everything.

In so looking at the world, Oliver is forced to confront poverty, suffering, and sloth—the very misery of the human condition that is inevitable, according to Hindu teaching. Furthermore, he is compelled to examine a tenet central to Hinduism—namely, the assertion that because we can do little to change the human condition we need to shift our attention away from doing good or social service and focus instead on realizing the “ideal of moksa” and the discovery of Truth. In very subtle ways, Oliver has arrived at a turning point in his spiritual journey—he finds turning away difficult, and in so doing, he admits—albeit in passing—that he does not accept all of Hinduism. He discovers in the face of Patrick’s challenge that he is philosophically selective in his approach to Hindu thought: “What I chiefly felt was sheer utter weariness at the thought of even trying to explain to him just what I do believe and what I mean by ‘believe,’ and what’s really important to me in Hinduism and what isn’t etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc.” In short, Oliver has discovered what Isherwood found fundamentally appealing and yet ultimately troubling about Vedanta: if all religions are equal because they all lead to the discovery of Truth, one can be selective in one’s approach to dogma.

\[^{19}\text{Ibid., p. 74.}\]
To get himself back on track, Oliver turns from Patrick—his physical brother—to Swami—his spiritual guardian. Oliver affirms anew that Patrick is maya; he is preoccupied with the physical world because he understands little or nothing about Truth. When meeting the spiritual leader of the monastery—the Mahanta Maharaj—Patrick fixates on “surface appearance.” During the meeting Oliver was “watching him, studying his mannerisms, probably, so that when Patrick gets home he’ll be able to do one of his imitations. . . . What does anyone do, when he doesn’t understand something? He fastens on to its surface appearance. . . . That’s the monkeylike side of him. . . . What Patrick does is pathetic really, because this need of his to mimic shows such an utter lack of contact with life itself. . . . Poor Patrick—this is one instance in which the word poor has a literal meaning, it’s what real essential poverty is.” Swami, on the other hand, is pure spirit; his gestures and affection are emanations of absolute Truth: “The first discovery I made about Swami . . . was his incredible capacity for concern. . . . What makes this kind of concern so tremendously powerful is that it has no ulterior motive, it isn’t in the least possessive, and it isn’t adulterated with pathos and sentimentality, like most so-called love.” Swami’s “concern” is real and pure; Patrick’s is superficial and “adulterated.” So construed, Patrick presents no real threat to Oliver.20

Nonetheless, Patrick continues to menace. Oliver’s fourth journal entry is key to understanding Oliver’s conversion. It opens with the disclosure that Oliver is once again wavering: “Am I being unjust to Patrick? That’s what I must keep asking myself. Am I completely wrong about him? But what do I mean when I say ‘wrong’? My attitude towards him is so hopelessly subjective that it’s absurd to talk about myself as though I were an impartial observer who could ever be ‘wrong’ or ‘right.’ For me the alternatives

20 Ibid., pp. 76–78.
aren’t to understand him or misunderstand him, but to love him or hate him.” Oliver cannot simply tuck Patrick away and dismiss him as quintessentially phenomenal. They are brothers and the bond is potent—“Heredity has made us part of a single circuit, our wires are all connected.” Oliver cannot model himself after Swami, whose “concern” is, in the end, an abstraction, detached as it is from possession, “pathos,” and “sentimentality.” When it comes to his brother, Oliver is swayed by emotion rather than reason; he must either “love” or “hate” because he is “hopelessly subjective” and, as he is gradually discovering, inescapably human.

Oliver’s individual struggle with Patrick is emblematic of his larger struggle to transcend the body: “Patrick can disturb me so terribly because he can make me question the way I live my life.” Oliver can’t turn away from his humanity because he simply can’t repudiate emotion. In fact, the relatively short journal entry is a meditation on the complexity of human emotion and Oliver’s inability to detach himself from his feelings.

Having removed himself to the monastery, Oliver thinks in the categorical: good vs. bad, spirit vs. body, true vs. false, sacred vs. profane. Within this framework, Oliver is aligned with the forces of virtue and Patrick with those of vice. Thus, when he confronts his brother at the monastery, Oliver is faced with a simple choice—“to love him or hate him”:

And of course I love him—I mean, I’m capable of it. Part of me probably loves him all the time. All of me certainly does, sometimes. When I was going through my Freudian phase, I used to wonder if I wasn’t actually in love with him, romantically and even physically. I’m quite sure now that that’s not true, at least not any longer. It isn’t nearly as simple as that—

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21 Ibid., p. 115.
22 Ibid., pp. 114–120. In these six pages, Oliver speaks of human feelings more frequently and with greater insight than he does anywhere else in the entire novel. Words of emotion abound: love, hate, guilty, funny, amusing, ashamed, embarrasses, happiness, unhappy, joy, enjoyment, guilt ridden, scares, funny, disturb, gloomy, smile of joy, sadly, and sweetly gentle and patient with my slowness.
considering what I’ve been through lately, I almost wish it were. Now and then I suspect that Patrick thinks it is—when he sort of flirts with me. But I’m afraid the truth is less interesting. Patrick’s flirting is just a nervous habit he’s got into, he tries it on all ages and both sexes. It doesn’t mean anything and I suppose it’s usually harmless, except that it has probably fooled a few people and made them unhappy. 23

For Oliver, the choice is far from simple. He cannot declare that he loves his brother without reservation all of the time: “probably” is juxtaposed to “certainly”; “part” is juxtaposed to “all.” And he can neither describe nor define the love he does feel for his brother. It was at one point decidedly incestuous, as it might still be: “I’m quite sure now that that’s not true, at least not any longer.” In fact, his love is even more complicated than incest—an emotion so darkly complex that society conveniently dismisses it out of hand as taboo; “it isn’t nearly as simple as that.” Rather, Oliver’s feelings for his brother defy neat categorization. In fact, they wander the spectrum of emotion in much the same way as Patrick’s indiscriminate flirting: “he tries it on all ages and both sexes.”

Patrick breaks down Oliver’s capacity to think in the categorical; when it comes to Oliver’s feelings for his brother nothing is black and white. In fact, Oliver discovers that Patrick blends virtue and vice, good and bad, the sacred and the profane—or so it seems in this reading of the novel. The Swamis are taken with Patrick, amused by his stories and humored by his account of why he came to the monastery. “Patrick told them in his most artless style about this film of his . . . with an air of shy confession, he let out that he’d hesitated for a long time before signing the film contract—some mystic instinct warned him to wait. . . . ‘But when I got your cable,’ said Patrick, turning to me, ‘I suddenly knew! I said to myself, if I go first to the Monastery and see Oliver, then everything I do after that will have a blessing on it.’” The story is on the one hand

23 Ibid., p. 114.
preposterous; Patrick is making a pornographic film and the notion that he would travel
to the monastery to bless the project is outrageous. And yet, Oliver is incapable of
dismissing the story out of hand. He is inclined to believe that Patrick is lying, but he
can’t be certain: “This time, I thought, he really has gone too far! But not a bit of it—the
others all found his story delightful. Swami V. chuckled hugely and said, ‘Your motion
picture will undoubtedly have a phenomenal success, for you are now under the special
protection of Mother Lakshni, the goddess of good fortune!’ Actually, I strongly suspect
that Patrick was lying; he just invented this stuff to entertain them. Most probably he’d
made up his mind to sign the contract even before he got my first letter.” Oliver simply
cannot judge; he can “strongly suspect,” but he can’t affirm because it is entirely possible
that Patrick harbors a “mystic instinct” and that “the goddess of good fortune” could
bring about “phenomenal success.”

In Patrick, Oliver discovers the terms of his true faith. The journal entry closes
with a description of Oliver’s spiritual awaking:

Today our gerua robes were brought to us, folded ready for the great
moment when we shall put them on, after stripping off our old clothing in
the Temple and prostrating naked before Mahanta Maharaj, to be accepted
by him as our new selves, on the night of sannyas. The very youthful-
looking brahmachari from Bombay happened to be beside me when our
robes were brought. He looked at them in delight and wonder, and then he
turned to me with such a brilliant smile of joy and hugged me and said,
‘We—together!’ I hugged him too, of course, but it was with a tiny
conscious effort, and even as I was doing it I felt sadly alien. How can I,
with my wretched raw-skinned self-consciousness, ever really be one with
these people and the utter simplicity of their feelings? I can’t. Becoming a
swami will make no difference. I shall never quite belong to them. I’d
better accept that fact now and for the future.

Anyway, this isn’t nearly as tragic as I’ve made it sound. What
separates me from them isn’t important, not ultimately. What unites us is
the one and only thing that really matters. 24

24 Ibid., pp. 119–120.
In his encounter with his brother Patrick, Oliver learns that it is impossible for him to realize the “ideal of moksa” because for him as well as his brother Patrick, the spirit and the flesh do coexist. He cannot repudiate the one—namely, the ego or “raw-skinned self-consciousness”—in favor of the other—namely, the spirit that joins all or “We— together!” And even though Oliver will never repudiate the flesh altogether and he “shall never quite belong to them,” he can nonetheless be one of them because he participates in the very search for Truth that makes all faiths one according to Vedanta. Oliver’s epiphany, in short, hinges on dogmatic relativism.

Unsurprisingly, we find Oliver in the fifth diary entry wavering once again. Patrick, we learn, has arranged for a British reporter named Rafferty to interview Oliver, “the Englishman in Hindu masquerade.” Oliver is incensed until he realizes that this encounter with the world outside the monastery is a test of another sort:

I saw this situation was really offering itself as a test. . . . I could easily have talked myself out of having to give the interview, for Maharaj wasn’t in the least set on it. It’s his own utter lack of interest in publicity . . . which makes him regard this sort of thing as quite unimportant harmless joke. And I must learn to take the same attitude. After all, I certainly don’t expect to spend the rest of my life hidden away in seclusion from the world. Being what I am, I shall always be an object of curiosity to some people, perhaps quite a lot of people—even more so if I go back to Europe which I probably shall sooner or later for a while at least.

One lesson I leaned from the Rafferty incident is that it’s very important to enter willingly into the game. To submit like a sulky slave, to say you can do what you want with me but I’m determined to remain my uncompromising unattractive self—that’s nothing but aggression and negative vanity. No, one must try hard to be pleasant and look one’s best, shave carefully, comb one’s hair beforehand. . . . Actually I got along quite well with that absurd little man and his colleagues. It was embarrassing of course—one would have to be very advanced to do this kind of thing absolutely unself-consciously. One feels a bit of a fake and so one suffers, but that’s merely vanity of another sort. It’s Oliver who is the fake, and I don’t have to identify with him. Next time I shall try to
remember that and I hope I shall do better. I’m sure it will come more easily with practice.\textsuperscript{25}

On the one hand, Oliver is simply citing a basic tenet of Vedanta: all that happens in the phenomenal world is an “unimportant harmless joke.” On the other, Oliver is struggling to discover how he can live in the phenomenal world given his previous recognition that he will never achieve the ideal of moska and his admission here that he does not intend to seal himself off inside the monastery, but rather plans on returning to “Europe . . . sooner or later for a while at least.” He gestures to his humanity by admitting that he cannot proceed “unself-consciously” or conscious of the “unself,” an awkward phrase that alludes to the mortified ego. He is flattered by Rafferty’s interest in him and his spiritual journey. And even though he acknowledges that the phenomenal Oliver is “a fake” he is not at all certain that he will ultimately be able to turn his back on Oliver and his preoccupation with human feeling and desire.

And so the diary entry ends with Oliver worried about his place in the world. Oliver resolves to “stay away from Patrick altogether until sannyas is over. Next time Patrick will meet Swami Somethingananda (I hope that they give me a name which won’t be too hard for Mother to pronounce!).” His worry about mother indicates that he plans to maintain a relationship with her, a stark contrast to his prior assertion that he would have nothing to do with her after the taking of sannyas. Moreover, he is intently focused on the death rather than the rebirth implicit in sannyas: “Am I prepared? No, of course I’m not. How could I be? How can you honestly say you’re prepared for death? This is a death followed by a rebirth, but for me the death is the important part of it. . . . I must try in every way I can to make a true death out of this ceremony and leave the old Oliver

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., pp. 125–126.
behind. As for what comes afterwards, I must just have faith.” Oliver sees clearly that he can’t kill off his ego without actually dying. Nonetheless, he will press on with the “faith” that he will somehow figure out how to live in the world while he pursues the Truth that is absolute and without form.

Moreover, tucked in the middle of this diary entry is a glimpse of Patrick’s spiritual awakening, the terms of which are remarkably similar to those of Oliver’s epiphany. Oliver reports that “these last three nights he’s been coming to the Temple for vespers, with Swami K. It must have been Swami K.’s idea.” Moreover, Oliver describes a scene that he found entirely unsettling:

I was on my way to Swami’s seat, meaning to spend some time there with my beads. As I came round the corner of the Mahanta’s house, I saw Patrick and Swami K. walking a little way ahead of me. I thought they must be going to visit Mahanta Maharaj, but they walked on, past the steps and the fountain and right over to the seat. I couldn’t hear what they were talking about, but no doubt it was only the usual polite chitchat. Neither of them seemed to lead the way, it just happened. When they got to the seat Patrick did stop, though, as if inviting Swami K. to sit down—which he did, and then Patrick sat down beside him. That was when they both saw me. Swami K. smiled, but he didn’t sign to me to come over and join them—not that that in itself proves anything. I admit. Patrick looked slightly guilty, I thought, but that may have been my imagination. Anyhow, I quickly changed my course and went up the steps to Mahanta Maharaj’s room, I had something I wanted to ask him, anyhow. When I came out again, about ten minutes later, Swami K. and Patrick had gone.

So, of course, I’ve been through another violently negative mood. When I saw Patrick sit down on Swami’s seat, I felt like some little teenage novice watching jealously over his guru, his precious property, and snarling at all intruders. Swami’s seat is my territory. I don’t even like to see the senior swamis of the Order sitting on it—and that Patrick, of all people, should dare!26

Enraged and jealous, Oliver presumes that Patrick is up to something sinister, a folly intended to ridicule his faith. In fact, Patrick is clearly in the grips of a spiritual awakening, or so one would argue in this reading of the novel. Patrick and Swami K.

26 Ibid., pp. 127–128.
wander aimlessly and without leader, pulled by the power of Truth emblemized in Swami’s seat. They talk quietly and privately among themselves. They seal themselves off and gently avoid the impulse to wave Oliver over. Patrick, in short, has a guru who will guide him on a spiritual journey similar to Oliver’s in both its trials and its discoveries.

Piqued, Oliver resolves to seal himself off from Patrick and to stop writing in the journal, a resolution he is unable to keep. In the sixth and most important diary entry of the novel, Oliver tells of his meeting by the river with Patrick. The events leading up to that meeting are straightforward. Oliver is summoned to the lodge to receive a phone call. When he arrives, he is connected to a drunken young man from Los Angeles named Tom who immediately blurts out: “Oh God, Patrick, I’m sorry, I just couldn’t bear it any longer, I had to hear your voice, you aren’t angry with me are you darling, I love you, I love you! He sounded as if he was sobbing.” Oliver instantly realizes that Tom is calling for Patrick, whom he retrieves from the guesthouse and brings back to the lodge. Oliver reunites with Patrick after the phone call and the two walk along the Ganges, talking about Patrick’s relationship with Tom and Oliver’s decision to take sannyas.

The journal entry invites two readings. The first stresses the spiritual awakening that the two brothers seemingly share in common.

As the previous diary entry implies, Patrick is undergoing a spiritual transformation under the guidance of his guru, Swami V. Thus, it is not surprising that when Oliver ran to seize him at the guest house, he “found Patrick and Swami V. and several of the others just about to start supper. In fact I had to wait while they intoned the

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27 Ibid., p. 128.
Om Brahmarpanam.” What is shocking is that spirituality readily gives way to vulgarity. As they begin their walk along the river, Patrick sets a religious stage: “For quite a long while we walked in silence. Then Patrick said, in an unnaturally solemn tone of voice, Oliver, I’m going to forget that you’re my brother, I want to talk to you like people do to a priest . . . not that I’d be caught dead telling a priest what I’m going to tell you.” Patrick takes Oliver into his confidence; he confesses to him. Oliver, in turn, struggles to remain objective, “taking refuge in my role of father-confessor.” His objectivity is shattered, though, not “by Patrick’s story, but by the way that he told it”:

When he started off, his language was very restrained, in fact it was sometimes almost comically formal . . . But soon his tone changed and he began talking very frankly and using four-letter words with a sort of aggressive relish. For instance, he told me how Tom and he had driven to some deserted cove up the coast to the north for the weekend, and how they’d been on a rock right above the sea and Tom had grabbed hold of him and they had torn off each other’s clothes. I suppose it was really a relatively ordinary scene of lust, but Patrick made it sound strangely horrible, uncanny and bestial, like two animals devouring each other alive.

By using vulgar language, Patrick stresses the carnal; the union between Patrick and Tom is unequivocally physical and has nothing to do with the spirit. They are “two animals.” Obsessed with candid disclosure—“I noticed once again how fetishistic the words can be that we use for sexual acts. It was as if the mere uttering of them was nearly as exciting to Patrick as the act itself”—Patrick is nonetheless worried about what Oliver thinks of his behavior and his relationship with Tom; he is, after all, cheating on his wife Penelope, with whom Oliver was in love.

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28 Ibid., p. 139.
29 Ibid., p. 142.
30 Ibid., p. 144.
31 Ibid.
Patrick, in short, has moral qualms about what he has done, and he turns to Oliver for ethical and perhaps spiritual guidance: “Do you think I’m awfully wicked, Olly? Do you think I’m damned? I know you don’t believe in damnation in the same sense as the Christians do. But there must be somewhere one can get oneself sent to—Hell-with-a-time-limit. . . . Oliver, if you refuse to tell me what you think, I’ll do it for you—you think I’m unfit to go on living with Penny and our children.” Patrick looks to Oliver for an absolute moral judgment, and Oliver won’t give him one: “You must regard me as a hopeless puritanical ass.” Here again, Oliver shuns the categorical, and he pushes Patrick to do the same. Patrick begs Oliver for advice in terms that are revelatory: “You still must have some sort of reaction to what I’ve told you, surely? I mean to say, here’s a problem or a dilemma or a plain old bloody mess, whatever you want to call it. . . . If you were in my shoes, what would you do? Or is being in my shoes too utterly unthinkable? Its perfectly thinkable, I said, we’re very much alike in some ways.”

Patrick struggles to frame the ethical dilemma at hand, and in so doing he discovers that the Penelope-Patrick-Tom triangle is neither black nor white; it is neither a “problem” nor a “dilemma.” Rather, Patrick admits, it is “a plain old bloody mess,” just like the rest of the human condition, and it is this knowledge that the two brothers share in common. If in fact Patrick is undergoing a spiritual transformation, it is at this moment in the narrative that he discovers what Oliver already knows: the spirit and the body not only coexist, but they commingle. Being human involves impulses that range the spectrum between purely physical and purely spiritual. As Patrick sexually favors both men and women, so too do human beings indulge the spirit and the body to varying degrees throughout their lifetimes, incapable of repudiating one in favor of the other.

32 Ibid., pp. 146–148.
Almost as if he were emboldened by this discovery, Patrick turns to Oliver and challenges his decision to become a monk. Patrick tells Oliver that he had an ulterior motive in disclosing his relationship with Tom to him: “I mean, I could easily have made up some story to explain his behaviour, or simply laughed it off, or told you only part of the truth—I didn’t have to tell you everything. But when Tom phoned I suddenly saw it was a heaven sent opportunity to prove to you that I could be one-hundred-per-cent frank with you.” Patrick hopes that Oliver will, in turn, be frank with him, but Oliver is puzzled; he tells Patrick that he has hidden nothing from him. In fact, Patrick insists that Oliver has been true with him, and he praises Oliver’s capacity for honesty: “I believe you’re one of those very rare people who are literally incapable of being false—I mean consciously false.” Patrick presses on: “The one thing I’m concerned about is that I’m afraid you may be suffering from a very dangerous misunderstanding of yourself.”

Patrick, in short, accuses Oliver of deluding himself: “What you’ve got to admit to yourself, Olly—however much it may disturb you to do it—is that you’re denying a very large part of your nature.”

According to Patrick, Oliver has a gift that is rare; the capacity to lead. “That’s what you’ve got, Oliver, whether you want it or not. It’s a quality no more than perhaps three or four dozen people have in any given generation—the power to lead others and make them forget their vanity and selfish interest and finally become almost noble.” Oliver can stir others to serve the common good and yet, Patrick argues, Oliver runs from this power “because you feel guilty. You see, on the one hand, this sort of power is absolutely inseparable from ambition. On the other hand, anybody who has it must long

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33 Ibid., p. 152.
34 Ibid., pp. 151–153.
to use it, by its very nature. A man like you wants to use it in a worthy cause, but that’s still ambition, and ambition horrifies you. You think it’s utterly evil under all circumstances, so you renounce it.” Hence, Patrick reasons, Oliver is drawn to the monastery and to a faith that calls for the annihilation of the ego. Phrased differently, according to Patrick, Oliver lives in the categorical; he labels and shuns that which is “evil under all circumstances.”

