

Christopher Isherwood
and the Vedantic Novel
A Study of 'A Single Man'

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AFTER moving to the United States just before the beginning of the Second World War, the British novelist Christopher Isherwood became interested in the Vedantic system of metaphysical thought and spiritual practice expounded by Samkara, an Indian saint and thinker of the eighth century. Samkara's Vedanta is known as Advaita or pure non-dualism. Isherwood's mentors in his Vedantic studies were the monks of the Ramakrishna Order in Southern California, notably Swami Prabhavananda whom he acknowledges as his guru. He helped the Swami to edit the bi-monthly magazine of the Order, and himself later brought out two collections of articles that had appeared in the magazine, *Vedanta and the West* (1948) and *Vedanta for Modern Man* (1952). He also helped Prabhavananda to translate *The Bhagavad Gita*, the Yoga Sutras (Aphorisms) of Patanjali (*How to Know God*, 1953), and the *Vivekachudamani* of Samkara (*The Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*). He also wrote an account of Ramakrishna and his disciples. It is therefore reasonable to inquire whether the Advaita Vedanta has made any significant impact on him as a novelist. We know from one of his articles ('The Problem of the Religious Novelist', reprinted in *Vedanta for Modern Man*, and *Exhumations*, 1966) that he is deeply interested in writing a religious novel, and we may inquire whether any of his later novels are religious in a specific Vedantic sense. This inquiry deals with a novel where this influence is not overt, and so far as I am aware, has not been previously pointed out: *A Single Man*, 1964. For information concerning those aspects of the Vedanta which are relevant to this inquiry I have

depended on the commentary in *How To Know God*.¹ Prabhavananda's and Isherwood's aim was to produce 'a practical aid to the spiritual life'. Hence the translation is not literal and the commentary is non-technical and restricted to essential elucidation. Though the Aphorisms are based on a metaphysic different from that of the Vedanta, Isherwood and Prabhavananda have written their commentary from the point of view of the Vedanta. They consider that the philosophical point of difference has no practical importance for the spiritual aspirant who may belong to any religion, Hindu, Christian or other.

In the first section of this paper I shall summarize the features of the Vedanta relevant to our purpose, employing, as far as possible, the words of the commentary. In the second, I shall point out in what respects they have affected the novel.

I

The Vedanta of Samkara teaches that there is a single ('one without a second') reality called the Brahman or the Atman. Nothing else is real. Brahman is the name given to the reality in its universal aspect; and Atman, when it is considered 'as the innermost Self of any particular creature or object' (*How to Know God*, p. 23). Atman and Brahman are one and the same Reality. It has a certain power or effect called *Prakriti*. *Prakriti* is the undifferentiated stuff of all mind and matter in the cosmos. It consists of three forces, *sattwa*, *rajas* and *tamas* which are collectively called the *gunas*. They are present everywhere in combination though at any given time only one of them predominates; they are always in a state of shifting equilibrium producing innumerable combinations. From this characteristic of the *gunas* is derived all the variety of physical and psychic phenomena which make up our apparent world — apparent because *prakriti* is merely an effect or power of Brahman and cannot exist in its own right. (This apparency is referred to as *māya*.) *Sattwa* causes our moments of inspiration, disinterested affection, quiet joy

¹ It will be recalled that Mr T. S. Eliot, no ordinary possum himself in digesting to his creative advantage alien tongues and habits of thought, studied these Aphorisms at Harvard with the help of Professor James B. Woods, the translator of these Aphorisms in the Harvard Oriental Series, and emerged from his study in a state of 'enlightened mystification'.

and meditative calm. Rajas brings on our outbursts of rage and fierce desire; it makes us restless and discontented; but it is also responsible for our better phases of constructive activity, energy, enthusiasm and physical courage. Tamas is the mental bog into which we sink whenever sattwa and rajas cease to prevail; in a state of tamas, we exhibit our worst qualities — sloth, stupidity, obstinacy and helpless despair.

