

The Novelist & Vedanta

"I am a camera with its shutters open, quite passive, recording, not thinking."

—Christopher Isherwood, *A Berlin Diary*, 1930

What is the most concisely Vedantic, and coincidentally most famous, phrase ever written by Christopher Isherwood? Easy, the opening line of *A Berlin Diary*: "I am a camera." The impartial Witness, or dispassionate observer, defines the characteristic attitude of Atman/Brahman; it permeates classic Vedantic literature and is taught to Vedanta aspirants as the ideal psychological stance to cultivate in dealing with the external world. To name just a few, The Bhagavad Gita reads: "The supreme Brahman in this body is also known as the Witness...It is the infinite Being, the supreme Atman."¹ Shankara states in *Vivekachudamani* "The self-luminous Atman, the witness of all, is ever-present within your own heart."² And the Mundaka Upanishad teaches: "Like two birds of golden plumage, inseparable companions, the individual self and the immortal Self are perched on the branches of the selfsame tree. The former tastes of the sweet and bitter fruits of the tree; the latter, tasting of neither, calmly observes."³

Ideas Isherwood assimilated in his Vedanta work infuse his writing. But the problem with attributing the self-conscious wisdom of "I am a camera" to Vedantic teachings in this particular case is that Isherwood wrote it a decade before his exposure to Vedanta.

It is, instead, the method and mindset of the writer's craft; and the convergence of the two disciplines demonstrates Dharma, how one's work and religion can be one, each enhancing the other even before one or the other is consciously known to the individual. Ultimately, application of the work's principles in itself drives the soul to God-union; and, conversely, religious practice reinforces the work as a continuation of worship. As many an aspirant knows, finding your Dharma early in life, as Isherwood did, is a rare gift.

We can attribute the popular fame of the line "I am a camera" to John van Druten, who was a very commercially successful professional colleague of Isherwood's as well as a member of the Hollywood Vedanta Society in the 1940s and 50s.⁴ He wrote the first play based on Isherwood's Berlin works, *I Am a Camera*, which has morphed into the now-ubiquitous *Cabaret*. Given his participation in Vedanta, Van Druten was certainly sophisticated enough to understand the spiritual ramifications of that phrase.⁵ But in its

¹ Swami Prabhavananda & Christopher Isherwood, *Bhagavad Gita The Song of God*, 13: 22-23

² Swami Prabhavananda, *Spiritual Heritage of India*, Vedanta Press, p. 297.

³ Swami Prabhavananda & Frederick Manchester, Translators, *The Upanishads*, Vedanta Press, p. 65-66. Prabhavananda introduces the place of the Atman in Upanishadic thought as such: "Yes, somewhere within or behind the tumult, apart from it, superior to it, there was, the ṛṣis said, a silent and constant witness. This they called the Ātman, or Self." *Spiritual Heritage*, p. 48.

⁴ Gopal Stavig, *Ramakrishna-Vedanta in Southern California*, <http://www.vedantawritings.com/RKVTOC.htm>
Literary Figures and Actors (1930-1949) <http://www.vedantawritings.com/HVS4.pdf>

⁵ Van Druten seemed to have a gift for creating enduring catch phrases. He won the Oscar for best screenplay in 1944 for *Gaslight*, which has left us with the term "gaslighting." Source: Gopal Stavig,

formative days, the project was referred to as "Sally Bowles" before emerging publicly as *I Am a Camera*.