However, having already discovered his very inability to do just that, Oliver counters: “I’d never say that ambition was always wrong for everybody, at least within limits.” Oliver admits once again what he had discovered earlier—namely, that one can never deny one’s humanity and turn from or obliterate the self altogether. Human beings are inescapably stirred to act by a range of emotions and desires, ambition being one of them. The choice before any one human being is whether to be swayed by virtue or vice, to do good or evil. And so Oliver toys with Patrick: “What you’re actually telling me is that you think I oughtn’t to be in this Monastery at all, isn’t that it.” In responding to that challenge, Patrick awakens to the very same spiritual truth that Oliver had already discovered:

My dear Oliver, this is your choice, not mine. If you should agree, on thinking this over, that you’ve been wrong about yourself, and if you should decide to change your life accordingly, then you’ll know what’s important to you and what isn’t. Suppose you do decide that this Monastery, helpful as it may be for many kinds of people, is the wrong place for you to be in—a hiding place from your natural vocation, in fact—that doesn’t necessarily mean you’d have to give up believing in—sorry, I seem to have some block against remembering these Sanskrit names, I’m not even sure it it’s a He or an It—just say God, I told him.

Thank you. I mean, speaking purely as an ignorant unbelieving outsider, I should have thought that if you really believed in God you’d

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36 Ibid., p. 158.
actually be proving it by taking this plunge. You’d have proved to yourself that your faith was strong enough to survive, outside in the wicked world.

Patrick argues that one can live in the world and still have faith, a reality known to Oliver. In fact, one’s “vocation” is the vehicle whereby one does just that, taking up a worldly occupation to which one is called by the Divine. And even though Patrick paints himself as an “ignorant unbelieving outsider,” he and Oliver have found a spiritual common ground in the realization that the material and the spiritual do coexist. The two brothers move forward, Oliver to the taking of sannyas and Patrick to a religious conversion of his own. And as they do, Isherwood reminds us once again of a central tenet of Vedanta, that all religions are identical because all lead to the discovery of Truth, variously labeled “He,” “It,” or “God.”

Challenged by Patrick to leave the monastery in search of his true vocation, Oliver is troubled. “One moment, everything Patrick said seems utterly idiotic and even laughable. The next it seems terribly, insidiously true. I feel like a madman—that’s to say I have absolutely no idea what I may or may not do next.” Oliver is overwhelmingly preoccupied with positioning himself in the world. Will he take money from Patrick so that he can return to England and establish himself in a profession yet to be discovered, or will he be unfaithful to his very recognition that he cannot turn his back on the corporeal and remain sealed off in the monastery? As Oliver nears the end of his spiritual journey, he discovers that the choice makes little or no difference.

In his penultimate diary entry, Oliver ponders anew the connection between the physical and the spiritual. Less than eight hours after his meeting by the river with Patrick, Oliver found himself “still in the violently disturbed state I was in this morning,

37 Ibid., p. 160.
not knowing what on earth to do next.” Sleep overtook him suddenly and he had a vision of Swami:

Yes, I can say I did literally see him, although this wasn’t a vision in the waking state. But seeing him was only a part of the experience of his presence which was intensely vivid, far more so than an ordinary dream. Also, unlike a dream, it didn’t altogether end when I woke up. It is losing strength now, but it’s still going on inside me at this moment.

I can’t say where it took place—where is a meaningless word in this connection, anyway—it could have been in Swami’s flat in Munich or it could have been here, it wasn’t specifically either. In one sense it was absolutely here rather than in Munich, because it had such a feeling of being absolutely now.

I was with Swami from the beginning, I mean he didn’t appear to me at a certain moment, I simply became aware that we were together—and it didn’t seem as if we had only just met.

The encounter with Swami is bound by neither time nor space: “where is a meaningless word in this connection” and “I was with Swami from the beginning.” Swami’s “presence was . . . intensely vivid,” and yet Swami was not there physically. In fact, Oliver was “clearly aware that Swami was already ‘dead’—that’s to say no longer in his earthly body.”

In his vision of Swami, Oliver confirms what he has known all along—namely, that while the physical and spiritual do coexist, the physical is temporal and fleeting; the spiritual is eternal and ever-present. Moreover, Oliver comes to understand what Vedanta teaches about “the symbolic nature of all action.” In the vision, Oliver makes tea for Swami: “And I understood, in a way I’d never understood before, that making this tea for him was both physically unnecessary and spiritually of tremendous importance. It was a symbolic act, but it was every bit as important as making tea that would be drunk, or indeed doing any other kind of physical service, for an embodied being. The spiritual significance was all that ultimately mattered, and it was the same in either case.”

38 Ibid., pp. 171–72.
themselves actions have no meaning or value; rather they matter only insofar as they point to the spiritual and lead to the discovery of Truth: “spiritual significance was all that ultimately mattered.”

Moreover, as the physical act is of value only insofar as it refers to the spiritual, so too the individual is of value only insofar as he or she is an embodiment of Truth. The disembodied Swami is, as Oliver discovers, the Divine that is bound by neither time nor physical space. “I knew that Swami was ‘dead,’ and I knew that nevertheless he was now with me—and that he is with me always, wherever I am. While he was in the body he wasn’t always with me, that’s obvious. If I was away at work, we could only be together in our thoughts, at best. But now we are never separated. I woke up actually knowing that.”

So enlightened, Oliver turns his thoughts to Patrick. Why, he wonders, did Patrick urge him to leave the monastery and abandon his way of life? Patrick, he asserts, is unhappy with a life entirely devoted to material prosperity and sexual lust:

What actually is his dissatisfaction? Couldn’t it be the first faint beginning of an awareness that some new and unknown power is working inside of him? Couldn’t he be starting to be aware of Swami’s presence? That would surely be a most disconcerting sensation for him at first. It would make him increasingly dissatisfied with everything he used to think was desirable and important, and he wouldn’t even know why! . . . Poor old Paddy—he’s in a state of grace! And he’s going to discover it the hard way. He doesn’t dream what he’s in for, but he’ll find out before long.

Oliver discovers that Patrick is on a spiritual journey that is remarkably similar to his own. Neither brother altogether repudiates the physical in favor of the spiritual. Rather,

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39 Ibid., p. 173.  
40 Ibid.  
41 Ibid., pp. 176–177.
both affirm the coexistence of physical and the spiritual. Polar opposition disappears, as Patrick (physical) and Oliver (spiritual) join together in their search for Truth.

The final encounter between the two brothers supports this reading of the novel. In his last diary entry, Oliver describes the scene outside the temple where he took sannyas. When he and the other monks emerge, clad in their gerua, Patrick is in a small crowd waiting to greet them. Oliver is stunned to see Patrick, and yet he is pleased when, after taking several pictures of him, “suddenly without any warning he dropped to his knees and took the dust of my feet and bowed down before me. . . . I hastily grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him to his feet and hugged him. . . . And everybody was smiling and murmuring, as much as to say how charming it was of Patrick to play this scene according to our local Hindu rules, and how very right and proper it was that we two brothers should love each other.” Unification is the order of the day. Patrick makes a religious gesture: Oliver makes a worldly one. Body and spirit come together as they do in the human condition, and the East meets the West in recognition of the basic tenet of Vedanta: the paths are many, but the endpoint is one: Truth.

II

Oliver’s diary entries do, in fact, invite a reading of the novel as a conversion narrative. They tell of the spiritual awakening of the Oliver and Patrick at the same time that they explore beliefs central to Vedanta: symbolic action, mortification of the ego, and that all religions are fundamentally in agreement.
Reading the novel this way ignores the bulk of the narrative, which is made up of letters from Patrick, and quite simply misses the point. *A Meeting by the River* reveals the dark side of Vedanta.

The novel opens with a letter from Oliver to Patrick. The prose is abrupt; the tone is hostile: “I suppose you’ll be surprised to hear from me after this long silence—almost as surprised as I should be to hear from you.” The two brothers have been estranged for a period of time, and neither seems to be particularly bothered about not having heard from the other. Oliver writes now out of necessity and for no other reason: “We seem tacitly agreed on one point at least, that there’s no sense in exchanging letters for the sake of chatter. I know you’re a busy man and I shouldn’t dream of bothering you, if a situation hadn’t arisen which threatens to become awkward.” The “situation” is quite simple: Oliver fears that Patrick will visit him in India and discover his heretofore guarded secret: “The point is, Mother is still under the impression, and I suppose you and Penelope are too, that I’m here working for the Red Cross in Calcutta, just as I was actually working for them in Germany up to a year ago. Well as a matter of fact I’m not. I’m in a Hindu monastery a few miles outside the city, on the bank of the Ganges. I mean, I am a monk here.” While not actively lying to his mother, brother, and sister-in-law, Oliver has nonetheless dissembled, and he has done so for one reason alone. He hopes to live an unchallenged life, isolated from and impervious to the judgment of the very world his family represents: “I must say I don’t see why I or anyone else should be expected to account for his actions to people they don’t really concern.”

To that end, Oliver asks one favor of Patrick: “Will you tell Mother about this for me?” He is stirred to clear up the misunderstanding he cultivated with silence not because

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42 Ibid.
he values telling the truth, but rather because he wishes to be left alone. He asks Patrick to “assure her that I’m in perfect health, which is true, and getting enough to eat.” Confident that her concerns will be maternal rather than philosophical, Oliver hopes that Patrick’s reassurances will calm her into acquiescence so that she will leave him undisturbed: “You always used to be so clever at calming her down and getting her to accept accomplished facts.” The point is made: Oliver has charted his course in life and he will not be deterred; he has sealed himself off in a monastery alongside the Ganges, where he plans to live out his life in spiritual devotion. The letter ends: “Don’t bother to answer this.” Oliver wants to be left alone. He has detached himself from his biological family in England and the Western values it represents; he has repudiated material wealth in search of spiritual prosperity.43

In fact, the novel shifts focus abruptly when Patrick ignores Oliver’s command and writes back to him. At that instant, Patrick takes control of the relationship and the narrative; the story suddenly becomes about Patrick. All that follows is written in response to questions posed, statements made, and/or actions taken by Patrick. In one stroke, the conversion narrative becomes a contemplative piece that focuses on the very ethical questions raised by the way in which Patrick forms and sustains human relationships.

III

Patrick’s letters, which constitute the bulk of the narrative, can be grouped into four separate categories, with each category corresponding to a particular type of relationship: brother-brother; son-mother; husband-wife; man-boy. At play in each of

43 Ibid., pp. 10–11.
these letters are rhetorical strategies conceived to establish and preserve the terms of the relationship in question at the same time that they isolate one relationship from another. Patrick, we learn, is as committed as Oliver to living a compartmentalized life, though his motives for doing so are far more suspect.

Of the four relationships, the one between the two brothers is the most entangled and difficult to explain. It unfolds throughout the book as the two either reflect privately about the other or communicate openly with each other in writing or in person. They refer to the past, live in the present, and anticipate the future. In short, their relationship is multidimensional in ways that Patrick’s relationships with his mother, his wife, and his male lover are not. Each of these relationships is defined within clearly marked parameters. Each of these relationships is formed by Patrick with specific needs and expectations in mind.

Patrick’s relationship with his mother is the most readily accessible and easily understood one in the novel. She is introduced by Oliver at the outset in the second paragraph: “Yesterday I got a letter from Mother telling me that you’re in the United States on business and that you may be going on from there to some part (unspecified) of Southern Asia. She ends by saying wouldn’t it be nice if you were able to come to India and visit me.” Mother is the neither unique nor imaginative. Rather she is an archetype. As matriarch, she corresponds with her children abroad, sharing bits of news about the family and encouraging the meeting of siblings at their mutual convenience. She is the force that predictably preys upon the siblings’ sense of obligation and pulls the otherwise separated brothers back together; she has a coercive power over her sons that is at once primal and irresistible. To Mother, both Patrick and Oliver are obliged.

44 Ibid., p. 9.
For all his desire to live apart, Oliver is nonetheless accountable to Mother. So too is Patrick, which is precisely the reason why he agrees to do Oliver’s bidding. Patrick contacts her first by phone rather than in writing. He makes the call from London, reassuring Oliver later in a letter that even though the long-distance connection with his mother was not good (“it sounded like an antique wireless set in a thunderstorm”), he was nonetheless able “to convey to her that I’d heard from you and that you were still in India and in splendid health and very very busy, and that you’d asked me to call and tell her you were thinking of her and give her your love.” The message is precisely the one that a conventional mother would want to hear about a son living in a foreign land. Oliver is safe and “in splendid health.” He is occupied in a profession that keeps him “very very busy.” And his affection for his mother is abiding.45

After calling Mother from Los Angeles, Patrick writes to her four times, and in each letter he displays first and foremost a regard for her conventional maternal concerns.

The first letter, written aboard his flight from Los Angeles to India, ends with a reassurance: “And now remember, Mother darling, you are not to worry about him. I can absolutely promise you, even in advance, that everything is going to be all right. I have a feeling about this, and you know my feelings, they’re never wrong.”46 Essentially, Patrick’s reassurance is ungrounded; nonetheless, he claims that all will be well because he knows that his mother wants it to be so.

In his second letter to Mother, written the day he arrived in India, Patrick speaks with the conviction of an eyewitness. “Now I can say this with absolute authority, I’ll repeat it—Oliver is well, and I mean well in every way, mentally and physically.” He

46 Ibid., p. 41.
allows that Oliver has lost weight due in large part to the vegetarian diet he has embraced, but “he assures me, and particularly asks me to assure you, that he’s getting enough to eat.” Moreover, Patrick reports that Oliver is being cared for by his elders; fussing over him as a mother would, they are committed to easing his transition from life in the West to life in the East: “The senior monks of the Monastery seem to be looking after him quite anxiously. . . . They have an exaggerated idea of the frailty of an English constitution in the Indian climate and are continually warning him not to overdo things and to be most careful what he eats and drinks.” And finally, he reassures Mother that Oliver is happy with the life he has chosen, even though “it’s a kind of happiness which could never be entirely understood by you or me.”

Patrick’s third letter to Mother once again speaks to her conventional concerns. The letter opens with another of Patrick’s reassurances: “Although I’ve only been here five days, I’m already getting quite habituated. I can almost go so far as to say that I feel at home.” Patrick’s message is one that any mother would want to hear; her eldest son has accommodated the whim of her younger son and settled in alongside him in a far-off place. The two have re-created home in a remote setting. Reminding Mother again that Oliver is physically fit, Patrick reports that he himself frequently eats with the other Swamis, but notes that “sometimes Oliver comes too, sometimes he doesn’t, but I’m certain this doesn’t mean he is missing meals and neglecting his health.” And finally, Patrick seals anew the bond between Mother and son when he signs the letter, “Your devoted son, Paddy.”

48 Ibid., pp. 89, 92, 101.
Patrick’s third letter to Mother is also preoccupied with describing the monastery in terms that are familiar to her and that consequently enable her to envision the place concretely. To that end, Patrick opens with a direct reference to Britain’s colonial occupation of India, pointing to “the still-lingering influence here of the British Raj.” He goes on to compare aspects of the physical setting to ones that Mother would know firsthand from her life in England: “The architecture of the older buildings is full of funny charming evocations of Victorian England”; the “gateway which leads into the grounds of the Monastery” evokes Patrick’s memories of “one of the back gates of our College at Cambridge over which I had to climb when I returned from trips to London, after hours”; the “good homely nineteenth-century Gothic”; and, “the Lodge, which is another Victorian structure in oriental disguise, a kind of cousin to the Gatekeeper’s Lodge on a country estate in England.” These Western points of reference ground Mother. She can picture the physical setting in which Oliver is living, and by so doing, she can transport Oliver in her mind back to England and reattach him to her apron strings. Oliver will be safe because the place in which he is living is familiar rather than foreign, comfortable rather than threatening.49

Patrick also emphasizes that Oliver’s surroundings are beautiful; he lives in a place that would appeal rather than offend Mother and son alike: “Everything is delightfully picturesque. . . . The great charm of the Monastery grounds is that they lie along the edge of the Ganges. The monks in their yellow robes and the women in bright saris make marvelously vivid spots of colour against a moving background of water.” The air is always filled with “some tropical bird” or another. The shore opposite the monastery is lined with “pink and yellow houses like gaily painted toys, standing among

49 Ibid., pp. 89–90.
palm trees.” The setting of the sun is visually stirring: “Oh, Mother, you should see the incredible light during the few minutes of tropical evening, just as the sun is going down! It shines through the thin mist that rises off the surface of the river and everything turns golden, a rich old eighteenth-century greenish-gold, exactly like a Guardi.” And even though the “French-looking fountain in the middle of the garden . . . has been allowed to fall into disrepair . . . and the garden is carelessly looked after,” both could be restored to their former beauty with the touch of Mother’s hand: “I suddenly pictured you so clearly, in your shawl and gardening gloves, snipping and pruning! You could restore and transform the whole place within a few months.” In short, Oliver lives comfortably in a place of beauty, worn though it may be.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 89–93.}

And finally, throughout the third letter, Patrick implies that he and Oliver are getting along. Oliver has “welcomed” Patrick to the monastery and, in turn, Patrick has settled in, dining as he does with the senior swamis and befriending them to the extent that he “might almost claim that I feel I already know them in certain respects better than Olly does!” Oliver and Patrick have toured the grounds of the monastery together and shared a moment of intimacy; Patrick asks Oliver about “a marble seat with scrolled ends” near the garden and learns from Oliver that “it used to be the favourite seat of his particular swami, the one who was his teacher in Munich and then died. I thought it was really touching that Oliver should have taken the trouble to find out a little detail of this kind, especially one that relates to the Swami’s early life in this Monastery, many years before Oliver met him. It proves that our Olly is capable of indulging sentiment after all.” And, Oliver introduces Patrick to the “Mahanta, the head of this Monastery.” Before doing so, though, Oliver “very considerately briefed me on the protocol” that would be in
play when meeting the Mahanta and that would prevent him from embarrassing himself and Oliver alike: “So, having gone through a hasty rehearsal beforehand, that was what I did, and I sensed immediately—I’m usually able to judge such things—that it made a really good impression. Which was good for me and good for Oliver too. He didn’t have to feel apologetic for his unbeliever-brother!”

Clearly, the message Patrick conveys to Mother is that he cares for Oliver’s feelings and Oliver cares for his; neither wants to embarrass the other. To drive the point home, Patrick records for Mother the Mahanta’s greeting: “So you have made this arduous and lengthy journey solely in order to visit your brother? This is indeed a most touching proof of fraternal affection!” The proclamation is ancillary; it says nothing about the physical monastery or life therein, the two subjects to which the third letter to Mother are largely devoted. Rather, it is a testimony to the very brotherly love that would warm any mother’s heart.

As with the first three letters, the fourth appeals to conventional, maternal concerns. Written ten days after the previous letter to Mother and on the day Oliver takes sannyas, Patrick opens with the report that “at approximately six a.m. this morning, Oliver became a swami!” He describes the conversion, focusing in particular on those aspects of the ritual, which “consists of several ceremonies which take place over a period of days,” that would resonate with Mother and fill her with pride: “The candidate for sannyas has first to be invested with the sacred thread, to signify that he has become a member of the caste of Brahmins, which is the highest of all the castes. You might say that it’s rather like being knighted or raised to the peerage.” Patrick renders the Eastern

51 Ibid., pp. 92–96.
52 Ibid., p. 97.
ritual in Western terms—“being knighted,” “raised to the peerage”—and appeals to his mother’s sense of pride. Oliver has risen to an honored station in the physical world; he has arrived, so to speak, realizing the aspirations and fulfilling the dreams of any conventional mother. According to Patrick, Oliver has done so, though, only to reject the world of the flesh in the end: “The idea behind it is that if you’re going to renounce earthly rank and fame you ought first to have something really worthwhile to renounce.”

Anticipating that Oliver’s repudiation of the flesh will alarm Mother, threatening as it does Oliver’s bond with her and family alike, Patrick sets out in the fourth letter to alleviate Mother’s concern. He singles out “a beautiful ritual in which the candidate lays his former self to rest—thereby becoming a pure disembodied spirit as a prelude to assuming his new monastic identity.” Once he was reborn a swami, “Oliver and his newly-made fellow-swamis had to go out into the surrounding district and beg alms, just as Hindu monks have done for thousands of years.” Upon returning from begging alms, Oliver offers to share the food he has been given with Mahanta and Patrick alike. Patrick is moved: “I felt that Oliver did this to make it clear that he wasn’t disowning me or excluding me from his new life—and of course that applied equally to you and Penny.” Oliver, Patrick assures Mother, may have become a swami, but he has not detached himself from the physical world and the very relationships Mother values most. Mother may rest easy.