So much for what Vedanta has to say regarding Reality and the nature of the cosmos. What about the nature of the human mind and human character? It has been already stated that, according to Vedanta, mind, as much as matter, is composed of prakriti. The mind is called *chitta*. It is made up of three components: *manas*, the recording faculty which receives impressions from the senses, *buddhi* which discriminates among these impressions, classifies them and reacts to them, and *ahamkara* which is the ego-sense that claims these impressions for its own and stores them up as individual knowledge. The mind is not intelligent in its own right. Its intelligence is borrowed from the Atman which is intelligence itself, pure consciousness. The mind is merely an instrument of knowledge. Knowledge or perception is a wave or *vritti* in the chitta, and therefore all knowledge or perception is objective, even what is called self-knowledge or introspection in Western psychology. Every perception arouses the ego-sense in us which says: I know this. The ego-sense is caused by the false identification of the Atman, the real seer, with the instruments of seeing, the mind, the senses, etc. Until we break free of this false identification, we shall not achieve freedom from birth and death. The point is explained by means of an image. If the surface of a lake is lashed into waves, the water becomes muddy and the bottom of the lake cannot be seen. The lake stands for the mind and the bottom of the lake for the Atman. When the lake of the mind becomes clear and still, man knows himself as he really is, always was and always will be. He knows that he is the Atman. 'His "personality", his mistaken belief in himself as a separate, unique individual disappears' (*How to Know God*, p. 16).

How does one achieve this realization that he is Atman, pure consciousness? Vedanta teaches that creation — which is cyclic and not unique — is the process of the undifferentiated consciousness becoming differentiated; 'pure consciousness is, as it

were, gradually covered by successive layers of ignorance and differentiation, each layer being grosser and thicker than the one below it, until the process ends on the outer physical surface of the visible and tangible world' (p. 28). Yoga teaches a technique of meditation which reverses this process. 'Beginning at the surface of life, the meditative mind goes inward, seeking always the cause behind the appearance, and then the cause behind the cause, until the innermost Reality is reached'. Involved in this meditation are various disciplines, one of them being the concentration of mind. *The Yoga of Patanjali* proceeds to describe various modes and 'targets' of concentration and their results. The psychic powers of Yoga which are unfortunately the only part of Yoga that is commonly known accrue during various stages of concentration. One of the aphorisms states that concentration may be obtained by fixing it upon 'that sense of peaceful happiness with which we awake from deep, dreamless sleep'. This is explained in the commentary in *How to Know God* as follows:

According to Vedanta philosophy, the Atman in man is covered by three layers or 'sheaths'. The outermost of these is the physical sheath which is the layer of gross matter. Below this is the subtle sheath which is composed of the inner essence of things, and is the stuff of the spirit-world. Below this is the causal sheath so called because it is the web of our *karma* (which the commentary has earlier explained as referring to both our mental or physical acts and their consequences), the complex of cause and effect which makes our personalities and our lives what they are at any given moment. The causal sheath is the ego-sense which makes us see ourselves and the phenomena of the universe as separate entities. In the waking state, Vedanta tells us, all of these three sheaths come between us and the Atman, but in dreamless sleep the two outer coverings are removed and only the causal sheath, the ego-sense remains. It follows therefore that we are nearer to the Atman in dreamless sleep than in any other phase of our ordinary unspiritual lives; nearer — yet still so far, for what separates us is the toughest covering of the three, the basic layer of our ignorance, the lie of otherness. And this sheath can never be broken through by mere sleeping. We cannot hope to wake up one morning and find ourselves united with Reality. Nevertheless, some faint hint, some slight radiation of the joyful peace of the Atman *does* come through to us in this state, and remains with us when we return to waking consciousness.

(p. 51-2)

Sleep itself is described in one of the aphorisms as a thought-wave about nothingness; if there were no thought-waves in the

mind during sleep, we should not wake up remembering that we knew nothing (p. 18). Vedanta teaches that this causal sheath survives the death of the other two sheaths and accompanies us from birth to birth, the type of birth itself being conditioned by the nature of the ego-sense that one has acquired or cultivated in life. The characteristics of the ego-sense are determined by the nature of the thought-wave that the ego has identified itself with. Thus if the mind has been exposed, exemplifies the commentary, to constant thoughts of anger and resentment, one acquires an ego-sense with a bad temper; a predisposition to anger is built into the ego-sense. These predispositions and latent tendencies existing very often at the lower levels of the mind are called *samskara* in Vedanta; their sum total at any given moment is the Vedantic notion of 'character'. It is these *samskaras* embedded, as it were, in the causal sheath that drive us from birth to birth. They condition the birth that we acquire, for it is their inherent characteristic to cast about for maximum expression in action.