Spiritual Writing as a Craft

Isherwood generously shared his insights about writing. In the 1960s the college dropout taught literature at several colleges and universities and both wrote and lectured on the topic to secular and spiritual audiences alike. We have three essays on the subject, at least two are transcripts of lectures: *The Problem of the Religious Novel* which appeared in 1946 for *Vedanta in the West*; *The Writer and Vedanta*,⁶ a lecture given at the Hollywood Temple in 1961 and also published as an essay in *Vedanta in the West*; and *A Writer and Religion*, part of a series, *A Writer and His World*, delivered at the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1960.⁷

A Writer and Religion is a polished and popularized version of its 1946 ancestor, *The Problem of the Religious Novel*. Both focus in depth on creating the character of the "Saint" as the pillar of religious fiction. *The Writer and Vedanta* covers similar territory as Isherwood considered saint-making fundamental to spiritual writing, so we will consolidate the three overlapping treatments of the saint as a literary character. However *The Writer and Vedanta* presented a smorgasbord of topics related to the creation of art, which we will consider first.

The Artist & Vedanta

In *The Writer and Vedanta*, Isherwood elucidates not just the writing process but art in general as it converges with spiritual disciplines and is reinforced by them. His insights on the artistic process are wide-ranging, covering mindset, technique, commitment, and work ethic, pinning each to a spiritual principle.

First and foremost he emphasizes the quality that made him so personally appealing, his warmth and attentive curiosity about people. "Writing also is concerned with human beings and the greatness of any individual writer depends to a large extent on the degree of compassion which he can feel toward human beings." Compassion he defines as an unsentimental and boldly objective interest that accepts that both good and evil characters are necessary, and he must love them all. There are no taboo subjects. He further likens the artist to a Creator God who enters into and is part of the world he has created but is also its master.

Ramakrishna-Vedanta in Southern California, <http://www.vedantawritings.com/RKVTOC.htm> Literary Figures and Actors (1930-1949) <http://www.vedantawritings.com/HVS4.pdf> Moreover, according to Paul Waldman, Washington Post, 11/28/2022 "Merriam-Webster has chosen 'gaslighting' as its Word of the Year for 2022."

⁶ There is also a sound recording of the lecture:

https://www.vedanta.com/store/writer_and_vedanta_isherwood.htm

⁷ *The Writer & Vedanta* and *The Problem of the Religious Novel* both appear in *The Wishing Tree*, ed. Robert Adjemian, Harper & Row Publishers and *A Writer and Religion* appears in *Isherwood on Writing*, ed. James J. Berg, University of Minnesota Press, 2007. *The Problem of the Religious Novel* also appears in *Exhumations*, Christopher Isherwood, Methuen & Co, 1984

One may then say that the author has incarnated himself among his characters. He shares in their struggles, he shares in their passions, he is apparently one of them. And yet, since he has created the entire situation himself, he is also master of his maya. He is not only within this world but also simultaneously looking down upon it and sanctioning it. He can say, as though he were Ishwara, "These are all my children, they all belong to me. I accept the good with the bad."⁸

He goes on to reveal that the philosopher is necessarily at the core of serious literature; the purpose of writing "is to understand, to reveal the deeper nature of experience, to make life and its phenomena, and all the human beings and creatures around us more significant. To make our own lives fuller of meaning and thereby to render our whole experience moment by moment more significant than it otherwise would be. To open our eyes, to open our ears, and above all to open our hearts to the experience around us."

But he is at his most animated and ferocious in discussing, then eviscerating, Sunday religion/Sunday artists:

Just as there is Sunday-religion, there is also Sunday-art. Sunday-religion is the religion of people who want to go into some suitable building once a week, and feel nice and reverent and uplifted before lunch. Such people can quite easily pass from the use of a church or a temple or a synagogue to going into an art gallery, let us say, and feeling nice and reverent and uplifted by art before lunch. Such Sunday-art, such banishment of art into a kind of shrine where it is isolated from everyday life, is every bit as pernicious as the banishment of religion into a shrine where it is isolated from our daily life. And people who thus isolate either religion or art or both, can usually be known by their attitude to those who seriously practice either religion or art. The people who like Sunday-art wish very much that you could do without those horrid creatures the artists, because while the art is so beautiful and is safe inside a gallery or in the hundred best books or a nice concert hall, these dreadful artists have deplorable habits, and are noisy and loud and obstreperous and antisocial and cause scandals. In just the same manner—not that I am suggesting a direct comparison between them—the people who have seriously practiced religion and achieved the greatest spiritual insight have often been very strange characters from the point of view of the Sunday religionists. Many of the saints have caused infinite scandal to the merely pious, by their odd, unconventional, bohemian, and even seemingly blasphemous behavior, simply because they were approaching the Reality with total belief. The life of Sri Ramakrishna is full of instances in which he caused great shock and offense, not to unbelievers, but to people who by their own lights were very pious and devout.⁹