The four letters to Mother clearly set out to do one thing: address Mother’s conventional concerns. Oliver has shelter; he is being cared for by his elders; he eats and

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53 Ibid., p. 186.
54 Ibid., p. 187.
is in good physical health; he is happy and living in comfort; and the bonds between mother and sons as well as brother and brother are intact. The letters do more, though, than simply speak to Mother’s anxiety about the welfare of her sons.

In fact, the letters to Mother are preoccupied with establishing Patrick’s creditability as a narrator. While in the first letter Patrick boasts about his power of intuition (“you know my feelings, they’re never wrong”) and in the second letter he speaks with the assurance of an eyewitness (“now I can say with absolute authority”), it is the third letter that is largely devoted to asserting Patrick’s authority.

After describing the worn beauty of the monastery and its surroundings, Patrick turns to the squalor of Calcutta. The once-charming “old English quarter . . . looks as if all strong colour had been parched out of it by the sun; it’s faded to a dirty yellow.” People, foul air, and sewage are everywhere: “The streets are filthy—you have to be careful not to slip on garbage which has been scattered and smeared over the pavement. . . . The atmosphere is full of smoke from the charcoal pots they burn at night. And the crowds! You get the impression that the houses simply will not contain these people; thousands of them must be living out of doors.” Chaos fills the streets, which “are so full that there’s a permanent traffic jam. The traffic ranges from lorries and taxis to bullock carts, rickshaws and funny little closed cabs with louvered shutters.” This is the tourist’s picture of Calcutta; these are the images likely to alarm Mother: “Everybody who returns from this country is apt to dwell on the horrors of Calcutta, and I’m afraid you may hear descriptions of it which will make you worry about Oliver.” The monastery is different,
Patrick assures Mother; Oliver is safe and settled into a place “where it’s clean and healthy and one has plenty of space and can breathe the fresh river-air.”

Patrick nonetheless lingers over the description of Calcutta and its horrors for one reason alone: he wants to reaffirm his authority as a provider of information: “Mother darling, I’m telling you all this because I know you want to hear everything about Oliver’s life and surroundings. If you found out that I’d withheld some detail from you just because it as unpleasant, you’d never trust me again, would you?” In short, Mother can rely on Patrick to tell the truth.

Authority intact, Patrick can be trusted not only as a storyteller, but also as an interpreter. In the third letter to Mother, Patrick poses as a translator, boldly defining terms and experiences for his mother. He explains that “pranam . . . consists of bowing down and touching the feet of your superior, one after the other, and then touching your own forehead, and it signifies asking for his blessing as well as making a salutation of extreme reverence.” He describes “namaskar, a bow with the palms of the hands pressed together as if in prayer.” And his defines the meaning of darshan: “exposing yourself to the spiritual radiations of a holy man, rather like taking a bath under a sun-lamp.” In fact, Patrick brags in the third letter about his accomplishments as an interpreter when he appeals to Mother: “(again I must ask for your admiration of the way I’m picking up these technical terms!).” Tucked as it is between parentheses, Patrick’s boast stands out. It is seemingly misplaced, appearing as it does in a letter to Mother that is otherwise devoted to the description of Oliver’s physical well-being. In fact, the statement is a well-placed reminder that the novel is not about Oliver, but rather about Patrick and the role he plays as narrator/interpreter.

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55 Ibid., pp. 100–101.
The letters to Mother are straightforward. They establish a set of facts and they describe the place where Oliver is living. Taken at face value, they create a backdrop against which one may read the rest of the novel and measure Patrick’s performance as a narrator, only to discover that he is a liar.

Patrick’s first letter to Mother, written en route to India, tells of the days leading up to his departure from Los Angeles:

My final memories of California are very agreeable, though. After weeks of having to attend tiresome lunches with executives in film studios and dinner parties at the homes of exceedingly dim stars, it was arranged for me to escape for a few days’ holiday. I was motored far up the coast to a district which is still quite wild and unspoilt; cliffs towering sheer out of the sea, seals swimming in the coves below, and magnificent tall dark solemn woods in deep canyons. At the bottom of one canyon, a low tunnel has been cut right through the rock. You come out through it on to a reef which forms a small natural harbour, just enough room for a single boat. The old heavy iron mooring-rings are still there. Perhaps it was used by smugglers, one can easily imagine that it might have been. I kept wishing you could have been with me with your watercolours. It’s just the kind of outrageously romantic spot which really appeals to you.

Having been burdened by “tiresome lunches” and time spent with “exceedingly dim stars,” Patrick is treated to “a few days’ holiday” in a pastoral setting that is “quite wild and unspoilt.” Awed by the beauty of this natural setting, an “outrageously romantic spot,” Patrick thinks only of Mother, “wishing you could have been with me with your watercolours.”

The letter to Mother is followed by a letter to Patrick’s wife, Penelope. He opens with an admission that falls shy of an apology: “I’m afraid I have been bad, not writing to you in all this long while. I know how you hate phone calls and our last few have been

56 Ibid., p. 41.
more than usually unsatisfactory, haven’t they?” Patrick has failed to be in touch with his wife while on business in California, and he has bungled attempts to communicate with her by phone: “I got an uneasy impression from one or two things you said that you imagined I was behaving strangely—being cold or distant. . . . I avoided asking you about this at the time, for fear I’d only make matters worse, but now tell me, was that how you felt? If it was, you had no reason to, believe me! You must admit darling, you sometimes fancy things.” Patrick chooses to ignore his wife’s feelings when speaking with her on the phone. Rather, he engages her in writing. He prefers written communication, which allows for delayed, deliberate responses that involve reflection, to verbal communication, which demands instantaneous, impulsive responses that spring from the top of one’s head.57

Patrick’s choice seems odd; why delay clearing up in a phone conversation what appears to be a simple misunderstanding between husband and wife? The answer is straightforward: Patrick is playing a confidence game (“believe me”) in which he is advantaged by delayed rather than immediate interaction.

Prose allows Patrick to shape his story, to manipulate his narrative in order to control his wife and the world around him. In his letter to Penelope, he points to the days leading up to his departure for Asia and tells a story that is somewhat different from the story he told Mother:

I even suspect, and do forgive me if I’m wrong, that you feel my staying on in Los Angeles these last ten days was unnecessary. (I know you were terribly disappointed, as I was, about our missing a Christmas together for the first time, but that was absolutely unavoidable, as I’m sure you realize.) Well, yes, it’s true that I could actually have left Los Angeles a little earlier than I did, and made the trip to India the other way around, via England, and spent a few days with you and the Children. That sounds

57 Ibid., p. 42.
heavenly, as an idea, but just consider, darling what it would have been like in fact, our being together with the prospect of parting again so soon hanging over us all the time. You know yourself, the few times that’s happened, what a strain it was and how wretched, and how it makes a sort of tragedy out of something that isn’t in the least tragic—as though you and I were desperate lovers in wartime, counting the last minutes of my leave!

“Missing a Christmas together for the first time,” Patrick has not only wounded or “disappointed” his wife, but he has disrupted the rhythm of conventional, family life, marked as it is by cycles of holidays, vacations, meals, and any number of experiences shared in common. Patrick is duty bound to explain himself and so he does. “He could actually have left Los Angeles” in time to spend Christmas with his family, but doing so, he reasons, would have created more pain than pleasure by raising expectations that would inevitably have to be dashed. Thus, his choice was “absolutely unavoidable” and in the best interest of all parties concerned. Patrick’s con is complete; should Penelope challenge his explanation she would call into question Patrick’s claim that his love for his wife and family is steady and enduring, something quite different from the passing affection of “desperate lovers in wartime, counting the last minutes of my leave.”

And while Patrick does not lie to Penelope outright, he does construct an explanation for his behavior that conveniently overlooks what we know to be true from his letter to Mother—namely, that he managed to “escape for a few days’ holiday” prior to his departure from Los Angeles and that his “final memories of California are very agreeable.” Patrick is posturing. One story is told to appeal to mother; another to placate Penelope. In fact, neither story is entirely true.

The letter to Penelope is followed by one addressed to Tom; the two contrast sharply in ways that suggest when writing to Tom, Patrick is telling the truth. The letter

58 Ibid., pp. 42–43.
to Penelope ends, “Devotedly, Paddy,” a close that underscores Patrick’s sense of obligation to his wife and family that is almost exclusively contractual. He has explained his choice not to return to England for Christmas in terms that are plausible, though untrue, and in so doing he has acquitted himself of his responsibilities as husband and father. In contrast, the letter to Tom opens: “Tom, how very strange—it is the first time I’ve ever written your name, and it sort of conjures you up! My heart has started beating faster already and I feel a bit breathless. Tom. Tom. Tom.” The letter is immediate and passionate; its primal ring strikes a chord of truth.\(^{59}\)

To Tom, Patrick writes honestly of his final days in California. The time away from his family in England was neither “absolutely unavoidable,” as Patrick alleges to Penelope, nor a solitary “holiday,” as he implies to Mother. Rather, the time was stolen from his family at Christmas in order to have sex with Tom. In the first letter to Tom, Patrick alludes to their frolic: “That afternoon down on the reef at Tunnel Cove, with the air full of spray and the shock of the waves making the rock tremble—no, if I talk about that I shall break the magic. It was magic, wasn’t it, every time we were together, from the first day that we met?”\(^{60}\) In this description of “the reef at Tunnel Cove,” all of nature is charged with energy: the “air full of spray” and the “waves making the rock tremble.” In contrast, the letter to Mother describes Tunnel Cove in static terms; the images are solid, sharp, and circumscribed or fixed: “cliffs towering sheer out of the sea, seals swimming in the coves below, and magnificent tall dark solemn woods in deep canyons.” Mother’s cove is a scene to be painted (“I kept wishing you could have been with me with your watercolours”); Tom’s cove is a place to have sex.

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\(^{59}\) Ibid., p. 46.  
\(^{60}\) Ibid., p. 48.
Patrick’s next letter to Tom presents a more elaborate and decidedly graphic description of their romp at Tunnel Cove. Citing a passage in the risqué novel Tom gave him at the airport before his departure, Patrick confronts Tom:

I’ve got to know this, did you deliberately make us re-enact it? It would be just like you, yes, I can believe it of you, it’s exactly the sort of wonderful sweet idiotic crazy thing you would do—and of course you did it, there’s no other possible explanation! You had read the book and it was you who planned the trip and took me there. I love the romantic silliness of your doing it, but at the same time I can’t help feeling, to put it mildly, embarrassed! I mean to say, there I was, taking part for all I was worth in a wild scene of passion—it was one of the most insane things I’ve ever done, if anybody had come through that tunnel we could never possibly have heard him coming until it was too late, with all the noise the waves were making. I was imagining in my innocence that you were as completely carried away as I was. You certainly behaved as if you were. And now I find everything you said and did printed almost word for word and move for move in this damned book.

Tommy, please don’t think I’m angry or hurt about this or that I feel like the victim of a practical joke. Even if you did stage-manage the whole thing, I know that doesn’t mean you were just pretending—I’m certain you weren’t. You gave me quite satisfactory proofs that you meant what you were doing, on numerous other occasions! And if you got some kind of private erotic kick out of stage-managing, then all I can say is, I hope you thoroughly enjoyed it.  

Patrick dwells on the literal (“everything you said and did printed almost word for word”) and the pornographic (“a wild scene of passion”). What transpired was a “thing,” nothing more than a physical act. Tom read a description of a scene in “the book” and decided to make the two of them “re-enact it.” In fact, Patrick derived a mildly sadomasochistic thrill out of the encounter. Tom was dominant, getting a “private erotic kick out of stage-managing.” Patrick was submissive, “mildly, embarrassed,” and “the victim of a practical joke.” As with all games of S&M, stress is placed here on the physical thrill derived from an imagined threat that never materializes.

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61 Ibid., pp. 84–85.
Tom, on the other hand, is set up to read the letter differently. He dwells on the implied rather than the literal, the emotional rather than the physical. Patrick is toying with Tom, calling him “Tommy” and playing with language as one might affectionately ruffle the hair on the head of an adorable youth: “It’s exactly the sort of wonderful sweet idiotic crazy thing you would do” and “I love the romantic silliness of your doing it.” Moreover, implicit in Patrick’s entire recollection is a profession of love. Tom’s gestures are “sweet” and “romantic.” Their connection is genuine: “I know that doesn’t mean you were just pretending.” The two were transported mutually—“you were as completely carried away as I was”—and yet as the novel unfolds, we learn that the two are not on equal footing.

Predictably, Patrick the elder controls Tom the younger. In his next letter to Tom, Patrick opens talking about the act of letter-writing: “I haven’t written for nearly one whole week!” The statement recalls a similar one Patrick makes to Penelope in his first letter to her—“I’m afraid I have been bad, not writing to you in all this long while.” Patrick writes when it suits and remains silent when it doesn’t. He is in charge, using the written word and delayed response as tools with which to manipulate people. As with the letter to Penelope, the letter to Tom is crafted; it is a shaped narrative intended to put Tom in his place and seal Tom’s devotion to Patrick by playing on Tom’s naïveté and emotional vulnerability.

The discussion of letter-writing not only establishes Patrick’s authority over Tom, but it also allows Patrick to circumscribe Tom’s behavior. On this front, Patrick proceeds gently, choosing to manipulate and endear rather than demand and alienate. With false

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62 Ibid., p. 129.
63 Ibid., p. 42.
modesty he begs forgiveness for his failure to write: “I realize our situations aren’t the same. You have the right to expect to hear from me. I know I can’t expect to hear from you until I leave this place. . . . I know that a lot of things can keep you from writing often—your job, your classes, people you have to see.” Patrick implies that his life is narrow, focused entirely on Tom, whereas Tom’s life is broad, filled with obligations and people; Patrick is only one of many. In fact, we learn that the opposite is true. Patrick’s life is large and full; Tom’s life is small and sparse. And yet, by asserting the opposite, Patrick stokes Tom’s affection in ways that soften the blunt edge of Patrick’s real message: Tom is strictly forbidden from writing to him while he is living at the monastery. All correspondence from Tom to Patrick is to be directed to Singapore where Patrick will travel eventually and “walk into the hotel . . . and ask at the desk for my mail and shuffle quickly through it, looking for the letters from you! How many will there be—three, four, five, six? . . . I’ll be quite content with only one letter, as long as your love is in it.” Patrick’s rhetoric is that of a giddy boy or girl in love for the first time; his words are ones that seduce Tom because Tom is just that, a young man smitten early in life. Patrick conjures up an image of a pair of lovers who are on equal footing emotionally when, in fact, Patrick is in control.

The remainder of the letter is an intricate profession of love that is crafted by Patrick and designed to trick Tom into accepting the place to which he has been assigned in Patrick’s complicated life. The opening declaration is bold and revealing: “What I want to tell you tonight is this—as far as I’m concerned, our relationship seems to keep on growing stronger and deeper, although we’re apart. I mean this literally! It’s very

\(^{64}\) Ibid., p.130.
strange, something I have never experienced before with anyone.” The reader is as startled as Patrick by this claim because both know the truth, that Patrick and Tom have known each other for only a short time and most of that time has been spent either having sex or living apart. Both the reader and Patrick realize that he is speaking “literally” rather than metaphorically when he says that “our relationship seems to keep on growing stronger and deeper.” Both know that Patrick alludes to the physical rather than the metaphorical, the sexual rather that he emotional—“stronger and deeper.” Yet, his language invites a more tender reading, one that stirs the heart rather than or as well as the loins. And as Patrick’s con unfolds, it is that reading that he hopes will preoccupy Tom.

Patrick tells Tom of a dream he had during the night after he last wrote to him. Having recently been separated from Tom, Patrick “was feeling awful. I needed you so badly. It was chiefly a physical need, I admit, and it was torture, pure and simple.” The dream turned wet, but it was not simply a “sexual dream,” according to Patrick. Rather, “this was much more than a dream, it was so intense it was a sort of vision. I mean, there was a burning pleasure and then an utter fulfillment with you. . . . But the whole experience went far beyond just sex, it was actually a glimpse of a life which you and I were living together!” The dream is a romantic cliché; sex (“a burning pleasure”) transports two lovers to higher plane (“an utter fulfillment”). Tom no doubt swoons as he reads of Patrick’s “vision.” Patrick no doubt smirks, writing as he does in terms that allow him to hedge his bets. The use of the indefinite article in the phrases “a glimpse” and “a life” is heavy handed; Patrick belabor the point: for him, there are many possibilities—“a”—rather than a single possibility—“the.” Patrick’s life, if managed

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65 Ibid., p. 130.
properly, can include a doting mother, a prodigal brother, a devoted wife, and a boy on the side. Tom, on the other hand, is duped by Patrick into circumscribing his life; for Tom, the world is narrow, filled with transcendent love and populated by Patrick and Tom alone.

In the course of the letter, Patrick cultivates Tom’s delusion easily because Tom is vulnerable to Patrick’s professed and implied devotion. Patrick’s rhetoric takes flight. Talk of his desire to be closer to Oliver gives rise to a meditation on brotherhood:

Tommy . . . I’m certain that you could be my brother—the kind of brother I now know I’ve been searching for all these years, without ever quite daring to admit to myself what it was that I wanted. I suppose I was frightened off by the taboos which surround the idea of brotherhood in the family sense—oh yes, they encourage you to love your brother, but only as far as the limits they’ve set—beyond that it’s a deadly sin and a horror. What I want is a life beyond their taboos, in which two men learn to trust each other so completely that there’s no fear left and they experience and share everything together in the flesh and in the spirit. I don’t believe such closeness is possible between a man and a woman—deep down they are mutual enemies—and how many men ever find it together? Only a very few even glimpse the possibility of it, and only a very few out of that few dare to find it.66

Patrick tempts the diminutive “Tommy” with a repudiation of heterosexuality, on the one hand, and with the promise of “true brotherhood,” on the other. What Patrick envisions is bold and rare: two men bound together “in the flesh and in the spirit.” What Patrick envisions is a life measured differently, a “life beyond their taboos.” In short, Patrick promises Tom that together they can redraw the moral boundaries that circumscribe human behavior so that they encompass a love that only “few dare to find.”

Having stirred Tom’s heart—“we are going to dare, aren’t we?”—Patrick sets out to explain how they will carve out a place for themselves in the mainstream, how they will go about stretching boundaries and redefining the acceptable. Referring to a previous

66 Ibid., pp. 131–132.
letter to Tom in which he argued that the two would “have to be crafty and cunning” and would have to hide behind the fiction that Tom worked for him. Patrick pleads on behalf of candor: “No, we must be absolutely without fear. . . . we must find the time and opportunity to go away, right away from everybody to a place where we can be alone, until we have broken down all the last little remaining barriers between us—we shall discover what they are by degrees, petty suspicions and shames and pockets of false pride. When those are gone we can face other people without fear and let them see us as we are.”67 Patrick and Tom will retreat from society in search of the true bond that links them together and which, once discovered, will allow them to return to society, where, Patrick promises, they will be greeted with acceptance.

The argument sways Tom, even though Patrick’s conclusion is patently preposterous: “We won’t be aggressive, but we won’t attempt to hide anything. Then it’ll be up to the others to decide how they’ll react—accept us or reject us. And, do you know, I have faith that we shall be accepted, at any rate by the ones we really care about? I believe that our being together is going to find its place and fit in amongst the other relationships of our lives, without even causing any great disturbance.” Set in 1967, Patrick’s claim, “we won’t be aggressive,” is political; it refers to the increasingly public clamor for what would become known as gay rights and to Patrick’s refusal to lend his voice to the cause. Rather, Patrick hopes to keep his homosexuality private in the truest sense of the word; his ambition is narrow and self-centered, confined to his sexual and emotional life alone. He fears “causing any great disturbance” in that life, and so he envisions a world into which he and Tom can slip unobtrusively as a couple and win the acceptance of “the ones we really care about.” Missing from his letter to Tom are the

67 Ibid., p. 133.
voices of “the other relationships of our lives”—the voices of Mother, Penelope, and his two daughters, all of which would surely challenge Patrick’s assumptions.

Patrick proceeds cautiously in public, boldly in private. He speaks openly with various monks about their repudiation of sexual pleasure, but does so, he assures Tom, without awaking anyone’s “suspicion that the problem of you and me exists.” Conversely, his private declarations to Tom are grandiose and poetic: “Tom, I feel strangely certain that one day I shall have you and you’ll have me, somehow, somewhere. Let’s have faith that it will happen—because it must! . . . As far as I’m concerned, being with you is Life.” Patrick has crafted a life for himself that is pleasurable and satisfying on all fronts: he has secured the affection of a doting Mother, the domestic stability of wife and children, and the sexual excitement of a young lover. All three aspects of his life are in balance—until Tom calls the monastery and hastens the meeting by the river.