If it is borne in mind that this is a conception of character within the larger conception of the supreme purpose of life as the liberation of the Atman from identification with thought-waves, it will be realized that a novelist who adopts this view of human character will record in a detached, almost clinical, manner the psychological characteristics of the individual as manifested in action or perception or relation with his environment. The perceptions (*chitta — vritti*) will also be treated as thought-waves; the mechanism of *manas-buddhi-abamkara* will be demarcated in the perception.

I have now completed what I believe to be the principal features of the Vedanta relevant to our inquiry. I shall in the section that follows indicate the aspects of the novel which are, in my judgement, indebted to these features.

II

First, the nature of consciousness. The hero of the novel, George, is asleep and the novelist describes the state as follows:

But is all of George altogether present here? Up the coast a few miles north, in a lava reef under the cliffs, there are a lot of rock pools. You can visit them when the tide is out. Each pool is separate and different, and you can, if you are fanciful, give them names — such as

George, Charlotte, Kenny, Mrs Strunk. Just as George and the others are thought of, for convenience, as individual entities, so you may think of a rock pool as an entity; though, of course, it is not. The waters of its consciousness — so to speak — are swarming with hunted anxieties, grim-jawed greeds, dartingly vivid intuitions, old crusty-shelled rock-gripping obstinacies, deep-down sparkling undiscovered secrets, ominous protean organisms motioning mysteriously, perhaps warningly, toward the surface light. How can such a variety of creatures coexist at all? Because they have to. The rocks of the pool hold their world together. And, throughout the day of the ebb tide, they know no other.

But that long day ends at last; yields to the night-time of the flood. And, just as the waters of the ocean come flooding, darkening over the pools, so over George and the others in sleep come the waters of that other ocean; that consciousness which is no one in particular but which contains everyone and everything, past, present and future, and extends unbroken beyond the uttermost stars. We may surely suppose that, in the darkness of the full flood, some of these creatures are lifted from their pools to drift far out over the deep waters. But do they ever bring back, when the daytime of the ebb returns, any kind of catch with them? Can they tell us, in any manner, about their journey? Is there, indeed, anything for them to tell — except that the waters of the ocean are not really other than the waters of the pool?

(pp. 155-6)

Vedanta holds that the existence of the separate 'single man' is a fiction; only the pure consciousness of the Atman exists. This tenet is also reflected in the novel. We see several Georges all functioning at the same time. There is the George who drives while allowing another George to go off into a reverie. There is the George who is a 'talking head' functioning at the same time as the George who sees the tennis-players and is lost in the reflection aroused by what he sees. There is also the George who is a 'dirty old man' according to current social mores and who is also simply a prisoner of a predicament (of which homosexuality is the symptom) which is inexplicable to himself. Of these several Georges who can be broadly classified as the public George and the private George, the one who threatens to prevail is the public George who is called into being by the exigencies of the external situation. The criticism of the American society implied in the novel is that it produces these purely 'public' characters and their converses without giving any opportunity to its members to realize the truth of 'pure' consciousness.

What is the predicament of George of which his homosexuality and masturbation are symptoms? (The same situation is created in Isherwood's next novel, *A Meeting By the River*.) It is not understood by George himself but certain wrong diagnoses such as 'glands', 'the English public school', 'brother or son-substitute' are ruled out.

'I want like hell to tell you. But I can't. I quite literally can't. Because, don't you see, what I know is what I am? And I can't tell you that. You have to find it out for yourself. I'm like a book you have to read. A book can't read itself to you. It doesn't even know what it's about. I don't know what I'm about' — (p. 149)

We are told that Kenny, the boy with whom he desires a sexual relationship, is 'crazy', that is, 'he tends to do the opposite of what most people do; not on principle or out of aggressiveness, but probably because he is too vague to notice the manners and customs of the tribe and too lazy to follow them'; he is for instance, interested in whether mescaline produces mystical vision and would like to try. A relationship with the boy can apparently give to George a sense of freedom from the ego which he is obscurely seeking. This is not possible in a heterosexual relationship because, so George thinks, such a relationship exists only to provide an opportunity to Woman to exercise her biological rights over man and the man returns from the relationship with a feeling of disgust, self-anger and a sense of having been exploited.