⁸ This statement echoes the well-known (in Vedanta circles) saying by Sri Sarada Devi, "I am the mother of the wicked, as I am the mother of the virtuous. Never fear. Whenever you are in distress, say to yourself, 'I have a mother.'"

⁹ Wishing Tree 156-157

We see here a surfacing of the long-standing resentment and contempt for what he called the Others,¹⁰ boorish slaves to respectability, that drove him (literally out of England) in his youth and will become increasingly naked in his life and writing as he ages.

He gives some very downhome advice to artists: He quotes the Gita on Karma yoga, "You have the right to work, but for the work's sake only. You have no right to the fruits of work."¹¹

...you must do your duty, whatever it is—the kind of work which nature seems to have fitted you for—and then you must offer up the results of this work as a form of devotion, a form of sacrifice. You must do your work to the utmost extent of your powers.¹²

Art for art's sake. God for God's sake. This is vitally important advice to the artist, who must persevere in the face of rejection, harsh public criticism, and often self-imposed poverty.

From another perspective, he describes Karma yoga as being "fundamentally concerned with our fellow human beings. We try to serve the Atman within these fellow human beings...You say to yourself: I wish to approach the Godhead, the Atman, which is present within all these people. I will try to find God by serving these people."

For the most mundane application of Vedanta philosophy, he touches on the gunas¹³ to show how to combat the paralysis of writer's block, which he often suffered from and complained about in his Diaries no end. He cites the Gita as teaching that the gunas are constantly cycling; just hang in there and be prepared to take up the work when rajas replaces tamas, no need to panic or despair.

He mentioned Aldous Huxley's thoughts on Divine Inspiration in art, which he heard Huxley express to a small group in 1942. He was quite taken with the idea and shared his verbatim notes in an essay for *The Atlantic*, [Huxley in California](#), (1964):

[Huxley is speaking]...I have mainly lived in the world of intellectual life and art. But the world of knowing about things is unsatisfactory. It's no good knowing about the taste of strawberries out of a book. The more I think of art I realize that though artists do establish some contact with spiritual reality, they establish it unconsciously. Beauty is imprisoned, as it were, within the white spaces between the lines of a poem, between the notes of music, in the apertures between groups of sculpture. This function or talent is unconscious. They throw a net and catch something, though the net is trivial. . . . But one wants to go further. One

¹⁰ *The Atlantic, Darling Me*, Thomas Mallon, January/February 2005.

¹¹ Bhagavad Gita 2:47

¹² *Ibid*, 157

¹³ There are three gunas: "Sattwa expresses itself psychologically as tranquility, purity and calmness; rajas as passion, restlessness, aggressive activity; tamas as stupidity, laziness, inertia." —*Bhagavad Gita*, Appendix I, page 143.

wants to have a conscious taste of these holes between the strings of the net. . . . Now, obviously, one could never possibly give it up.

Of the three, *The Writer and Vedanta* exclusively points out the pitfalls of trying to model the fictitious saint on a real life example. This became obvious to him while working on *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*. The actual events in the lives of real holy men are sometimes difficult to believe, so that if these things were to be presented in a work of fiction, they would be dismissed as fantasy. The only way to relate the events in the life of Sri Ramakrishna, for instance, would be to present them as non-fiction.