Patrick’s letter to Tom clearly drove him into a state of frenzied passion; the declaration of love was too bold, the language too stirring. The letter, in short, failed to contain Tom. Left with no choice, Patrick is forced to confess to Oliver, but he does so in ways that control the damage Tom has done. He speaks with Oliver not as a “brother” but rather as “people do to a priest,” hoping that Oliver will keep quiet about “the problem” of Patrick and Tom. He uses hyperbole to keep Oliver from judging him: “Do you think I’m awfully wicked, Olly? Do you think I’m damned?” He vows to fulfill his familial duties. And most importantly, as soon as possible he smoothly shifts the subject of conversation to Oliver: “He went on, in a tone of gentle, reproachful intimacy, do you

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68 Ibid., pp. 135–136.
know why I made such a point of coming here to see you, Olly—it was because I felt that perhaps you needed to talk to me."^69

Patrick turns his attention from Oliver to Tom, whom he needs to contain. The challenge is formidable. Tom is clearly incapable of living within the boundaries Patrick has circumscribed for him; he is a loose cannon. Patrick needs to cut him off without inflaming him further. He needs to restore balance to his life.

As he did with Penelope, Patrick chooses to write to Tom rather than call him. He prefers the written to the spoken word. Writing allows for reflection and the careful crafting of a rhetorical strategy designed to manipulate:

My dear Tom,

After our conversation last night, I feel I must get a letter off to you at once. . . (Perhaps you’ll say to yourself, well, if he’s in such a hurry to clear things up, why the hell doesn’t he telephone me? But I think, if you remember anything about last night, you’ll have to agree that just wouldn’t be sensible. It would still be impossible for us two to communicate calmly with each other in our present emotional state. We’d only get excited and incoherent and tie ourselves up in further misunderstandings.)

A conversation between two people, particularly one that could become heated, is of no use to Patrick. He needs to control what is said because he has a point to make and something to accomplish; he needs to end his relationship with Tom.^70

Patrick’s strategy is elegantly multifaceted.

First, he emphasizes that Tom was drunk and he himself was angry; thus, much of what was said can be either forgiven or forgotten: “Of course, there’s always the possibility that you don’t remember what I did say—you certainly were drunk”; “I know

^69 Ibid., pp. 142, 146, 151.
^70 Ibid., p. 161.
I lost my temper last night and said some things I shouldn’t have said and didn’t quite mean.”

Next, he identifies with Tom; the two share feelings in common. “First of all, I want to tell you that I do understand perfectly what made you make that call. . . . Believe me, Tom, there’ve been many times when I longed to call you.” Neither malice nor ill will motivated Tom to call Patrick. Rather, Tom is stirred by loneliness, the very kind of loneliness that “if one lets oneself brood on it, it distorts everything into a nightmare of isolation and self-pity, until one simply doesn’t stop to consider the consequences of one’s actions or just doesn’t care what they’ll be.”

Tom and Patrick are human and both know what it means to be lonely. They differ in their response to loneliness. Patrick is measured; Tom is wild. And while Patrick understands Tom’s petulance and so forgives him, he nonetheless chides Tom.

The reproach is gentle; the barb is sharp. Myopically preoccupied with Patrick, Tom fails to picture the physical setting in which Patrick received the call:

I think very few of us ever take the trouble to visualize what may be going on at the other end of a telephone line. I know I often fail to do that myself, and sometimes one can’t be expected to. How could you possibly have know that I was talking to you last night in the presence of at least thirty people, several of whom undoubtedly understood English quite well, well enough certainly to get a general idea of what was going on between us? The fact that our conversation was, to put it mildly, personal didn’t mean to them that it should be private. No one left the room. I suppose in Asia this kind of insensitiveness, as it appear to be from our viewpoint, is normal behaviour, like not moving away when people pee in the street!

Like most people, Patrick notes, Tom is self-absorbed. He pursues self-interest, all the while blinded to the needs of others. The offense is mild; Tom simply doesn’t know any better. He has never traveled to India and can’t possibly imagine a place where the

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71 Ibid., p. 161–162.
72 Ibid., p. 162.
“personal” is not “private,” a place where people openly “pee in the street.” On the surface, Patrick appears to be doing little more than scolding Tom with lowered voice.

And yet, Patrick is doing much more. In pointing out that Tom is unaware of social and cultural difference, Patrick accuses Tom of being naïve and prone to the very kind of indiscretion that hurts other people. The phone call, Patrick notes, had widespread, ethical ramifications:

So, I was rattled, I’m afraid, and all the more so because I knew you’d already spoken to my Brother. I don’t know exactly what you said to him . . . but it was obvious that you’d been pretty hysterical . . . I’m sure you didn’t leave him in any doubt as to what the relations between you and me were . . . it wasn’t very pleasant for me to have to confess to him everything that has gone on between us. I say ‘confess,’ because having to tell him outright like that, without any preparation, made it sound like a confession. But I owed it to him not to spare any details, because of course he may well have to face questions from his superiors, if they get to hear about our conversation from those who were present. I know that Oliver in his loyalty will do his best to cover up the whole affair and make light of it, even though, as a monk, he will be committing a grave sin by not telling the unvarnished truth. This will cause him great distress, I know, and most probably he’ll punish himself for it later with severe self-inflicted penances.  

First, Tom’s call was an invasion of Patrick’s privacy, forcing him to disclose to his brother aspects of his personal life that he would have preferred to have kept hidden. Second, the call put Oliver in a compromising position with his spiritual elders; Oliver will be called upon to answer questions about his deviant brother and in so doing be forced to lie. In fact, the Swamis would have little or no regard for Patrick’s sexual escapades given the Vedantic view of sex, but Patrick indicts Tom within the very Judeo-Christian framework Tom is likely to understand.

In the end, though, Patrick argues that Tom’s actions “cause . . . great distress.” They injure the innocent. And it is this moral affront—namely, harming those who

73 Ibid., pp 162–163.
neither provoke nor deserve harm, that Patrick alleges is of greatest consequence: “I don’t
give a damn about myself. . . . I am only thinking of my Brother. No, that’s not quite
true—I’m thinking also of the elder monks. . . . It’s all very well to be defiant and say
that my private life is my own affair. Yes, that’s true, but only as long as I keep it private.
By letting it become public I force my standards of behaviour on them, as it were—and
what right do I have to do that? I feel I’ve abused their hospitality. And that I hate.” 74
Patrick disregards self-interest. Rather, he defends that which is universally right. He
dons the mantle of moral authority and judges Tom harshly, but he does so in terms that
recall those of his prior profession of love, a declaration that is at odds with what he
claims here because there he envisioned a relationship that is boldly public: “We can face
other people and let them see us as we are.” 75

Patrick, in short, is a con artist. One letter is designed to stir Tom’s heart in order
to hook him; this letter is crafted to seal Tom’s lips and get rid of him. Tom’s lapse in
judgment harms, but Patrick forgives.

The argument for separating unfolds elegantly. Not only was Tom drunk, but he is
young and naïve: “I shouldn’t have been angry with you. How could you have
understood this? You are an impulsive creature, Tommy dear. . . . I’m just beginning to
realize how awfully young you are, young even for your age. Since last night I see that
we do actually belong to two different generations.” Patrick recasts the relationship; now,
he and Tom are no longer equals, but rather more like father and son. Patrick seduced
Tom sexually, but did so in a way that was misleading and cruel: “The realization of how
young you are emotionally was the greatest shock I got from last night. It made me think

74 Ibid., p. 164.
75 Ibid., p. 133.
very hard. I begin to see our relationship in an altogether different light, and for the first time I feel guilty about it, because I now see that I involved you in something which was far out of your depth. . . . I see now how utterly monstrously selfish my attitude was.” Patrick has taken advantage of Tom, a discovered truth that compels the morally “upright” Patrick to act in Tom’s best interest rather than his own.

And so, Patrick is honor-bound to end the relationship with Tom and assume blame for the damage he has done:

Oh, it was all my fault, of course. In my eagerness to seem young to you, I instinctively concealed my oldness of spirit, my tiredness. . . . You see, I have been hurt, I don’t want to remember how many times, there’s no sense in brooding over it. You don’t know what it’s like, thank goodness, that kind of disappointment in someone which takes the edge off your faith in life. . . . The only way I can repay your is to make sure that you won’t ever be disillusioned by me. Somebody will hurt you sooner or later, I’m afraid, because you are so reckless and innocent and loving—but it won’t be me, that I can prevent, at any rate.

In itself, Patrick’s profession is noble and upright. He accepts complete responsibility for involving Tom in a relationship beyond his emotional years. He admits that he concealed his true self in the sexual excitement of the moment. And he steps up to his duty as the elder to set things right. Read in the context of his other letters to Tom as well as his meeting by the river, though, Patrick’s mea culpa is a manipulative farce. He heaps blame upon himself in order to create the appearance of moral propriety that conceals what in fact he is doing to Tom, inflicting upon him “that kind of disappointment in someone which takes the edge off your faith in life.”

And so Patrick hopes to slither away. “For God’s sake, don’t get the suspicion that this is leading up to some dishonest attempt to say goodbye without actually saying it, just to spare your feelings and save me the embarrassment.” In fact, Patrick does end
the relationship without saying goodbye: “Of course we shall meet again. Only I do think we need a period of separation first, probably quite a long one. We ought not to see each other until we can take each other more lightly.” Patrick breaks off with Tom without cutting ties altogether. He deviously continues to manipulate Tom for two reasons, both of which are in Patrick’s best interest. He drops a crumb into Tom’s lap: the hope that they will see each other again one day. And he does so for two, interconnected reasons. On the one hand, he hedges his sexual bets—in time, he might be able to return to Tom’s bed without engaging Tom’s heart (“take each other more lightly”). On the other, he bargains that with that light flickering dimly in the distance, Tom won’t do anything rash, like contacting his wife Penelope.76

And so the letter closes with Patrick preoccupied with silencing Tom. First, he encourages Tom to end his fixation and fall for another: “Yes, I do wish you another lover, someone altogether more suitable, closer to your own age, with more faith and courage and innocence than I had left to give you.”77 Next, Patrick reassures Tom that he will never pursue another lover. Rather, he will abandon passion altogether and simply return to work and family: “There’ll always be my work. I must plunge back into that. And then there’s my family—I have my duty to them, and . . . they have so many needs which it’s up to me to satisfy in a practical way. Duty often seems to me to be the only thing one can really count on, in the long run.”78 The practical will supplant the romantic for Patrick. And finally, with the affair, Patrick argues for the destruction of the record of the affair—the letters the two have written to each other: “About those letters which are waiting for me in Singapore. . . . I’ll either burn them unopened or send them back to

76 Ibid., p. 166–167.
77 Ibid., p. 167.
78 Ibid., 168.
you—let me know which you prefer. . . . I beg you, burn all my letters, for your own sake! If you keep them around and reread them, they’ll only make you unhappy.”79 Once again feigning an interest in Tom’s feelings, Patrick manipulates in the hope that he can convince Tom to destroy the evidence. And so, Patrick wistfully signs off with a profession of love that is on the one hand the clichéd “too little too late,” but on the other a clever device meant to close and to open, to declare the relationship of the past over and to stir hope for the future. Patrick, in short, has Tom right where he wants him.

Patrick appends a postscript to the letter that is as confusing as it is revelatory. In sum, he urges Tom to try his luck with girls. Given that Tom’s ravenous love of men is precisely what attracted Patrick in the first place, the suggestion seems odd and out of place. But then, Patrick goes on to explain: “But when someone is—as you must admit you are—such a militant standard bearer in the ranks of the man-lovers, isn’t it just possible that his sexual inclinations may be partly prejudice? Steady now, don’t start denying this right away! First ask yourself frankly, am I against heterosexual love simply because it’s respectable and legal and approved of by the churches and the newspapers and all those other vested interests I hate.”80 Patrick challenges Tom to think about whether “sexual inclinations” are choices conditioned by social forces and institutions external to the self. In fact, Patrick implies that they are and goes on to argue that Tom should make choices that serve him:

If you honestly don’t like girls, you don’t—all I’m urging is that you should give them a few more tries. They do have their advantages, you know, the chief of which is that they can provide you with children. You of all people, with so much love to give, ought not to miss the marvelous experience of being a father. I can promise you that becoming a husband is a very small price to pay for it? Being married does make a lot of things

79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., p. 169.
easier because the world accepts marriage at its face value, without asking what goes on behind the scenes. . . . The unmarried are apt to regard marriage as a prison—actually it gives you much greater freedom. And you’d be amazed how many of the married men I know personally swing both ways. Some of them will even admit that they feel more at ease making love with other married men, rather than with out-and-out homosexuals, whom they’re inclined to look on as somewhat willful freaks.  

So constructed, heterosexuality and homosexuality are social institutions that either advantage or disadvantage. Accordingly, Patrick urges Tom to do as he has done and make the socially acceptable choice of marrying a woman. Doing so would provide him with apparent benefits—children and “the experience of being a father.” But, more importantly, it would provide him with the veneer of respectability that would allow for “greater freedom” to do whatever he wishes unchecked “behind the scenes.”

For Patrick, heterosexuality and homosexuality are social conceits to which benefits and/or liabilities are attached. They are artificial. Bisexuality, on the other hand, is natural: “May I also call to your attention that one of your best-seller American psychologists . . . maintains that man is bisexual by nature and that the homosexual who rigidly rejects women under all circumstances is being just as unnatural and square as the heterosexual who rejects men!” Human beings are only true to nature when left free to roam the spectrum of sexuality.  

In his celebration of bisexuality, Patrick eschews the categorical in the same way that Oliver did when he rejected the ideal of moska in favor of a faith that grants the coexistence of the phenomenal and the spiritual and in the same way that Isherwood did in 1951 when he walked away from the Center and Caskey in search of a life that balanced the sexual and the spiritual. In turning their back on the categorical, all three

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81 Ibid., p. 170.  
82 Ibid., pp. 170–171.
point to a tenet central to Vedanta—namely, the assertion first conveyed to Isherwood by Swami Prabhavananda “that all religions are essentially in agreement.” With all paths leading to Truth, the line between right and wrong is fluid; Patrick demonstrates the problem with ethical relativity.83

Patrick’s final letter to his wife is at once endearing and diabolical. The note opens with a sigh, “Oh, Penny—” and ends with a diminutive cuddle, “Yours sleepily but completely.” Patrick bubbles throughout the letter, eager to communicate honestly with Penny: “I don’t think I have ever felt a greater need to write to you than I do now—there’s so much I want to say. . . . I have a strange, rather exhilarating feeling that I’ve never understood certain things about myself and my life as clearly as I do at this moment.” He celebrates his fraternal bond with Oliver, refusing to sleep as Oliver takes sannyas: “I feel I ought not to go to bed, I want to hold my own little private vigil to keep him company!” He speaks of the rituals of conversion only to boast of Oliver’s daring and capacity for greatness: “I find this act of his, the sheer courage of it, terribly moving.

83 In the course of doing my research on Vedanta, I came across a collection of essays entitled What Vedanta Means to Me: A Symposium (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960). The title struck me as an odd choice for a theological text dedicated to setting out the basic tenets of Vedanta: is there no orthodox canon to Vedanta? Indeed, there is a set of beliefs and teachings that are established, and yet the teachings of Vedanta embrace a level of subjectivity and universalism best summarized in an introductory statement to the volume by John Yale: “By asking a comparative stranger, one who is not a member of the Vedanta society, to introduce the various evidences here presented, the editors wished, I think, to indicate an essential aspect of Vedanta itself: its benign universalism, the welcome it gives to all who seek by whatever way.” Vedanta, thus, values the subjective experience in ways that other religions do not. Rather than prescribing human behavior, labeling right and wrong, Vedanta embraces the full range of human behavior and action, viewing it all as part of a steady procession toward Truth. As John van Druten explains in his essay within the collection: “If Vedanta is in itself a religion, or a statement of religious principles, it is also an embracement of all religious principles. The statement is made in the widest possible terms. It can catch and hold members of any religion whose code is not so strict that it will not allow them to look in any other direction, or to accept the fact that there are other manifestations of faith besides its own. Unfortunately, that is true of most religions. But to those, too, Vedanta holds out its arms” (p. 59).
He’s so utterly, almost unimaginably alone in what he’s doing—far more so than any lone hero on a battlefield.” And he professes a love for Penny that is without boundary.  

But, it is in that very profession of love that Patrick manipulates his wife in order to protect himself and secure a license to roam freely along the spectrum of sexuality. Patrick’s paean to Oliver culminates with a poetically bold salute: “Dear old awe-inspiring preposterous Olly.” From there, Patrick segues into a discussion of love:

I feel so close to him tonight! And through him I seem closer than ever to you my darling—I mean, I feel such closeness in the thought of us three together. Each one of us will belong to the other two always, even if we never set eyes on Olly again. Do you know, while I’ve been with him here, I’ve often found myself wondering what would have happened if he had married you! We have never discussed you, only referred to you and the Children occasionally, and yet, oddly enough, I now know for certain that he’s still in love with you. And you once told me that you were still in love with him. Isn’t it strange that I can talk about this and not feel jealous? Oh, Penny, how extraordinary men and women are in their dealings with each other! Why do two people choose to live together, “forsaking all others.” Is it love or need? Is the need to be needed stronger than love? Or does love, in its pure absolute (as in alcohol) form, need no relationships? Do we love Olly because he doesn’t need us? I know I need you. I hope to God you need me. 

Patrick’s argument is crafty. First, he constructs a ménage à trois that defies convention and suggests that marriage can take on many different shapes. Second, he implicates his wife; she is party to his defiance of conventional marriage: “he’s still in love with you” and “you were still in love with him.” Third, he exchanges love for need as the basis of marriage: “I need you” and “you need me.” Conventional marriage rooted in love becomes an abstraction easily dismissed, as Patrick speaks of love in decidedly platonic terms: “pure, absolute . . . form.”

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85 Ibid., pp. 181–182.
For Patrick—and allegedly for his wife—marriage is a game. “It seems to me that we only play at ‘marriage’ for the benefit of other people to reassure them that we’re like they are and not freaks.” Patrick and Penelope live as a married couple for the very reason that he urges Tom to marry; the institution provides him with the veneer of respectability behind which he can live his life as he chooses. The problem with living like this, Patrick argues, is that they can easily forget that they are playing a game and in so doing hurt each other: “Game-playing can be dangerous, because one may get to take it seriously. There is a danger that even you and I might start believing that I really am your husband. And there have been times, I know, when you have suddenly felt insecure. . . . You’ve accepted the world’s values and allowed yourself to think in terms of ‘husband,’ ‘wife,’ married couple, etc. and therefore told yourself that you were being humiliated, betrayed and so forth.”\(^{86}\)

So, Patrick begs Penny to “accept me as I am.” He beseeches her to let him run off and play, confident that he can return to her arms as a child would to its mother. And he speaks in terms that beatify that bond:

I shall always return from these idiotic adventures with increased love for you and gratitude—in fact, I can only enjoy these adventures if you’ll sanction them! Oh Penny, can’t we forget about “marriage” altogether and live in our own special way, the way that’s natural to us? Can’t I quite shamelessly be the child who keeps running home to you, and who is always thinking of you even in the midst of his play. When I see us in that relationship it’s obvious to me that you can be more central to my life than any mere wife could be to any mere husband.

I am all yours, Penny. Yours and the Children’s. Never doubt this. To me you are safety and freedom, both together, and those are the two things I need more than anything else in the world. Only you can give them to me.\(^{87}\)

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\(^{86}\) Ibid., pp. 182–183.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., pp. 184–185.
Patrick and presumably Penny have redefined the terms of marriage. They have redrawn the boundaries in ways that allegedly suit both of them, and yet, given that Patrick is a con artist and a liar, one can’t help but question the extent to which Penny acquiesces. In fact, one can only infer from the pleading tone of this letter that Penny accepts Patrick’s terms because she is trapped and without choice.