Of the nature of pure consciousness, a glimpse of which is available in deep sleep, and of the nature of the individual ego there are clear indications in the novel. The novel opens with George waking up, and we are given a description in an objective detached manner of how the ego-sense gradually comes back to the waking body, the return of George's *chitta* from its *sleep-vritti*. The description makes no distinction between the physical and the non-physical aspects of 'the non-entity' called George (p. 158) since according to Vedanta both mind and matter are composed of prakriti. Since the description is of an individual nonentity, the third person neuter pronoun is used. Since the mind, according to Vedanta, is an object of perception, like the outside world, the perceptions are described from the outside, as it were, in the style of a scientific report using the present tense throughout. The perceptions are also analysable clearly

into the sequence of *manas-buddhi-abamkara* as, for instance, in the description of what happens in George's *chitta* when he sees the tennis-players at play (pp. 42-3). The novel ends with the description of George falling asleep, and in the course of the description, the Vedantic conception of consciousness is brought in unmistakably. (See the quotation made earlier on page 65 above, 'But is all of George altogether present here?') At the end of the novel it is hinted what happens when the body dies. The causal-sheath, the ego-sense in which the *samskaras* are deposited ('codicils which have been secretly signed and witnessed and put away in a most private place, to await the hour of their execution', pp. 153-4) comes back to the body and finds that it is 'homeless' for 'it can no longer associate itself with what lies here, unsnoring, on the bed'. Vedanta goes on to describe how incarnation takes place. (This is not done in Isherwood's novel, but Huxley attempted the task in *Time Must Have a Stop*, basing himself in the account in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad which *How to Know God* quotes and explains in the commentary on *Aphorism*, II, 9, pp. 85-6.) The ego, or non-entity, called George, will seek, Vedanta teaches, a birth which will give it opportunity to express its *samskaras*.

A single man is a fiction; perception is a thoughtwave; the mind and the body are both composed of the same substance; the mind is as much an object of perception as the outside world; our character is determined by our *samskaras* which are stored away in 'a most private place'; in sleep we experience faintly the larger single consciousness that is the only reality — these animating conceptions of the novel are derived from the Vedanta. Even the narrative style of the novel is adjusted to the realization of these conceptions.

Nevertheless *A Single Man* is not a religious novel if we adopt the definition of such a novel provided by Isherwood himself in his article on 'The Problem of the Religious Novel'. It gives us the portrait neither of the saint nor of the saint-to-be, but of an average man of the world who is searching 'however unconsciously for that same fundamental reality of which X (i.e. the saint-to-be) has already had a glimpse' (*Vedanta for Modern Man*, p. 249). 'The creature we are watching will struggle on and on until it drops. Not because it is heroic. It can imagine no alterna-

tive (*A Single Man*, p. 8). Neither his reading of Huxley's *After Many a Summer* nor his mescaline-experience brings about any self-questioning or transformation of character in George. Why? The answer is suggested in the next novel Isherwood wrote, *A Meeting By the River*, which illustrates his conception of the religious novel most adequately. Patrick in that novel is very similar to George in his spiritual state (he is also a homosexual), and towards the end of the novel, it is intimated that he will ultimately cross 'the river' to 'the other shore', that he is in a state of grace. This state of grace consists in the example provided by his brother Oliver who is preparing to cross the river and in the overseeing care of Oliver's swami, the guru, the boatman who will ferry him across the river. The criticism of the society in which George in *A Single Man* lives is that it has neither such examples nor such 'boatmen'. A single man in that society faces the dilemma of becoming either a 'zombie' (p. 77) or singular. It is a society that has achieved what Aldous Huxley (Appendix to *The Devils of London*) has called infra-self-transcendence; Europe has achieved horizontal self-transcendence. Salvation, however, consists in vertical self-transcendence, the permanent mortification of the ego and the realization of the consciousness 'which is no one in particular but which contains everyone and everything, past, present and future, and extends beyond the uttermost stars' (*A Single Man*, pp. 155-6). This quotation from Isherwood's novel also indicates the inherent limitation of the Vedantic novel. The Vedanta of Samkara cannot, by definition, be realized in a novel. Pure consciousness is beyond the *chitta-vrittis* — which are all that language can cope with — and *A Single Man* copes with them very successfully indeed. As Isherwood in his article on 'The Problem of the Religious Novel' admits, the mystical experience 'can never be described; it can only be written around, hinted at, dimly reflected in word or deed' (*Vedanta for Modern Man*, p. 250). The 'hinting' in *A Single Man* is done by means of the narrative technique. The *chitta-vrittis* are described as if they were objects of perception, leading to the inference that there is a perceiver other than the *chitta*. This is the Vedantic core of Isherwood's novel.