He ends *The Writer and Vedanta* by discouraging the overt injection of philosophical or political ideas onto a work of fiction. The story becomes "a poorly disguised sermon. I think, in other words, that if you want to present the ideas of Vedanta philosophy, you should write an essay or a book which is explicitly about that philosophy." This could be a swipe at Aldous Huxley's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* (1939), in which the plot is often interrupted by Huxley allowing one of the characters, Propter, to hold forth, page after page, on various of Huxley's own pet topics. Thomas Merton called Propter "the dullest character in the whole history of the English novel."

The Fiction Writer & Vedanta

As Isherwood himself points out, the sacred and the profane existed in discrete compartments in his body of work. The struggle to unify them dogged him. While he was an excellent essayist on Vedanta as well as a noted travel writer, his chosen artistic form was the novel. The folding in of Vedanta eluded him for decades. But he wrestled with the process in *The Problem of the Religious Novel* (1946) which he presented in a refined form 15 years later in *A Writer and Religion* (1961).

Perhaps because he was addressing a secular academic audience not necessarily in sympathy with religious ideas, he lays a thorough foundation at the outset. He offers his definition of a "saint," "...I take arbitrarily, this definition: a saint is a man, primarily of experience—an experience which has led to enlightenment." His lecture notes¹⁴ read "...a man who has made contact with God. A saint is also a good man, but not primarily a good man."

In order for the listener to accept the reality of enlightenment as a concept, Isherwood establishes a minimum working hypothesis, borrowed from Aldous Huxley, that the reader must adopt to follow Isherwood's thesis any further: there is a Reality within us, without us and in all creatures and things, beyond individual being, which we call God which can be contacted within ourselves and known. He shows how the Vedantic concept of Atman, without ever using the word, gives the author entry into the world of characters he must create. While the phrase "I am a camera" shared the writer's technique of objective observation from without, Vedanta methodology shows how to discover others by diving deep within. "...Reality can be contacted within ourselves

¹⁴ Isherwood on Writing, Ed. James Berg, University of Minnesota Press, p. 234

and known...in the sense of self-knowledge, [which] leads...by extension, to the recognition of Godhead within other people."¹⁵

His blueprint for the construction of a successful religious novel is superbly Vedantic in its view of Life. He casts the saint-in-making as an outwardly unremarkable inhabitant of a world peopled by his fellow creatures, all of whom are, like him, potential saints. The dissatisfaction and suffering that drives us, the restless longing, boredom, and fears, and most importantly the drive to find something more to life, engenders all manner of "vice" when frustrated, hence the drama. The saint-to-be, while one of the gang, breaks ranks and directs this thwarted energy Godward. The reader must recognize that the aspirant starts out just like everyone else so that the reader believes that he too can become a saint. This is Isherwood's all-important bridge that the author must establish between the finished saint and the reader. The outlook resonates with Swami Vivekananda's articulation of the inevitable, no mandatory, outcome of Life according to Vedanta:

Nature's task is done, this unselfish task which our sweet nurse, nature, had imposed upon herself. She gently took the self-forgetting soul by the hand, as it were, and showed him all the experiences in the universe, all manifestations, bringing him higher and higher through various bodies, till his lost glory came back, and he remembered his own nature. Then the kind mother went back the same way she came, for others who also have lost their way in the trackless desert of life. And thus is she working, without beginning and without end. And thus through pleasure and pain, through good and evil, the infinite river of souls is flowing into the ocean of perfection, of self-realization.

Commentary on Patanjali's Yogasutra

Why the Long Face?

"Just fancy, to describe God, who is the very nature of Love and Bliss, as dry! It only proves that the man has never experienced what God is like."¹⁶

Contrary to the popular paradigm, Isherwood insists that the portrayal of the saint and his struggles mustn't be gloomy. The spiritual aspirant takes up austerities willingly, like an athlete in training, for the preferred prize of God realization.

His use of the word "Saint" is tricky in that that word's connotations play into the very paradigm Isherwood warns against.