And so Patrick shows himself to be the villain that he is. Assuming that Penelope is complicit, Tom is not. As the letter to Penny draws to a close, he tells her as an aside that she might hear from “a young American named Tom.” Patrick dismisses Tom—“he’s terribly disturbed, poor boy, and terribly young” and claims that Tom misunderstood the nature of their relationship: “We’d had a little interlude of pleasure together, he jumped to conclusions and imagined, I don’t exactly know what, that I had somehow committed myself to him. . . . So he might try to make some kind of scene with you and perhaps pretend that I’ve promised him all sorts of things which I never did or could have.”88 Patrick is simply lying. He did boldly profess his love to Tom and extend to him the promise of a future together that defied the boundaries of conventional relationships. In short, he destroyed Tom’s innocence, inflicting upon him the very hurt he so aptly described when parting with Tom “as that kind of disappointment in someone which takes the edge off your faith in life.”89

Patrick’s musings on bisexuality and marriage fit into Isherwood’s larger, critical examination of Vedanta. Like Oliver, Patrick discards the categorical in favor of the relative. When Oliver redraws the boundaries that circumscribe his faith, though, he does so in the service of living a truthful life that is devoted to the greater good. However,

88 Ibid.
89 Ibid., p. 160.
when Patrick redraws the boundaries of conventional marriage and sexuality, he does so in ways that serve himself and harm others. So read, the story of Patrick and Oliver is a meditation on the very endorsement of ethical relativism that is at the heart of Vedanta. Clearly nourished throughout his life by Vedanta, Isherwood nonetheless discovered the perilous ethical position endorsed thereby. *A Meeting by the River* reveals how moral judgment is compromised when right and wrong become relative values, easily manipulated to justify individual action with little regard for the interests of the whole.
CHAPTER 4

A Single Man is Isherwood’s finest novel. Published in 1964, this penultimate novel is stylistically brilliant. “Beautifully written in a style that alternates between poetic intensity and gentle irony, the book is a technical tour de force in which every nuance is perfectly controlled,” according to Claude Summers.¹

The story is simple and the narrative is straightforward. George wakes in the morning, tends to his toilet and descends the stairs leading from his bedroom: “And it is here, nearly every morning, that George, having reached the bottom of the stairs, has this sensation of suddenly finding himself on an abrupt, brutally broken off, jagged edge. . . . It is here that he stops short and knows, with a sick newness, almost as though it were for the first time: Jim is dead. Is dead.”² George is alone. He prepares and eats his breakfast; returns to the toilet; drives to school; eats with colleagues; teaches a class; visits a dying friend in the hospital; drinks and dines with his friend Charlotte, a.k.a. Charley; runs into one of his students, Kenny, at a gay bar; skinny dips with Kenny in the ocean across the street from the bar; and takes Kenny home, only to fall asleep and wake to find that Kenny has left him tucked in and unsatisfied. Throughout this one day, George

¹ Claude Summers, Christopher Isherwood (New York: Ungar, 1980), p. 120.
periodically recalls Jim and his death in a car accident, producing a haunting meditation on love.

To date, scholars who have done significant work on Isherwood agree that *A Single Man* is a superb novel—a piece of writing that validates Cyrill Connolly’s 1938 boast that Isherwood was “the hope of English fiction.” However, these very scholars read the novel more brightly than the text allows.

Carolyn Heilbrun is humored by the tale of George. “*A Single Man* (1964), that masterpiece of a comic novel, is the story of one day in the life of an expatriate English professor in Los Angeles. It contains the best American college classroom scene ever portrayed, and a series of stunning portraits, not the least of all George, the central character who . . . is allowed no single moment of privacy.” Indeed, the novel is filled with humorous images that linger long after reading the story: George perched on the toilet with a book by Ruskin in hand, peering out the window at a little Benny Strunk who is wildly hammering away at a scale pulled from the garbage; George scooting from the toilet to answer the phone (“even with the longest cord the phone company will give you, it won’t reach into the bathroom. George gets himself off the seat and shuffles into the study like a man in a sack race”); George’s encounter in the cafeteria with Russ Dreyer, an older student who reveres George and who is “a grade A scholar and his European counterpart would probably be a rather dry and brittle stick. But Dryer is neither dry nor brittle. He has discreet humor and, as an ex-Marine, considerable toughness”; the boozy night with his friend Charlie, who shoves her tongue into his

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3 Cyrill Connolly, *Enemies of Promise*, as quoted by Peter Parker in *Isherwood*, p. 363.
4 Heilbrun, *Christopher Isherwood* p. 42.
6 Ibid., p. 49.
mouth when kissing George goodnight; and George neatly wrapped in a dressing gown talking with and turned on by Kenny, who clumsily wraps himself in a towel.

Moreover, Heilbrun celebrates the absence of the spiritual in the novel. George is simply George: “Not that *A Single Man* ever mentions spiritual experience; that is its greatness. Here is only the portrait of an inhabited body and the attempts it makes at living.” George trudges through the day, preoccupied with being human and with living in the world. In fact, by emphasizing the impersonal (“an inhabited body”) rather than the personal (George), Heilbrun urges the reader to pay attention to George’s struggle to label himself in relationship to Jim, his now dead lover: “George is a homosexual, which allows him to have lost his life’s companion without being a widower or deserted, and to have a remarkable but largely nonsexual relationship with a woman his own age.” For Heilbrun, the absence of conventional labels is liberating; George is free to choose whether and how he will name himself and his relationships.

Published eight years after Heilbrun’s essay, Paul Piazza’s 1978 study is entitled *Christopher Isherwood: Myth and Anti-Myth*. As the title implies, Piazza is preoccupied with the very archetypes that were important to Isherwood in life and in fiction: Mother, Father, Mother-Son, War Hero, the Homosexual, and the Heterosexual. All these and others figure prominently in his study. For him, the “suprasensible” resonates throughout *A Single Man*: “Though radically different in technique, *A Single Man* and *A Meeting by the River* both point to an extra dimension, a ‘super-conscious, extraphenomenal’ aspect in reality. In *A Single Man*, Isherwood presents a day in the life of a Truly Lonely Man, George. . . . His homosexuality, his education, his pathetic mourning for Jim, his dead

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7 Heilbrun, *Christopher Isherwood*, p. 42.
lover, actually intensify George’s very human condition of loneliness."  

George is an archetype, “a Truly Lonely Man.” His story is one of another archetype: “Who is George? Isherwood’s Everyman for in his humanity and desire for wholeness, George is no different from anyone else.” Piazza is preoccupied with the universal rather than the particular and the mundane. His reading of the novel elevates George from a man, to “a Truly Lonely Man,” to “Everyman,” to Saint. In the end, according to Piazza, George is on a Vedantic journey. His swim in the sea with Kenny is neither drunken foolery nor the lust driven act of an older man smitten with the charm and looks of a younger man. Rather, the swim symbolizes “a letting go of consciousness and of self and . . . a merging with Being itself.”

In his 1980 study, Christopher Isherwood, Claude Summers shares Paul Piazza’s impulse to see George as a universal archetype, though he does start with George the gay man. The chapter devoted to A Single Man praises the novel as “the masterpiece of Isherwood’s maturity . . . dealing with universal themes of commitment and grief, alienation and isolation, the book concretely explores the minority sensibility, presenting the homosexual predicament as a faithful mirror of the human condition.” Summers acknowledges George’s homosexuality and at the start he is preoccupied with the very facts of George’s life: his lover is dead, he lives alone, he has one friend, he is cut off from the past, and he is alienated from both the mainstream and the communities of homosexuals, such as they existed before Stonewall. However, Summers shares Piazza’s inclination to see the universal and shared in the particular and unique George:

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8 Piazza, Christopher Isherwood, p. 150.
9 Ibid., p. 161.
10 Ibid., p. 153.
11 Summers, Christopher Isherwood, pp. 110–111.
A Single Man has been described accurately as a memento mori sermon. But it is more: the awareness of death heightens the need to live fully and to love. A Single Man is surely as much about living as about dying. It confronts the most vital issues of contemporary fiction and of modern life and offers in resolution to the problems of alienation and isolation a vision of community, of self-transcendence through universal consciousness and through involvement in the lives of others. In making concrete this resolution, the novel presents a sustained and moving portrait of male homosexual love—perhaps the most honest of such portraits in contemporary fiction—and plumbs insightfully and revealingly the homosexual plight, using homosexuality as a metaphor for alienation.

The vision of A Single Man is complex, even double: the assertions of individual uniqueness and of minority consciousness are regarded as indispensable worldly goals, but goals ultimately subsumed in the Vedantic idea of the oneness of life. All individuals are single in their separateness, one from another, yet they are finally united in an oceanic consciousness. Thus, even as the novel charts George’s growth from isolation toward worldly commitment, it also traces his emergence from the narrow confines of individual identity into an other-worldly union with the universal consciousness.12

Summers is absolutely right that the novel is “a sustained and moving portrait of male homosexual love—perhaps the most honest of such portraits in contemporary fiction.” Had he stopped with that assertion and looked closely at the portrait, he would perhaps have been in a position to speak eloquently about the many shades of that love. Instead, he moves as Piazza does from the particular to the universal. The story becomes one that speaks of the “homosexual predicament” or the “homosexual plight”—whatever they might be—and George’s life becomes a metaphor for human alienation, on the one hand, and a testimony of the Vedantic impulse of the individual to search for and merge “with the universal consciousness,” on the other hand.

David Izzo’s 2001 study entitled Christopher Isherwood: His Era, His Gang and the Legacy of the Truly Strong Man comes closest to a true reading of the novel in large part because Izzo argues that the relationship between Jim and George is at the center of

12 Ibid., pp. 117–118.
the story: “‘Jim is dead. Is dead.’ . . . This is the input that overwhelms George’s consciousness in every waking moment and forms the umbrella that all other information crowds itself under with obtrusive rudeness. It is 1962. George cannot yet say openly that his male lover is dead and be allowed to grieve openly. Since George is British, his stiff upper lip is conditioned non-response to his grief, even though he knows that this particular reaction is a fool’s mask.”

Jim and George were an unconventional couple living in a conventional world that did not acknowledged them or the love that bound them together. Separated by death, George is alone, unable “to grieve openly.” George is profoundly sad, and yet he has no other option than the “non-response” and the “fools mask.” This is the very truth that is at the heart of the novel, and had Izzo dwelled thereon his study would perhaps have been more revelatory. Instead, like those before him, his final reading of the novel is heavily influenced by Vedanta and far more optimistic than Isherwood intended: “George awakens. The experience with Kenny has indeed transformed him by giving him back his will to go forward—if not with Kenny, then with someone else. He would remember Jim faithfully but would no longer cling to his memory as an emotional crutch. George would stay in their home because this is where he had found Jim and where a new cycle should begin.”

In sum, all of the serious studies of *A Single Man* end on a positive note. Heilbrun laughs at the same time that she celebrates George’s freedom to define himself and his relationship with Jim. Piazza, Summers, and Izzo all read *A Single Man* with Vedanta in mind. In so doing, they see either archetypes or universal truths about the human condition in a novel that is a smaller, simpler story.

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14 Ibid., p. 232.
A Single Man is a story about two men, Jim and George, who create a life for themselves that is both emotionally and physically detached from the world at large. Isolation on the margin is the key to reading the novel as Isherwood intended.

The house that Jim and George bought and occupied is located on the outskirts of “dingy downtown Los Angeles” in an area originally settled by artists and writers in the early 1920s. The “colony” was for a brief period an enclave, a place apart from the mainstream where living an alternative life was possible:

Their utopian dream was of a subtropical English village with Montmartre manners: a Little Good Place where you could paint a bit, write a bit, and drink lots. They saw themselves as rear-guard individualists, making a last-ditch stand against the twentieth century. They gave thanks loudly from morn till eve that they had escaped the soul-destroying commercialism in the city. They were tacky and cheerful and defiantly bohemian, tirelessly inquisitive about each other’s doings, and boundlessly tolerant. When they fought, at least it was with fists and bottles and furniture, not lawyers. Most of them were lucky enough to have died off before the Great Change.

With the end of WWII, the “Little Good Place” became populated by returning soldiers who, newly wed, settled in the canyon to raise families. Perhaps inclined to veer in sympathy toward the “rear-guard individualists” and “defiantly bohemian,” the young men were nonetheless set straight by their wives, who insisted “that breeding and bohemianism do not mix. For breeding you need a steady job, you need a mortgage, you need credit, you need insurance. And don’t you dare die, either, until the family’s future is provided for.” By the end of the 1940s, Camphor Tree Lane had become the mainstream with two signs, “One told you not to eat the watercress. . . . The other sign—those sinister black silhouettes on a yellow ground—said CHILDREN AT PLAY.”

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15 Isherwood, A Single Man, pp. 18–19.
The “Little Good Place” was no more by 1960—the bohemian had given way to the mainstream—and yet George and Jim were drawn by a storied past and by a particular house: “They loved it because you could only get to it by the bridge across the creek; the surrounding trees and the steep bushy cliff behind shut it in like a house in a forest clearing. ‘As good as being on our own island.’” Quite simply, George and Jim not only distanced themselves from “dingy downtown Los Angles,” but they also isolated themselves from others within the canyon. In short, they moved themselves to the very margin of the margin, where after the death of Jim, George ultimately discovered a devastating reality.

II

The novel ends somewhat optimistically. Having passed out drunk and been put to bed by his student Kenny, George wakens in the middle of the night. He is disoriented at first, but clears his head long enough to read the note that Kenny left behind:

Thought maybe I’d better split, after all. I like to wander around at night. If those cops pick me up, I won’t tell them where I’ve been—I promise! Not even if they twist my arm!

That was great, this evening. Let’s do it again, shall we? Or don’t you believe in repeating things?

Couldn’t find pajamas you already used, so took these clean ones from the drawer. Maybe you sleep raw! Didn’t want to take a chance, though, Can’t have you getting pneumonia, can we!

The note confirms what George has known all along; Kenny is a tease. And yet, George is neither offended nor put off: “Little teaser, his mind says, but without the least resentment.” Rather, George is turned on, stirred by the simple fact that one so young, virile, and sexually ambiguous flirted with George, a man of a certain age, and wants to

16 Ibid., p. 20.
continue doing so into the future, a prospect that fills George with hope that perhaps the flirting will give way to “fucking.” And so, “as he lies on his back in the dark, there is something that keeps him from sleep: a tickle in the blood and nerves of the groin.”

George has an erection. In his mind, he cycles through a series of erotic, visual images while he masturbates until he lights upon the one that brings him to orgasm: two tennis players he saw earlier in the day, one a “Mexican maybe, black-haired, handsome, catlike, cruel, compact, lithe, muscular, quick and graceful on is feet” and the other a “big blond boy. . . . He is so sweet-naturedly beautiful, so nobly made; and yet his classical cream-marble body seems a handicap to him.”

George the elder is potent; he is still moved by the raw sensuality of youth, the brute battle between boys of disproportionate strength and capability: “The game is cruel; but its cruelty is sensual and stirs George into hot excitement. He feels a thrill of pleasure to find the senses so eager in their response.” The very erection George holds in his hand at the end of the day and the orgasm he enjoys fill him with hope:

Just barely awash, the brain inside its skull on the pillow cognizes darkly; not in its daytime manner. It is incapable of decision now. But, perhaps for this very reason, it can become aware, in this state, of certain decisions apparently not yet made. Decisions that are like codicils which have been secretly signed and witnessed and put away in a most private place to await the hour of their execution. . . .

Daytime George may even question the maker of these decisions; but he will not be allowed to remember its answers in the morning.

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17 As the evening with Kenny winds down and George nears unconsciousness, he becomes boisterously philosophical. He challenges Kenny and his generation, chastising both for a failure of nerve when it comes to crossing the line that separates the known from the unknown, the safe from that which is dangerous because it could entirely change one’s perception of and place in the world: “It’s the enormous tragedy of everything nowadays: flirtation. Flirtation instead of fucking, if you’ll pardon my coarseness. All any of you ever do is flirt, and wear your blankets off one shoulder, and complain about motels. And miss the one thing that might really—and, Kenneth, I do not say this casually—transform your entire life.” Isherwood, A Single Man, pp. 176–177.

18 Ibid. p.53.

19 Ibid.
What if Kenny has been scared off? What if he doesn’t come back?
Let him stay away. George doesn’t need him, or any of these kids. He isn’t looking for a son.

What if Charlotte goes back to England?
He can do without her, if he must. He doesn’t need a sister.

Will George go back to England?
No he will stay here.

Because of Jim?
No, Jim is in the past now. He is of no use to George anymore.

But George remembers him so faithfully.
George makes himself remember. He is afraid of forgetting. Jim is my life, he says. But he will have to forget, if he wants to go on living. Jim is death.

Then why will George stay here?
This is where he found Jim. He believes he will find another Jim here. He doesn’t know it, but he has started looking already.

Why does George believe he will find him?
He only knows that he must find him. He believes he will because he must.

But George is getting old. Won’t it very soon be too late?
Never use those words George. He won’t listen. He daren’t listen. Damn the future. Let Kenny and the kids have it. Let Charley keep the past. George clings only to Now. It is Now he must find another Jim. Now that he must love. Now that he must live. . . .

George’s musings and determination conjure up all the very trite things said to and by one who has lost a beloved spouse. The death of one seems to be the death of two until over time the survivor does move on with burnished memories of the past and a present made tolerable by anticipated intimacy in the future. Past, present, and future collude to steady the survivor and enable him or her to continue living. The paradigm is potent; it allows for life. However, the paradigm is also heterosexual and unavailable to George.

Conventional heterosexual relationships are linear; the past, present, and future are clearly demarcated, and yet the past, present, and future come together to make life meaningful. They have milestones everyone recognizes: boy meets girl, boy and girl become engaged, boy and girl marry in the company of others who act as witnesses, the couple has children, the couple has grandchildren, and the couple is separated by death.
And while the widow mourns at first, she eventually moves on with the support of children, grandchildren, and the community at large. If the widow should perhaps meet another boy, their relationship will most assuredly unfold as sequentially as the first even though it might steer clear of some of the milestones.

By contrast, gay relationships are sloppy; they are anything but straightforward. They neither follow a charted course, nor have milestones or norms by which they are measured and known. They are as different from each other as they are from the conventional, heterosexual relationship. A Single Man probes these differences and in so doing reveals why George’s optimism ultimately gives way to despair: “Damn the future. Let Kenny and the kids have it. Let Charley keep the past. George clings only to Now. It is Now he must find another Jim. Now that he must love. Now that he must live.” George’s life has narrowed to a single moment, “Now,” and that moment is empty because the very relationship by which he defined his life was gay and not straight. George is a single man, alone in the present with a fading memory of a dead lover.

III

As a couple, Jim and George are without social or familial standing. They lived alone on their “own island” in a house accessed only by crossing a bridge, cut off as it is from the rest of the world by trees, a cliff, and a creek. Inside that house, their meaningful life unfolded:

Think of two people, living together day after day, year after year, in this small space, standing elbow to elbow cooking at the same small stove, squeezing past each other on the narrow stairs, shaving in front of the same small bathroom mirror, constantly jogging, jostling, bumping against each other’s bodies by mistake or on purpose, sensually, aggressively, awkwardly, impatiently, in rage or in love—think what deep invisible
tracks they must leave everywhere, behind them! The doorway into the kitchen has been built too narrow. Two people in a hurry with plates of food in their hands, are apt to keep colliding here.\textsuperscript{20}

Fixed and inanimate, the house is the container for the dynamic life of Jim and George. Therein, they felt the full range of human emotion, everything from “rage” to “love.” Therein, their various passions flared and subsided—“sensually, aggressively, awkwardly, impatiently.” Therein, the mundane became meaningful to Jim and George precisely because they were a couple laying down “tracks,” in the only space they were allowed to do so—a home cut off from the outside world. Their life together was an insular one.

In fact, when Jim’s uncle in Ohio called George to tell him that Jim had been killed in a car accident, his sympathy diminished at George’s response. “An uncle of Jim’s whom he’d never met—trying to be sympathetic, even admitted George’s right to a small honorary share in the sacred family grief—but then, as they talked, becoming a bit chilled by George’s laconic \textit{Yes, I see, yes}, his curt \textit{No, thank you}, to the funeral invitation—deciding that this much talked of roommate hadn’t been such a close friend, after all.”\textsuperscript{21} In straightforward terms, Jim’s uncle misreads George’s response to the news of Jim’s death simply because he does not recognize that George is in shock. He knows George simply as a “roommate,” entitled to “a small honorary share in the sacred family grief,” but nothing more. Because the relationship between Jim and George plays out only within the walls of their walled-off home, it is neither known nor valued in the mainstream. Jim’s uncle doesn’t know how to respond to George because he doesn’t know George in the context of Jim \textit{and} George.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 12.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 126.
Quite simply, the relationship between Jim and George is unlabeled and accordingly unacknowledged. By contrast, his neighbors, the Strunks and the Garfeins, live conventional, heterosexual lives easily known by the label “married”: the women stay at home while the men go off to work, the women greet the men upon their return home with silenced children and food on the table, and the couples gather on Saturday evening for a few too many “martoonies” and “the more or less concealed pinching of other wives’s fannies, the steaks, and the pie.” The Strunks and the Garfeins are mainstream America. They are the majority entitled to and in pursuit of the American dream. “And they are proud and glad. For even the least among them is a co-owner of the American utopia, the kingdom of the good life upon earth—crudely aped by the Russians, hated by the Chinese—who are nonetheless ready to purge and starve themselves for generations, in the hopeless hope of inheriting it.”

Snug within the mainstream, they fear only one thing: the unknown. They are frightened of George:

They are afraid of what they know is somewhere in the darkness around them, of what may at any moment emerge into the undeniable light of their flashlamps, nevermore to be ignored, explained away. The fiend that won’t fit into their statistics, the Gorgon that refuses their plastic surgery, the vampire drinking the blood with tactless uncultured slurs, the bad smelling beast that doesn’t use their deodorants, the unspeakable that insists, despite all their shushing, on speaking its name.

Among many other kinds of monsters, George says, they are afraid of little me.

George is an emblem of the very “monsters” that the mainstream fears most—namely, those “abnormalities” that insist on coming to light, “nevermore to be ignored, explained

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23 Ibid., p. 26–27.
away,“ and that by so doing challenge conventional assumptions. The grieving George and the shattered coupling of George and Jim do just that. They threaten the status quo.

To control the “monsters,” the mainstream names them; it assigns them an identity that is compatible with mainstream assumptions. “Mr. Strunk, George supposes, tries to nail him down with a word. Queer, he doubtless growls. But, since this is after all the year 1962, even he may be expected to add, I don’t give a damn what he does just as long as he stays away from me.” With the pejorative label “Queer,” Mr. Strunk brings George into existence; Mr. Strunk reels him into the mainstream, but he does so on his terms and positions him therein where he wants. George is admitted to the order of the men, occupying the rank accorded to sissies and pansies—namely, the lowest rank of that order. He can be seated alongside the likes of Mr. Strunk so long as “he stays away from him” and cowards, instead, in the corner. Mrs. Strunk, on the other the hand, brings George into the mainstream by labeling him in clinical terms. She “is trained in the new tolerance, the technique of annihilation by blandness.” George is a condition:

Out comes her psychology book—bell and candle are no longer necessary. Reading from it in sweet singsong she proceeds to exorcise the unspeakable out of George. No reason for disgust, she intones, no cause for condemnation. Nothing here that is willfully vicious. All is due to heredity, early environment (Shame on those possessive mothers, those sex-segregated British schools!), arrested development at puberty, and-or glands. Here we have a misfit, debarred forever from the best things of life, to be pitied, not blamed. Some cases, caught young enough, may respond to therapy. As for the rest—ah, it’s so sad; especially when it happens, as let’s face it does, to the truly worthwhile people, people who might have had so much to offer.

George is a deviant; he suffers from an illness over which he has no control. He cannot be cured. His condition is “so sad” because it deprives him of “the best things of life,” the very milestones that bring meaning to the heterosexual life. George is “to be pitied, not

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24 Ibid., pp. 27–28.
blamed.” With a clinical label in hand, Mrs. Strunk is able to “exorcise the unspeakable out of George,” to deny that which is at the core of his being gay.

And yet, George embraces the unspeakable, the unnamed. He rejects the Strunks’ efforts to label him.

But your book is wrong, Mrs. Strunk, says George, when it tells you that Jim is the substitute I found for a real son, a real kid brother, a real husband, a real wife. Jim wasn’t a substitute for anything. And there is no substitute for Jim, if you’ll forgive my saying so, anywhere.

Your exorcism has failed, dear Mrs. Strunk, says George, squatting on the toilet and peeping forth from his lair to watch her emptying the dustbag of her vacuum cleaner into the trash can. The unspeakable is still here—right in your very midst.\(^{25}\)

George’s self assertion is bold, direct, and insistent: “your book is wrong”; “there is no substitute for Jim.” And yet, George’s assertion is without force in the world at large, uttered as it is by George “squatting on the toilet.” At best, the mainstream will tolerate Jim and the coupling of Jim and George, but as Denis Altman points out, that tolerance does little to level the playing field between gay and straight: “The difference between tolerance and acceptance is very considerable, for tolerance is a gift extended by the superior to the inferior.”\(^{26}\) Moreover, George can neither influence nor persuade the mainstream to accept him and his relationship because he fails to name either in terms that are true and received by the mainstream. George can say what his relationship is not—“Jim wasn’t a substitute for anything”—but he can’t say what his relationship is.

Naming is central to reading *A Single Man* as Isherwood intended. The first paragraph of the novel labors over the connection between naming and power. George opens his eyes in the morning: “Waking up begins with saying *am* and *now*. That which

\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 29.  
has awoken then lies for a while staring up at the ceiling and down into itself until it has recognized I, and therefrom deduced I am, I am now. Here comes next, and is at least negatively reassuring; because here, this morning, is where it has expected to find itself: what’s called at home.”27 The body stirs from slumber, at first disoriented, confused, and powerless. As it wakes, though, it recognizes and names the self (“I”), and in turn, places the self in time and space: “now,” “here,” “what’s called home.” “I” is now in control, prepared to dress and become a third person, the person the world expects to see and know as George: “By the time it has gotten dressed, it has become he; has already become more or less George—though still not the whole George they demand and are prepared to recognize.”28 The transition from “I” to “he” to “George” is, on the one hand, a steady assertion of George’s power; he dresses himself and in so doing, shapes the way that the world sees him. He chooses what he wants to show to the world. On the other hand, the transition from “I” to “he” to “George” reveals how little power George has over his self-identification. George is known by a name given to him by someone else, his parents. As the offspring of a presumably conventional, heterosexual relationship, George is labeled by the mainstream and expected to conform to the values and expectations of that mainstream. Each time he dons that name, he agrees to become what “they demand and are prepared to recognize.” He steps on to a stage to perform a part assigned to him by others.29

27 Isherwood, A Single Man, p. 9.
28 Ibid., p. 11.
29 George drives to work and loses himself in a daydream. As he nears, he snaps to: in ten minutes, George will have to be George—the George they have named and will recognize. So now he consciously applies himself to thinking their thoughts, getting into their mood. With the skill of a veteran he rapidly puts on the psychological makeup for this role he must play and steps from his car as an actor steps from the wings and on to the stage. “So now George has arrived. He is not nervous in the least. As he gets out of his car, he feels an upsurge of energy, of eagerness for the play to begin. And he walks eagerly, with a springy step, along the gravel path past the Music Building toward the Department office. He is all actor now—an actor
Throughout the novel, George consistently relinquishes the power to name his true self and to identify his relationship with Jim. In addition to Mr. Strunk, who “tries to nail him down with a word,” there are others who label George and his kind pejoratively. The Strunk’s youngest child, Benny, calls George “That Man,” and the children of the neighborhood regard him as a “mean old storybook monster.” “A local newspaper editor has started a campaign against sex deviates (by which he means people like George).” And as his boozy seduction of Kenny progresses into the night, George applies a pejorative label to himself: “I suppose you’ve decided I’m a dirty old man.” Moreover, George does not name his relationship with Jim. To Jim’s family, George is a “much talked of roommate.” Before his colleagues and students George dissembles, certain that neither would be much interested in his true identity and his former life with Jim. “(Does he know about me? George wonders; do any of them? Oh, yes probably. It would interest them. They don’t want to know about my feelings or my glands or anything below my neck. I could just as well be a severed head carried into the classroom to lecture to them from a dish.)” And while their one true friend Charlotte knew of the relationship between George and Jim—Charlotte is the person to whom George fled upon receiving the call from Jim’s uncle—she neither asks after George and his grief, nor speaks of anyone but herself in the protracted scene of their dinner together that rests at the center of the novel. References to Jim are woven into stories that Charlotte needs to tell about herself, and George leaves Jim there, complicit in Charlotte’s attempt at “hiding the truth from her friends with such visibly sealed lips that they must surely have suspected Jim had left the

on his way up from the dressing room, hastening through the backstage world of props and lamps and stagehands to make his entrance. A veteran, calm and assured, he pauses for a well measured moment in the doorway of the office and then boldly, clearly, with the subtly modulated British intonation which his public demands of him, speaks his opening line: ‘Good morning!’” Ibid., p. 44.

30 Ibid., pp. 21, 36, and 173.
state after some sex scandal—until at last she had turned Jim’s death into something of her own creation entirely, a roaring farce.”

George not only surrenders his power of self-identification, but he also denies the importance of naming. The final scene between Kenny and George ends with George lecturing Kenny; he is drunk, but he is “a formidable George, who articulates thickly, but clearly, with a menace behind his words.” George silences Kenny and pounds away at him rhetorically:

“I supposed you’ve decided I’m a dirty old man?”

“You needn’t say anything,” George tells Kenny (thus dealing with either possibility), “because I admit it—oh, hell, yes of course I admit it— I am a dirty old man. Ninety-nine per cent of all old men are dirty. That is, if you want to talk that language; if you insist on that kind of dreariness. I’m not protesting against what you choose to call me or don’t. I’m protesting against an attitude—and I’m only doing that for your sake, not mine. . . .

“Look—things are quite bad enough anyhow, nowadays—we’re in quite enough of a mess, semantically and every other way—without getting ourselves entangled in these dreary categories. I mean, what is this life of ours supposed to be for? Are we to spend it identifying each other with catalogues, like tourists in an art gallery? Or are we to try to exchange some kind of signal, however garbled, before it’s too late? You answer me that!”

George has been seducing Kenny all evening. His final shot is an argument on behalf of pure experience. He and Kenny are two people. They are capable of a true connection (“some kind of signal”) if and only if they turn their backs on the mainstream and its “dreary categories.” Labels are unimportant; they superficially tag people as “catalogues” do works of art. What matters is uninhibited experience, the genuine connection between people: “Experience isn’t any use. And yet, in quite another way it might be. If only we weren’t all such miserable fools and prudes and cowards. . . . Here am I. Here are you—in that damned blanket. Why don’t you take it right off, for Christ’s sake. . . . for once

31 Ibid., pp. 126, 51, and 127.
there’s no one to disturb us. This may never happen again. I mean that literally! And the
time is desperately short."\textsuperscript{32}

George is in heat, but George is also angry—"You answer me that!" In fact,
George has been angry throughout the novel. He rails against the neighborhood children,
"a mean old storybook monster . . . the role George has found himself playing with
increasing violence since he started living alone."\textsuperscript{33} He is angry with Mr. and Mrs.
Strunk, who out of shame exclude him from a cocktail party with their friends “from the
Valley” and who can do little more than extend to him the hand of tolerance.\textsuperscript{34} He is
angry with the U.S. government and with the developers who have transformed the
bohemian refuge into a high-rise hell: “All are, in the last analysis, responsible for Jim’s
death; their words; their thoughts, their whole way of life willed it, even though they
never knew that he existed. But, when George gets in as deep as this, Jim hardly matters
any more. Jim is nothing now but an excuse for hating three quarters of the population of
America. . . . George’s jaws work, his teeth grind, as he chews and chews the cud of his
hate.”\textsuperscript{35} George is enraged by “pseudo-liberal sentimentality” that argues “minorities are
just people, like us.”\textsuperscript{36} And George is enraged by the heterosexual majority, figured in
Doris, the only woman with whom Jim had sex: “that big arrogant animal of a girl? . . .
Gross insucking vulva, sly ruthless greedy flesh, in all the bloom and gloss and arrogant
resilience of youth, demanding that George shall step aside, bow down and yield to the
female prerogative, hide his unnatural head in shame. I am Doris. I am Woman. I am

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., pp. 173–175.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 21.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 116.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, p. 40.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p. 70.
Bitch-Mother Nature. The Church and the Law and the State exist to support me. I claim my biological rights. I demand Jim.”

George spews anger throughout the novel. He can do little more than endure and more often hate the world he encounters outside the house—simply because “Jim is dead.” Indeed, Jim is gone, but more importantly, memories of Jim and the relationship between George and Jim are fading. Charlotte’s references are self-serving, and George must force himself to remember. He is afraid of forgetting. Jim as well as Jim and George are destined for obscurity because neither is labeled in a way that is telling to the world at large. There is no true, public memorial.

In choosing an insular life, George is condemned to live in the present. “Damn the future. Let Kenny and the kids have it. Let Charley keep the past. George clings only to Now. It is Now he must find another Jim. Now that he must love. Now that he must live.” Living in the Now is, at best, empty. At worst, it is nothing more than an exhausting effort to recreate experiences of immediate satisfaction. With neither the past nor the future at hand, living in the Now is void of memories that sustain and hopes that inspire. George is imprisoned; he is a single man who can anticipate a future of endless repetition that he may or may not share with another Jim.

And so, his role models are “two other unhypnotized nonconformists, an elderly couple who belong to the last handful of surviving colonists.” Seated next to him at the Starboard Side, they “are practicing their way of love: a mild quarrelsome alcoholism which makes it possible for them to live in a play relationship like children. You old bag, you old prick, you old bitch, you old bastard: rage without resentment, abuse without

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37 Ibid., pp. 95–96.
venom. This is how it will be for them till the end. Let’s hope they will never be parted but die in the same hour of the same night in their beer-stained bed.”\textsuperscript{38}

George is doomed.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., pp. 149–150.
CONCLUSION

When Isherwood and Auden left England in 1939, they did so deliberately. “On January 19, 1939, Auden and I sailed from Southampton in the French liner Champlain, bound for New York. It was the first anniversary of our trip to China. I am always on the lookout for coincidences in dates, and I remember that this one flattered my vaguely optimistic belief that my life was somehow running to schedule.”¹ Isherwood’s relationship with boyfriend Heinz Neddermeyer, the German seventeen-year-old he had met in Berlin in 1932, had ended in 1937 when Isherwood’s attempts to protect Neddermeyer from repatriation to and arrest in Germany failed. Moreover, by 1939 Isherwood and Auden had become politically disaffected, perhaps immobilized. Fascism loomed large throughout Europe, dwarfing the political ambitions of the left that they had both once held dear. On board the Champlain, Isherwood wrote in his diary, “One morning on the deck, it seems to me, I turned to Auden and said: ‘You know, I just don’t believe in any of it any more—the united front, the party line, the antifascist struggle. I suppose they’re okay, but something’s wrong with me. I simply can’t swallow another mouthful.’ And Auden answered: ‘No, neither can I.’”² Isherwood and Auden were resolute; they were artists sailing to America to devote themselves to writing: “Now in a

¹ Isherwood, Diaries, Vol. 1, p. 3.
² Ibid., p. 6.
few sentences, with exquisite relief, we confessed our mutual disgust at the parts we had been playing and resolved to abandon them then and there. We had forgotten our vocation. We would be artists again, with our own values, our own integrity, and not amateur socialist agitators, parlor reds.”

And so, Isherwood positioned himself and Auden in the long line of voyagers to the New World in pursuit of a “vocation.” However, the break from Europe, England, politics, and the past—a Gordian knot figured for Isherwood in one word, “Mother”—was anything but absolute, anything from “then and there.” In fact, as late as December 1960, at the age of fifty-six, Isherwood continued to long for approval from the world that he had left behind with contempt:

The San Francisco trip was really a great success, all except for the Writer’s Conference itself. That was a fiasco. To begin with they had planned a banquet in honor of Sir Charles and Lady Snow, and the bastards went off to New York and didn’t return for it or even write or wire excuses. When the British noblesse oblige, which is quite nauseating enough in itself, breaks down, then that’s truly squalid. And all the worse in the case of the Snows, who are posing as aristocracy, waving his knighthood in the faces of the naïve Americans, and glorying in having dragged themselves up out of the lower middle class. (Why so heated, Dobbin? Do you want a knighthood?) No, it’s not as bad as that. But I suppose I even now resent these inflated reputations. The truth is, I want the English snoothood to break down just once and admit that, all kidding aside, I am the—greatest? best? No—just most interesting—writer alive today.

Isherwood’s notoriety pales in comparison to that of Auden, as does the volume of his literary output. However, since his death in 1986, Isherwood has in various quarters received the attention that his work deserves. At their finest, Isherwood’s short stories and novels—*The Last of Mr. Norris, The Berlin Stories, A Single Man, and A Meeting by*
the River—prove true Cyril Connolly’s claim that Isherwood was “the hope of English fiction.”

The beauty of this writing was the starting point for my work on Christopher Isherwood. Ultimately, though, I moved beyond a stylistic fascination with his fiction to examine a pattern that I detected in his work—namely, a preoccupation with the margin as a place of redemption. That examination resulted in this dissertation, which in turn will lead to my future work.

In 2004, Peter Parker published what was to have been the definitive biography, Christopher Isherwood: A Life Revealed. Stuffed with facts and indispensable to anyone working on Isherwood, the biography nonetheless fails to breathe life into Isherwood and Isherwood’s relationships with others, which he valued enormously and chronicled in his diaries. Moreover, Parker’s tone is contemptuous, and for this very reason Don Bachardy recently referred to the biography as “the Parker putdown.” Katherine Bucknell, the editor of Isherwood’s diaries, is at work on another biography. Given her intimate knowledge of those diaries, her vast command of the period, and her broad knowledge of the web of people with whom Isherwood and Bachardy interacted, her biography is sure to be a lively, verisimilar portrait. She will undoubtedly write the definitive biography of Isherwood, which I look forward to reading. I plan to turn my attention in a different direction that should spawn four major studies that use Isherwood’s fiction as the starting point.

Isherwood lived in Berlin from 1929 to 1933. With his back turned on the past and drawn to Berlin by “Weimar’s radically modernist culture,” Isherwood immersed himself in the world of the avant-garde, populated with writers, painters, filmmakers,
architects, and musicians, all “obsessed . . . by deviance, murder, atrocity, and crime.”

He trolled the bars, cabarets, and nightclubs—all lively alternatives to the routing poverty of the period—and there he met boys, plenty of boys, with whom he had the kind of sex he couldn’t have in England. In these spaces, the world was filled with promise for Isherwood. He was party to a new, decidedly modern aesthetic being created, and he was an endlessly satisfied guest at the party of sexual delight.

*The Last of Mr. Norris* and *The Berlin Stories* derive from this period in Isherwood’s life. Out of this entire body of work, it is not surprising that the story entitled “Sally Bowles” stands out. Sally is a carefree floozy; she sparkles in whatever rags she can piece together. She hustles us arm and arm into the cabaret, where she shows us how to have fun and how to forget. Sally also shows us how to survive in a world where survival is tenuous. For her, the formula is simple and perfectly innocent. She gives and she takes; she uses one man at a time to her advantage after she lets them take advantage of her. Sally displays all that glittered on the surface of the Weimar Republic, and for this very reason, Sally and her story are the basis for an enduring image of the period, the image that was captured in the 1966 musical play and 1972 film *Cabaret*, music by Kander and Ebb.

*Cabaret* is the work that ultimately made Isherwood famous and rich. On December 17, 1966, after the opening of the musical, Isherwood wrote in his diary, “*Cabaret* really does seem to be a hit, so I hope for steady drippings of money through the spring of 1967 at least.” In fact, *Cabaret* made Isherwood a great deal of money and still generates revenue for his estate. The diary entry, though, betrays Isherwood’s real

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5 Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, p. 133.
feelings about *Cabaret*; it was a commercial, rather than artistic success. In his mind it would always be “a fifth-rate musical.”

In fact, *Cabaret* is a preoccupied with glitter rather than gloom; it is a distraction to a true reading of *The Berlin Stories*. My approach to the collection is one that reconciles the coexistence of Sally Bowles and Frau Nowak, the cabaret and the sanatorium. I stress the desperation that Bowles and Nowak share and focus on their respective efforts to remove themselves to the margin in order to find relief. On the margin there is hope, but that hope is illusory. The cabaret closes at the end of the night only to turn its revelers back out onto squalid, impoverished streets where, at best, a con artist like Sally can survive by plying her trade. And the sanatorium fails to deliver on its promise. The sick never heal. They simply rot away. Hope takes both Bowles and Nowak to places where they ironically succumb to rather than escape from the doom that is the mainstream.

Isherwood’s Berlin fiction zeros in on the coercive power of hope, a rhetorical tool that he saw the Nazis using to annihilating effect as they rose to power. Chapter 2 will give rise to a study that looks at the artistic fringe of Weimar Germany, focusing in particular on film, music, portraiture, literature, and cabarets. I will examine the promises implicit in those fringe cultures in an effort to think through how the Nazis ultimately exploited that promise in order to destroy them. That study will then dilate into a larger consideration of the rhetoric of hope that figures prominently in contemporary American political discourse, and which has had a damaging effect on American culture.

When Isherwood and Auden arrived in New York in 1939, Auden flourished; Isherwood did not. “This time in New York has been a bad, sterile period for me. I’ve

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7 Ibid., p. 426.
done practically nothing.” 8 Isherwood hated New York. “There is much that is majestic but nothing that is gracious in this city—this huge, raw functional skeleton, this fortress of capital, this jungle of absolutely free competition. Every street is partly a slum. Where the banks and the brownstone houses end, the slum tenements begin, with their rusty fire escapes and crowds of baseball-playing Dead End Kids. Beyond, on the mainland, is a wilderness of scrapyards and shacks. This country is insanely untidy.” 9

Isherwood settled in New York only briefly, living with his boyfriend of the time, Vernon Old, and Auden first in the George Washington Hotel and then in an apartment on East Eighty-First Street. On May 6, 1939, less than five months after the Chamberlin landed in New York on January 26, Isherwood boarded a Greyhound bus with Old, and the two headed across country to Los Angeles. Isherwood was drawn there by Gerald Heard, Chris Wood, and Aldous and Maria Huxley:

We often joked about them, and the mysterious practices which we vaguely described as yoga. We pictured Gerald levitating in a turban and gloating out over the desert, at a great altitude. Nevertheless, I took him seriously—at any rate as a pacifist. We exchanged letters. Gerald wrote that every pacifist should acquire medical knowledge. Order and creative accuracy must be opposed to disorder and destruction. We must create a doctorate of psychologically sound, well-equipped healers. This sounded authoritative and exciting—if rather vague. I had to know more about it. Certainly my own life badly needed some kind of discipline. I was still suspicious of the occult, however, and hated anything which sounded like “religion.” 10

In Southern California, Isherwood was essentially seduced by Gerald Heard and the teachings of Vedanta, which would play a seminal role in Isherwood’s life right up to his death in 1986. Chapters 3 and 4 explore Isherwood’s engagement with Vedanta and his struggle to reconcile the stirring of the spirit and the yearning of the flesh. And while I

had originally thought I would write about the tension and connection between sex and faith, inserting my thoughts into the large body of literature on homosexuality and religion, my research and thinking took me in another direction.

Isherwood’s final novel, *A Meeting by the River*, is truly a masterpiece, a rhetorical tour de force. On the one hand, the story is linear and direct; it is a tale of Oliver’s steady progress toward the taking of sannyas. And yet, by intertwining letters and diary entries, Isherwood introduces different points of view and creates a narrative that is anything but straightforward. The novel that appears to be about Oliver and his spiritual journey is, in fact, a novel about Patrick and the perils of the very ethical relativism that is endorsed by Vedanta.

Moving forward, I would like to direct my work on Vedanta in two directions. First, in the course of doing my research, I visited the Vedanta Center in Los Angeles where Isherwood studied and worshiped. The little Center continues to flourish—in fact, Don Bachardy is an initiate—and attracts students and worshippers from all walks. I would like to write a history of Vedanta in Southern California, focusing in particular on the period immediately before, during, and immediately after World War II, when the likes of Isherwood, Gerald Heard, Chris Wood, and the Huxleys were drawn to the teachings of Vedanta by their pacifist leanings and their utopian dreams. Second, I would like to do an in-depth study of Vedanta in the context of the history of religion in America. In particular, by using Vedanta as a starting point, I would like to examine whether ethical relativism plays a role in other religious traditions that shaped and continue to mold American culture.
A Single Man is truly Isherwood’s finest piece of fiction. On July 26, 1963, Isherwood recorded in his diary, “Yesterday I finished, or rather, came to the end of the novelette.” The story was done, but he didn’t know what to name it. “As I was getting toward the end, I had the idea of calling it The Survivor—but this title had been used in various forms at least three times recently. Don suggests Making Do, which is a sort of Henry Green approach. I quite like it but am not sure.” And then the name appeared. As Isherwood reports in a diary entry dated August 2, 1963, “in bed, on Monday night, Don was silent for along while. I thought he had fallen asleep. Then he suddenly asked, ‘How about A Single Man for a title?’ I knew instantly and have had no doubts since that this is the absolutely ideal title for the novelette.”

Given my reading of the novel, I was not surprised to find that Isherwood struggled over the title only to have settled upon a perfect choice. Both Making Do and The Survivor do not work for two reasons in particular. First, the two titles suggest that George is a universal archetype, a figure of the human suffering that is common to everyman or everywoman cut off from his or her spouse by death. He is not. Second, both titles suggest that George lives in the world—after the death of Jim he will endure and make his way in the world, perhaps one day meeting another. He won’t.

In the words of Edward Upward, “The book as a whole cuts the reader to the heart, and dazzles him too.” The story is about a single man, devastated upon the death of the very man with whom he isolated himself away from the world. In their very deliberate choice to cut themselves off from the mainstream, figured in their refusal to

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11 Isherwood, Diaries, Vol. 2, pp. 282–283,
12 Ibid., p. 284. Isherwood first met Upward in 1921 at Repton, and the two studied at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge before Isherwood was expelled. Their shared rebelliousness bound the two together in a lifelong friendship. According to Katherine Bucknell, “Upward remained a challenging and trusted critic of Isherwood’s work throughout Isherwood’s life, and a loyal friend.” Ibid., p. 710.
name or label their relationship, George and Jim created a life that was true to themselves, but entirely interdependent. Without one, the other ceases to exist.

* A Single Man was written during one of the most difficult periods in Isherwood’s relationship with Don Bachardy. In his diary entry dated December 31, 1962, Isherwood bid “goodbye to this frightening and tragic year. . . . A bad year with Don. And yet, despite all omens, I still believe we may get through this phase to some kind of new happiness together.”13 The year 1963 was worse. With thirty years separating them in age, Chris and Don were in very different places professionally, economically, spiritually, and sexually. Chris, in short, was a literary star in certain circles. Don was an emerging artist, whose notoriety derived at this point in large part due to his connection with Chris. And while that would change in time, with Don becoming a truly accomplished and sought after portrait artist, Don was unquestionably dependent upon Chris and angry about it. The two lived together but in different rooms, the two lived apart in different cities, the two quarreled about everything and anything, and the two slept with other people, with Don forming a couple of relationships of substance during this period. And yet, as Isherwood predicted, they did “get through this phase to some kind of new happiness together.”

Given the very “unconventional” nature of all his relationships, particularly the one with Don Bachardy, Isherwood shied away from labeling them. In a diary entry dated November 12, 1961, Isherwood reports, “I keep thinking of a possible father-son novel, about Don and me, more or less. What puts me off, at present, is fear of being sentimental, and also the mistrust of presenting one relationship in terms of another. But the answer to the latter objection is: why do you have to think in categories of

13 Ibid., p. 255.
relationships at all? Why not simply describe a relationship."\textsuperscript{14} Labels, for Isherwood, contain and limit relationships; they set up expectations that are rarely met and that invariably stifle. Hence, Isherwood loathed marriage:

Sure, I am prejudiced, but I feel always more strongly how ignoble marriage usually is. How it drags down and Shackles and degrades a young man like Henri, who is really sweet and bright and full of quiet but powerful passion. The squalid little shop, the little business premises, you have to open, and the deadly social pattern which is imposed on you—of dragging some dowdy little frump of a woman all around with you, wherever you go, for the next forty years. Not to mention the kids. It is a miserable compromise for the man, and he is apt to punish the woman for having blackmailed him into it.\textsuperscript{15}

The very relationship that Isherwood and Bachardy had for over thirty years endured because they were resolute in remaining true to who they were as individuals and who they were together. Their limits were self-imposed: Don wanted to talk of all their exploits outside their bedroom; Chris insisted on reticence: “I think he would really love it if he could discuss everything with me. But, alas, I am neither the Buddha nor completely senile. I have my limits. I cannot help minding. When I finally stop minding I also stop caring. I don’t give a shit.”\textsuperscript{16}

In reality, Chris and Don did give a shit. They adopted each other to secure their financial position, but they never married and they never named their relationship. Like George and Jim, they created a relationship that was meaningful to them, a life that in many respects was walled off and detached. To say that relationship was unconventional is to miss the point; the relationship was genuine, and it ended in a way that was true to Chris and Don.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 135.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 188.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 253.
Christopher Isherwood was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1981. As he declined, Bachardy drew Isherwood. When asked how he could sketch his lover dying, Bachardy explained:

Well, the alternative was just to stand around wringing my hands, being idle and watching him die. I’d always rather be doing something. And when I do a sitting with anybody, I often do it with eye to eye contact. It really is the most intimate relationship for me. And I identify with my sitter as I’m working. So it seemed to me a very good plan to identify with Chris. So identifying with him in order to do the drawings gave me a more intimate access to him and, as I say in the film, it felt like we were dying together. And that being close to him and with him all those hours on end seemed to me a very good plan.17

On the morning of January 4, 1986, Christopher Isherwood died. Don Bachardy continued to draw him throughout the day, stopping only after night arrived. The body was nearly unrecognizable and Don was alone, a single man.

My work on A Single Man will give rise to a larger study of how gay men form relationships that are true. I am particularly interested in how we resist the impulse to ape heterosexual paradigms of domesticity and how we label our relationships in ways that accurately describe, on the one hand, and that convey meaning to the mainstream, on the other.

In short, I am fascinated by the question of how we tell the world and each other that we “give a shit.”

17 Interview with Don Bachardy conducted by Paul M. McNeil and Soterios Johnson on August 11, 2008, Appendix I, p. 233.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX I

Introduction: On August 11, 2008, I interviewed Don Bachardy in the home that he shared with Christopher Isherwood at 145 Adelaide Drive in Santa Monica. I was joined by Soterios Johnson who engineered the interview and interjected on occasion.

What follows is an edited version of the interview. I deliberately wanted the interview to flow freely, so while I had topics in mind, I did not approach Don with a structure set of questions. In editing the manuscript, I cut all material that Don disclosed off the record—there was very little—and I eliminated fragments of conversation that did nothing to convey an idea. My hope in doing so was to produce a manuscript that was literally faithful, but not cluttered with words that detract from a clear reading of the text.

Paul McNeil [PM]: I wanted to talk to you a little bit about your and Chris’s involvement in gay politics and about Chris’s and your relationships.

Don Bachardy [DB]: Berlin is the only thing I won’t be able to help with much.

PM: There are a couple of specific things I want to ask you but before I do that, can I use the bathroom real quickly?

DB: Oh, sure.

PM: Basically, Don, I’m not going to publish this interview, I’m just going to use it in the dissertation. And pretty much if I ask anything or go down any direction you don’t want to go in, just tell me.

DB: OK.

PM: Don, Do you mind showing me around a little bit? [DB: Sure] Or do you want to do that later?

DB: This is what Chris and I used to call Hockney Hall. Much of them were given to us by David. That’s a recent portrait of me. [That’s where we slept. And this is the work room.
DB: This is the desk, rather a mess, I’m afraid to say. This hasn’t changed much except for the fax machine and the computer.

PM: Do you use a computer?

DB: Uh, well, hardly. I use the word processor part of it. I’m not even on the Internet.

PM: A smart place to be. Is this his desk?

DB: Yeah. And of course, all of his books were in the shelves, but they’re now at the Huntington and I just – those are largely copies of his different books.

PM: Most of the papers are in the Huntington now?

DB: Most of them, yes. The great majority of them and all of his books and that home movie film in the documentary belong to them. Yeah.

PM: When did all of that stuff transfer to the Huntington? Did you keep them here for a while, or…

DB: Well, let’s see, probably in 2003, so five years ago.

PM: So, five years ago. So you moved them there why?

DB: Because this house could burn down. I felt very responsible. There were some very valuable hand-written manuscripts of Auden’s among them.

PM: Oh really? What?

DB: Early poems with crossing out words that Chris hadn’t liked and putting in others.

PM: So the editing was being done by Chris or the both of them?

DB: No. He just gave all of his early poetry to Chris to read first. Chris was a very, very good critic and loved poetry and loved Auden’s poetry. And Chris said if he objected to a line, Wystan would take it out, put in another. But inevitably, the line would show up in another poem.

PM: Oh, really? He would re-incorporate it somewhere else.

DB: Yes! Yeah…

PM: And did Chris ever call him short on that?

DB: Ever what?
PM: Did Chris ever call him short on that, when he saw the line reappear someplace else?

DB: Oh no. Not if it were better-placed than it had been originally. (laughs)

PM: (laughs) That’s wonderful

DB: Yeah.

PM: Where is your artwork hanging? Here or is most of it in your studio?

DB: It’s in my studio.

PM: OK. We’ll go to the studio then later then, if you don’t mind. Or do you want to do it now? Which do you prefer?

DB: Uh, OK, let’s go visit now…

[Door opens]

PM: So this is your studio. [Soterios Johnson. SJ: Wow] One of the joys that I’ve had working on Chris is getting to know your work.

DB: I do all of my sittings up here. [walking up steps]

PM: So there are two floors to this, both of which are overlooking the ocean.

DB: And it all started with a little one-room garage that was here when we moved in. The squared-off part of the room downstairs. This is part of the original garage floor. We used to go up and sunbathe on the roof of the garage. And that’s when we realized it was the best view of the property. And for years we used to plan to put on a second floor and we finally did it in 1976. And I had it slightly remodeled in 2000 and now it’s absolutely perfect.

PM: So Don, these are all of your pieces hanging.

DB: Uh…all of them.

PM: And, when were these done?

DB: These are all fairly recent. The ones in the alcove are from the ‘80s, ‘90s. And on the lower floor, they’re mostly recent pictures.

PM: Don, do people commission you to do portraits of them?
DB: Yes, indeed. I got a commission just yesterday. A guy who likes my work – what was his name? – Timothy Corrigan. It’s a situation I quite enjoy. We met for the first time when he arrived at the studio and within 5,10 minutes we were locked into this relationship, which I enjoy because it forces me to be objective. All I have to go on is what I can see. And in passing, I realized only after he left that I’d been calling him Tom all through the afternoon when his name was Tim. (laughs).

PM: And you met him simply because he enjoyed your work, called you up and said would you do a portrait?

DB: Yeah.

PM: Do you have the piece here or…

DB: Oh yeah, I haven’t even looked at it myself. I never know what I think of my work right after doing it. I have to get away from it for several hours anyway. And I haven’t even looked since I did the picture.

PM: How long do you spend doing your pieces?

DB: Oh, an hour and 15 minutes per picture. I did four of him yesterday. And they all took an hour and 15 minutes.

PM: These all took an hour and 15 minutes?

DB: Uh-huh. Maybe even faster, because I was standing up at an easel doing these and when I’m standing up I’m more active and I work faster. And also I was 25 years younger. I had more energy.

PM: That takes me back to where I was actually going to end the interview but, Chris’ death portraits. Can you talk to me a little bit about that period of time when you were doing those? You were drawing them very, very quickly, correct?

DB: Yes. Some of the – well he was often in a restless state, sleeping. I was often working in the house and in the last weeks he was in the bed most of the time. I often worked at night, the lighting was very tough. Yes, I never had such difficult circumstances for my work but at least the house was familiar and I’d certainly drawn and painted him enough to be fairly practiced at it.

PM: How could you do it? I don’t think I could sit and draw – particularly you continued to draw after he died…

DB: Well, the alternative was just to stand around wringing my hands, being idle and watching him die. I’d always rather be doing something. And when I do a sitting with anybody, I often do it with eye to eye contact. It really is the most intimate relationship for me. And I identify with my sitter as I’m working. So it seemed to me a very good
plan to identify with Chris. So identifying with him in order to do the drawings gave me a more intimate access to him and, as I say in the film, it felt like we were dying together. And that being close to him and with him all those hours on end seemed to me a very good plan.

PM: Beautiful. Do you have any of the sketches here?

DB: Oh, all of them.

PM: Could I take a look at them?

DB: Oh, that’s a real business.

PM: Going through all of those.

DB: Yes. And I really have to get myself up to review that work.

PM: Have you ever thought – I mean obviously I’m sure you have – exhibiting them or collecting them?

DB: Well I did. I’ve had various shows. I had a show here in Santa Monica and Jim [James] Corcoran Gallery. And, let’s see…a hundred of them were shown at the Cultural Center of Mexico City and those are the only two shows. I’ve never sold a single one. Faber and Faber did a book in ’99. It was supposed to be a book of a hundred that John Russell had personally selected. He came here from New York just to choose the drawings. There are hundreds. 450, anyway.

PM: From just the last…

DB: From just the last 6 months. Faber and Faber lost a drawing. It’s the only one I don’t have.

PM: They lost a drawing?

SJ: Oh my god!

DB: Well that’s what they told me. I suspect that the printers or somebody damaged it and they were ashamed to admit it. But really it’s more shameful to lose a drawing and more suspicious too, but they were good people and I was glad to get a book published so I didn’t want to make a stink about it.

PM: But, it’s the only one that’s missing in the whole collection.

DB: The only one that’s missing.
PM: Now, you drew after he died. You spent the day drawing. How many did you produce after he died?

DB: 11 and I was all ready to do the 12th drawing when his doctor Elsie Georgie arrived just when I was about to begin and I was very relieved that I didn’t have to do that 12th drawing. Because by then his corpse had so little relation to him, but I had been drawing it all afternoon.

PM: So he had passed at that point. I had intended to end on this note, but why don’t we go back to the house. This of course is one of Chris – no that’s Stephen Spender. How old was Spender there?

DB: He was 5 years younger than Chris and Wyston was 3 years younger.

PM: Did you ever draw Wyston?

DB: Oh, many times. And at many sittings with Steven. That was his favorite of mine. There’s another one on the floor upstairs.

PM: And these are… [PM pointing to cabinets with flats filled with paintings]

DB: All my work, starting in 1959…

PM: Are these fire-proof? (18:37)

DB: Oh, nothing is really fire-proof.

PM: This is true.

DB: If it’s hot enough, yeah. I mean, OK, if the metal doesn’t burn. It gets hot enough, you burn.

PM: Who is this?

DB: Um, Rick Luce is his name. That’s Natalie Schafer from Gilligan’s Island. That’s Louise Latham, who is Marnie’s mother in Hitchcock’s film “Marnie.” Uh, let’s see… otherwise… Rick Sanford, he was a very good friend of ours. In the middle on top is Jane Greer and next to her is Teri Garr. That’s Samantha Eggar. Up there is Evelyn Keyes and Louise Fletcher under here who won an Oscar for “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.”

PM: Under what circumstances did you do these? Were they commissioned are these friends of yours?

DB: They were all people I asked to sit for me as a favor.
PM: How do you come by models, do you ask friends to do it as favors, do you hire people?

DB: I had a patron, well he’s still a patron and friend for 4 years he sent me male models, professionals, some amateurs, but he paid them very well. He paid the $400, $450 a day. And I worked every day. I once worked more than 2 weeks without missing a day. And the sittings were always at least 6 hours long, sometimes 7, 8, 9. And once, I started at 12:30 in the afternoon and didn’t finish until 10:30 at night. But very few people have that kind of endurance.

PM: That’s enormous stamina.

DB: Uh-huh. Yeah. But you know if I’m doing something fun, time passes quickly. And the more I do, the warmer I get, I love working long hours, but not all the people I work with have that kind of stamina.

PM: Now, tomorrow, you’re doing a sitting. Will you do that all afternoon?

DB: Yeah. I worked yesterday from 12:30 to 6:30.

PM: Do you paint every day?

DB: I try to. It’s easier every day. And I’ve taken to doing abstract pictures, so on the days that my sitter cancels too late for me to find somebody else, I can now paint an abstraction. And it’s a luxury, not to have to rely on anybody. I just paint for my amusement and it’s fun.

PM: I can’t imagine anyone canceling a sitting with you. I’d be here an hour ahead of time. I’d come sick.

DB: Well, you know, there are a lot of people who don’t want to give their time.

PM: That’s stunning! Do you have any of the abstract work that I can look at quickly?

DB: I had my first show of them last April and these were things that weren’t shown.

PM: Why did you pull these back?

DB: I had extra ones framed and I had the gallery dealer make the choice.

PM: I love the abstractions. They’re beautiful. They’re wonderful. Do you work with only one dealer? Who represents you?

DB: Well I had a show simultaneously with the show here in New York at the White Columns. Do you know that?
PM: I don’t know…I’ve never been to it, but I know the name.

DB: They’re very nice people that run it there. And they’ve had very good shows.

PM: These are water colors, Don?

DB: Acrylic. All my color work is acrylic.

PM: And how long do these take you?

DB: Oh, I can do one in half-an-hour, 40 minutes. Sometimes I work on them over a long period, hours. This is the – I spent hours doing that one.

PM: Would you just open one of these drawers for me? I just want to see how these things are stacked in here. [DB opens] Oh my lord. In huge folders.

DB: A to K.

PM: And it’s dated over here.

DB: Uh-huh. These are the 90’s, the 80’s, the 70’s, the 60’s. Uh, this is starting early 2000. And these are all the last drawings of Chris. And this is early 2000, 2001. I need more filing cabinets!

PM: So you have five drawers of the last drawings of Chris.

DB: Uh, let’s see…four, yeah. Well this is ’85, that’s late.

PM You need more space.

DB: Yes, I don’t know. I suppose I could have a couple of filing cabinets in the middle of the room. Because there would be room to pull out the drawers.

SJ: Maybe on wheels. You could move them around.

DB: They’re very heavy.

SJ: Are they, yeah?

PM: These are?

DB: Yeah. [SJ: They must be.]

PM: This view…
SJ: This view is amazing. How many of these homes were here when you moved here?

DB: Not quite as many. You can identify the new ones because they’re all the big ones. That house straight across, I’m told, is Seinfeld’s

SJ: Oh really? The one covered in all the ivy?

DB: The one with the red bougainvilleas in front. All those on the top, those big ugly places are new. That big gray one across there is new. That white one up there, the two houses below it, the tower? Roof and the one below that, those are all new. And this ugly thing here is new. [SJ: Oh really?] Yeah. And this is very new. And that’s three stories high. You go down on Mayberry Road and…..

PM: The two of you had a home on Mayberry Road at one point, didn’t you?

DB: No. Salka Viertel lived on Mayberry. And Chris and Casky once lived on Mayberry for awhile in her garage apartment.

PM: Oh, that’s right.

DB: Her husband was Berthold Viertel who was the director in Prater Violet.

PM: Was Chris good friends with Salka and Berthold?

DB: Well, he knew Berthold in England when they were making the film. He didn’t meet Salka until he came here in ‘39.

PM: Was he closer to one or the other? Or did he…

DB: Well, they weren’t often together. Berthold did come and stay with Salka for a year or two, I think, during the war, but they eventually split up and he moved back to Germany and married another woman.

PM: But she stayed here.

DB: And she stayed here.

PM: And she remained a friend of Chris?

DB: Yes, a very close friend. We went to visit her in Switzerland when she was dying. And of course we knew their three sons. Peter, who was married to Deborah Carr. Hans, who wrote children’s books. And Tommy, the youngest, who’s still alive, lives up near Seattle with his wife. And they moved up there because they have a son who lives up there with his family.

PM: Don, do you have any of your work hanging in the house?
DB: Uh, no, never. When we first moved in and didn’t have any artwork, I used to put up a few things. But I realized it was putting people on the spot when they came to the house. It seemed to be like I was begging for comments. And then I was upset if there weren’t any comments. Are they blind? Can’t they see?” So, I didn’t want to put myself through that or our guests on the spot. So I keep it all out at the studio.

PM: Did Chris have pieces of yours that he preferred?

DB: Oh yes. Yes, he always told me the ones he liked.

PM: He didn’t have anything in his study…

DB: Oh yes he did. Let’s see. He had a self-portrait. But I did eventually take everything out of the house because you know people often ask to see the house. So, if they were interested in my work, they could ask to see my studio.

PM: As we’ve just done.

DB: Mmm-hmm.

PM: Do you want to have a seat? Do you want to sit down?

DB: Yeah.

PM: What I wanted to do, Don, was go back a bit. Chris pretty much abandoned the whole notion of becoming a Hindu monk by the time he met you. Did he ever talk about that decision with you?

DB: Surely, he talked about it and I questioned him. And he talks about it in My Guru and His Disciple. Yes I knew all about it and also he let me read all of his diaries which began in 1939 when he arrived in this country. He destroyed all of his previous diaries before he came to this country.

PM: Why did he do that?

DB: Because he felt he had put the best of his material in his books and because they were indiscreet and because he would have had to leave them in England. There were many volumes. It would have been a nuisance dragging them over here. And he felt there was danger that when he came to this country it was perfectly possible that England would be invaded by the Germans. And he didn’t want them to fall into the wrong hands. And when he told me he had destroyed them, I was horrified. “How could you,” I said. But he said, well, he had gotten the best out of them. Of course, later when he began writing Christopher and His Kind, he very much regretted not having had material at hand. It was a youthful act of destruction. But, yes, he made drastic decisions sometimes. He was very, very careful about --- he didn’t want to hurt other people’s
feelings. He was very correct about what he wrote and he was sensible enough to know that anything he left behind would be published, so he destroyed what he didn’t want published. Though, he never told me what he wanted done with the diaries that he kept in this country. And I assumed that I had permission to publish them, because if he hadn’t wanted them published, he would have destroyed them. But he never mentioned anything about publication and he used to laugh reading other writers’ diaries because it was so clear to him that they’d been written for publication. And he really did write his diaries for himself. And that’s what I think is so remarkable about them. That he was just a natural recorder. And that was something we had in common because I’m a natural recorder too. I just record everybody I know visually and he wrote about people.

PM: Now, I want to pick up on that and go back. First of all, I was horrified to learn that the material from prior to 1939 had been destroyed for the same obvious reasons that you were when you first found that out. You speak about the indiscretions that were recorded in the diaries. Are you talking about sexual indiscretions? Are you talking about political ones?

DB: I don’t know because I didn’t get a chance to read them. All of the material that’s in My Guru and His Disciple was lifted out of his diaries. So I knew all about it from the reading that book. After we met, he gave me everything to read up until the time we met. And, one of the first bits of advice he gave me was to keep a diary. And I did because he never gave me bad advice. It took me a while to really get going. And we also made a pact that we would not share our diaries because that would hamper us in writing about each other. So, I didn’t read any of his after we met until I started the night of the day he died.

PM: And that’s the first time you dipped into his diaries.

DB: I hadn’t even thought about it. I just remember going on my way to bed. I knew exactly where his diaries were kept and I never sneaked a peak. And I know he never looked at mine. It seems amazing the two people as close as we were could trust each other not to intrude on our diaries.

PM: Do you still keep a diary?

DB: Yeah, but not regularly. I discovered that my diary keeping is only consistent when I’m involved in a relationship. I need to be sharing my life with somebody else. I can’t quite tell you why, but it suddenly hit me a few years ago. And after Chris died, of course I kept diaries all through the years. I lived with a young architect in this house for 10 years. And my diaries of those 10 years are voluminous. I’d never written so much diary material either before or after. And when Tim moved out of the house, I still went on keeping diaries, but my heart wasn’t in it. Then a few years later I did live with a young man for a year and I wrote a lot again about our relationship. But when he moved out, I slowed down. I really don’t write much diary now.
PM: I’m interested by the connection between writing and personal experience that you’re talking about. You spoke in the movie about the correspondence you and Chris exchanged under the pseudonyms of horse and cat. Where did those metaphors come from? Why the horse, why the cat?

DB: Neither of us could remember how it began. It wasn’t a conscious thing. But it began very early. There was a movie called “Night People” [transcriber’s note: 1954] with Gregory Peck and Anita Bjork. And I remember we were driving in Chris’s car and there was a big billboard of the move and the blurb-line for the film was “We didn’t say ‘Nice People,’” we said ‘Night People.”’ And I made a pun – what was the pun? I was teasing Chris. I was pretending to be cross with him and I then said, “I didn’t say Night, People, I said Night, Mare.” It was already by then that there was a language between and that was just a little more than 2 years after we started living together. But, it soon became, whenever we were alone together, and only when we were alone together it was our way of addressing each other. And there are variations – pony, stallion—all kinds. And, imagine all the cat terms. (45:53)

PM: I was wondering. What were the cat terms?

DB: Black cat, of course. And, kitty, tiger, even a panther when he was bad and vicious.

PM: Don, did you ever draw anything involving the two characters?

DB: No. I only work from the heart religiously. These abstract pictures are the only things I’ve done out of my head.

PM: I’m fascinated by the importance that Kitty and Horse played in your personal interaction with each other and yet as a visual artist you never drew Kitty and Horse.

DB: No. Well, always for anniversaries and birthdays, Chris would do these drawings of Kitty and Dobbin. And I kept all of those. But, no – and of course I would give him cards of that, but I wouldn’t draw them. I would paste magazine pictures of angelic looking cats and kittens with messages to him. It’s funny, I’ve always disliked drawing out of my head. My imagination doesn’t interest me in that kind of way. But, not as a kid -- I always drew and they were always drawings of people and they were either done out of my head or more usually copied from magazine pictures of movie actors because I felt I knew them from their movies. And I was very good at getting likenesses -- in my late teens, very good indeed. The drawings themselves weren’t interesting, because they were copied from photographs. And I don’t think you can make an interesting drawing from a photograph. But, I was unconsciously training my eye so that when I did start drawing from life, I immediately made advancement because I could use all that unconscious training when I drew from life. And I could get likenesses of living people. And it was Chris who was my very first live sitter at his own suggestion. And I still have that first drawing I did of him.
PM: You do? You still have that first drawing? Is it framed?

DB: No. I never framed it, but I kept it.

PM: Has it been reproduced anywhere?

DB: No. But I want to do a book of all – not all, because it would be too many – but a comprehensive book of my drawings and paintings of Chris. And it’s a goal of mine before I die to get that done.

PM: Clearly there would be publishers lining up to do that. What’s standing on the way?

DB: Well, they haven’t lined up behind me. I’ve suggested it often. I’ve published a book called “Stars in My Eyes” in 2000. I asked Chris’s agents if they would represent it. They sent it to at least a half a dozen publishers and three of the publishers wrote me back and said, “Well we like the book, but our marketers tell us they don’t know where the market is. We know how to publish books of drawings and we know how to publish books of prose, but the two together? We don’t know what to do with . . . . . the marketers! And, so out of frustration, I really just gave the book away to the University of Wisconsin and they cheated me blind because the book was on the bestseller list in southern California for 8 weeks and one of those weeks it was number 1. Now NY publishers, I don’t know where the market is for a book about portraits of mostly movie actors. Well, what are people thinking about? And these are supposed to be professionals. Well, the publishing business seems to be run by amateurs nowadays. And these marketers, I don’t know what they’re thinking about. It seems to me they’re getting paid for being dumb.

PM: Going back to the Kitty and Dobbin correspondence, do you have all of that correspondence or is that at the Huntington?

DB: Yes. No, I have that. That’s something I haven’t let them have yet. Eventually, they’ll have it, yeah.

PM: Do you ever think about publishing that?

DB: Oh yes. Since we were almost always together, we rarely wrote to each other, but when we were separated, we wrote continually, so that there is a volume and they’re very good letters from each of us. And always addresses to Kitty and Dobbin. But, full of everything we were doing at the time. I lived in London for a year. I went there to go to school and then I stayed on to have my first one-man exhibition. That was in 1961. I left here in January and Chris joined me in early April and after my exhibition opened, that was in early October, he came back here so we wrote to each other from January to April and from October to December when we met in New York. And then he went up to San Francisco once, but anyway, I have all those letters. And yes, they tell a lot about both of us.
PM: Let me go back to the Vedanta stuff, if you don’t mind.

DB: Sure.

PM: Did you ever practice?

DB: Oh yes. I became a Vedantist in 1962. It took me 10 years to decide I wanted to do it. Chris never proselytized, never urged me. But he was very, very pleased when I announced to him that I wanted to be initiated.

DB: And, I’m still a Vedantist. I tell my beads every day.

PM: Do you have Chris’ beads?

DB: Yes.

PM: You do. Before we leave, can I see them?

DB: Yeah. Yes I can find them, uh-huh.

PM: Did Chris ever disclose his mantra to you?

DB: No, no, no, because that was part of the deal. You never tell anybody.

PM: And you’ve never told yours, obviously.

DB: No.

PM: So you continue to practice today. Did Chris practice up until the end of his life?

DB: Yes he did and it was of great support to him.

PM: Does the Vedanta Society of Southern California have any of Chris’s papers

DB: They have all the rights to everything that Chris wrote for them. He gave the rights right away. They own all the translations that they did together. And they’re still good sellers. And the Society has made a lot of money off of them over the years.

PM: And the original manuscripts – do they reside there or did they go to Huntington as well?

DB: I think they must have them. They were never in Chris’ papers.

PM: I don’t do manuscript work, but I’m just kind of interested in where that stuff ended up. Shifting gears again, just slightly, we’re moving into the early to mid 1960.
Obviously this is a period when gay politics becomes a preoccupation of any gay person, particularly anyone travelling in your set. How did you and Chris get involved in gay politics – separately and together?

DB: Well, once gay liberation became active, he was invited to speak to queer groups. And some of the people who invited him to speak chastised him for not coming out sooner. How dare they criticize him for not waving a queer flag for everybody to see. They simply don’t understand what it was like in the early years. And Chris never thought he was writing exclusively for a queer audience. And he minded being ghettoized in the book shops and libraries. Only on the gay shelves. Only. As though he couldn’t be of any interest to anybody else.

PM: Talk a little more about his work being ghettoized. I find stunning because his work is universal in reach.

DB: The heterosexuals are the one who ought to be reading it. His gay readership is preaching to the converted.

PM: What would Chris think of the whole discussion of gay marriage right now and what do you think?

DB: Well, I know he would have been for the right to get married. Why should queers be denied? He or I would never for one moment considered it, because we didn’t feel any need to have our union legalized. But, I mean, if it means something to other queers, why shouldn’t they? And of course there are advantages to being married. Chris and I had to adopt each other so there wouldn’t be any question of his being sick in the hospital and I not being allowed to see him.

PM: So that’s how you did it – you each adopted the other.

DB: Yes.

PM: Did that afford you certain rights to inheritance and that kind of thing?

DB: Chris and I had this house in his name and after his death I was taxed like somebody who bought the house..

PM: Even though you…

DB: Even though we’d lived in it from ’59 to ’86, more than 25 years. I still had to pay taxes – well, that was just dumb of us. But, you know, we didn’t pay attention to financial matters at that time, so…

PM: Who criticized Chris for not coming out sooner?
DB: Oh, some of these gay activists, you know, who are just full of themselves and pushing whatever it is they push. You know, holier than thou.

PM: The Larry Kramer types?

DB: Uh-huh. Oh yeah, he’s a very good example. I guess he’s enraptured with himself as an activist.

DB: I remember Chris, when he was doing publicity for one of the late books. It would have been in the ‘70s. We were both in Rochester en route to Toronto and we went to see a couple of Louise Brooks films at the Eastman House. After the films, we spent the rest of the day with her and that was fascinating. And we were supposed to go the next morning to Toronto, but I hadn’t brought my passport. And nobody would tell us definitively whether I would have trouble at the airport getting back and forth. So I decided to stay in Rochester for another day. Chris went to Toronto. And it was at a big queer event where when he was introduced as a distinguished man of letters in a speech that ended with “…and I want to introduce you to a 75-year old faggot,” which brought the house down and delighted Chris.

PM: Why did it delight him?

DB: Well, you know, because he thought it was audacious in the right way. Yes, he was proud to be a faggot.

PM: Going back, he was not always that aggressively public about his sexual identity, was he?

DB: Well, as he explained in Goodbye to Berlin, if he’d identified himself as a queer, that would have made the narrator too interesting. That would have given him a personality, which would have maybe eclipsed everybody in the book. And anyway there just wasn’t that kind of freedom in publishing then. And he probably wouldn’t have gotten publishers to publish it.

PM: Right. Don, in the documentary, you’re quoted as saying that as a homosexual “Chris had been wavering between embarrassment and defiance. He became embarrassed when he felt he was making a selfish demand for his individual right at a time when only group action mattered. And he became defiant when he made the treatment of the homosexual a test by which every political party and government must be judged.” Can you elaborate a little bit more on that?

DB: Well, it’s perfectly clear. How could I elaborate on it?

PM: The embarrassment piece of it.

DB: Read me the embarrassment part again.
PM: He became “embarrassed when he felt he was making a selfish demand for his individual rights at a time when only group action mattered.”

DB: Well, at the time there was a strong movement in England toward communism. It was the fashionable political movement of the time. You could never get Chris for being a communist because he would never consider joining because he didn’t like their attitude toward the queers. So, it maybe embarrassed him at the time for not having the political beliefs that everyone else had, but he had very good reasons for not having them. And Steven Spender did join the Communist Party

PM: What does that say about Steven?

DB: Oh sure. Yeah. Well, except he was a world within world. He makes it perfectly clear. But Natasha was always insisted that once they married, he gave it all up. Well she knows better. She just doesn’t want to admit it. And of course, she’s a hawk about everything published by Steven’s friends. And we haven’t been in touch since the first volume of Chris’s diaries was published because she of course asked to see what he had written about Steven. And I chose one page which was the only one I could find that I thought had nothing that Natasha could possibly object to. She sent back a long, long letter: “Take out this, take out that, take out that.” And she never heard from me again. No, I knew her very well. And I know Lizzie. And I’ve been in touch with Matthew, the son and daughter. But, I just realized – I was determined to publish everything that wasn’t libelous. And Kate Bucknell and I followed all of the recommendations of the libel lawyers. That was the only thing we changed. We always put in brackets and gave the sense of the passage without the libelous material. And I knew that Natasha would never agree to that.

PM: The diaries are indispensible. I mean, it’s key to doing any serious work on Chris. How much material did you have to redact? How much material did you have to remove?

DB: [DB breaks off on a tangent and we do not return to the question]

PM: Don, let me go just to a couple of more things – you’ve been really very generous with your time. Your relationship with Chris was more than that of just two amazing lovers. It was more than a love story in many respects. It was an artistic relationship. How would you characterize that relationship? What role did he play in your work? What role did you play in his work?
DB: Well, people thought the age difference made our relationship remarkable and we always regarded it as an advantage because it just gave us more roles to play with each other. He was lover, father, guide, tutor, all kinds of things for me. And he taught me everything that I value in my experience. And his example told me what an artist is – what it is to care about what you do. And, he always regarded being an artist as symbolic of the religious life. If you wanted it, you do it for its own sake. Well, you know I never heard such ideas until I met him and he was so sound in every respect. He’s the wisest man I ever met and I met some of the best minds of my time. But Chris, with all that he knew, lived a much more sophisticated life than somebody like, Aldous Huxley. And the fact that he was queer and dealing with German street boys that broadened his views wonderfully. And the fact that he knew how to [woo] an 18 year old and charm the pants off him. He was a year older than my father and certainly at 18 I wasn’t contemplating a lover of Chris’ age. But, thank God I had the sense to realize that he was really extraordinary. And I’ve never met anybody the least bit like him.

PM: I agree with you. A lot of people who write about the Berlin Diaries seize on the phrase “I am a camera.” And they go immediately from there to talk about the motion picture industry and Chris’s work in the industry. Do you think your work as a visual artist, a portrait artist, influenced Chris’ fiction? And the reason I’m asking this is I think Chris’ best work is produced after he meets you.

DB: So did he. He thought his work in this country was miles ahead of anything he wrote before. And back in England, they’re just determined to believe the reverse. That he was sullied by this country. They’re so short-sighted. [laughs]

PM: Well, you know the British critics who talk about him, talk about the commercial film industry and the work he did in the commercial film industry as somehow compromising his literature, when in fact nothing can be further from the truth. And in fact, I think you and your regard for the portrait is present in Chris’ work. I feel that.

DB: Well, it was his idea I should be an artist. He saw these drawings I did as a teenager. He saw that I had a flair for it. I had no confidence in myself. Neither of my parents had ever taken an interest in my art work. And, in fact my father actively tried to discourage me. It took three years – more than three years before I even dared to take a summer term at art school. Just a 6-week summer term. And yet, I was desperate to find my vocation, something to do with myself. I knew that our whole life together depended on it. And after the first week of art school, I quit UCLA. I’d been going for three years and hating it. I had the sense not to go to art school for any kind of degree, but I was just determined just to learn to draw people. And I did. I just took the classes, not that were necessary for a degree, but I took any class that had a live model. And I went from 9 to 4 every day and I was often back from 7 to 10 at night. And it was such a relief to find my vocation. And of course, in those days, I dreamed of being a famous, rich artist. I never occurred to me the real value of all that effort and discipline was that I’d have a vocation at the age I am now.
PM: Right. Are you discriminating when it comes to your models. Will you sketch anyone?

DB: Yeah, I don’t often admit it, but anyone will do. Anyone who’ll sit still. That’s the truth, but I don’t often speak it. And the ones who could be still and concentrated turned out to be some of the most fascinating people I’ve worked with. Just because they expressed who they were so subtly. And that made me realize that anybody who would sit still would do – and as I said earlier I love meeting people for the first time and within minutes getting them into this very intense relationship.

PM: When you meet someone, do you engage that person visually as well as visually?

DB: Oh yes.

PM: In other words, do you walk away saying –

DB: But, I’ve always done that and I didn’t realize I was doing it. And I thought everybody saw people like that. My brother and I were very close. He was four years older and he drew better than I did. And he corrected my drawings quite rightly. And even after I became a professional artist, if I were in doubt about a picture of somebody I’d done, if I thought there was something wrong with it, I just have to show Ted. And he’d tell, “Well, that’s wrong and that’s wrong.” And so, but I thought everybody felt that way. Chris used to be astonished when we would meet people at parties and I would notice things about them that hadn’t seen. Particularly about women, I was very good. I would notice, you know, if they just changed their hairstyle slightly. And Chris would, if he were writing about somebody that I knew, he would ask me to describe what that person looked like. I gave him ideas how to write about that person. And he would even ask me for words. He describes the water of the Ganges in A Meeting by the River. He wanted a word for a changing – something that changes. Anyway, I cam up with inconstant. And he said, “Where on Earth did you get that from?” And I said it’s in Romeo and Juliet and it is. And he put in A Meeting by the River.

PM: I know he did!

DB: But I felt often that we knew each other so well, that he was just using me as a medium. That he was kind of almost inspiring me to come up with a word that he already knew. Maybe we were using mental telepathy.

PM: Is there anything about Chris I haven’t asked you about that I should know about?

DB: No, no. I mean, of course, there is lots more, but I have to be questioned. Any question you think of, please ask it. Chris always said to audiences when he spoke and he was wonderful at speaking and never prepared any lecture. He always made the audience ask him questions, and he said, “Ask anything you like. I’ll either answer your question or tell you it’s none of your business. And I’ve never had to say it’s none of your business.”
PM: So there’s an open book. You’ve been very generous. Thanks so much, Don.