...prejudices have to be overcome. The public has its preconceived notions—a figure with a lean face and an air of weary patience, who alternates between moods of austerity and heartbroken sweetness—a creature set apart from this

¹⁵ Isherwood on Writing, 114-115, Editor James Berg, University of Minnesota Press, 2007

¹⁶ Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Translated by Swami Nikhilananda, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1969 p. 454.

bad world, a living reproach to our weakness, in whose presence we feel ill at ease, inferior, and embarrassed. In other words, the dreariest of bores.¹⁷

His description seems to reflect Gerald Heard as Isherwood has drawn him in the Diaries. Rather than being gloriously liberated from convention, the pop-generic "saint" is hamstrung by humorless niceness. But the true saint is different and a precious literary element:

...of all characters, the saint is the most interesting. He is the most interesting because he is the most flexible and he is the most flexible because he is not driven by hate, fear, greed, and all the other limiting motives. He acts according to quite other principles and he can constantly astound us. Very few people have succeeded in writing well about saints in fiction just because it is so extraordinarily difficult.¹⁸

He illustrates his point with a limerick:

There was a young man who said, Damn,
I really can see that I am
A creature that moves
In predestinate grooves
In fact, not a bus, but a tram

Well, a saint is a bus. A tram is what most of us are, confined along certain lines. The bus can decide to change its course...it can go anywhere.¹⁹

The Problem of the Religious Novel ends on a sardonically defeatist note, "Perhaps the truly comprehensive religious novel could only be written by a saint—and saints, unfortunately, are not in the habit of writing novels." According to Isherwood's own definition—that a saint is at liberty to do anything—the point is debatable.

Isherwood calls upon a few examples of spiritual fiction. His most glowing appreciation for the rendering of a saint and his transformation is Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. He often referred to the conversion of Father Zossima as arguably the finest example of spiritual unfoldment in literature. His analysis reinforces that he defines sanctification as the individual liberating itself from the ego.

...the process of turning a stupid young bully of a Russian officer into Father Zossima, the saint. How beautifully Dostoevsky handles this moment of transformation—without the least sentimentality, in terms almost of farce, yet with such warmth, insight, and naturalness! We share the young man's exquisite relief when he finds himself suddenly able, by fearlessly asking his opponent's pardon,

¹⁷ Wishing Tree ?

¹⁸ Wishing Tree, p. 162

¹⁹ Isherwood on Writing, 117

to break the bonds of a rigid military code which has hitherto conditioned his behavior, and to perform his first act of pure free will.²⁰

He notes of the books he cites by Maugham, Hugo, and Huxley that full-blown “saints” are generally in supporting roles, their appearances are significant but brief. He also faults religious novels that don’t satisfactorily reveal the moment of transformation when the vocation is taken up.

He concludes *A Writer and Religion* by recounting the plot of Tolstoy’s *Father Sergius*, Tolstoy’s last work, published posthumously, which Isherwood admires and cites as the most potentially successful of the spiritual novels although it was more of a framework for a novel than a fleshed out novel. (Spoiler alert: The reader may want to read *Sergius* for himself before reading Isherwood’s detailed recap.) Unlike the other disappearing saints, *Sergius* has no other important character. It is entirely concerned with mapping this soul’s journey to sanctity. *Sergius* himself is the uncontested protagonist and his liberation the uncontested quest²¹ The piece is spiritually sophisticated. A lesser writer would have ended the story a few times before Tolstoy has finally let *Sergius* off the hook. And a spiritually naive reader would have been satisfied, may have even preferred it, to Tolstoy’s challenging ending.

He comments on a few of the attempts of his friends, colleagues, and mentors. Notably, he criticizes Somerset Maugham’s *The Razor’s Edge* for falling flat on many counts, not sufficiently explaining Larry’s impetus toward spiritual life, portraying his illumination as too easy, and not really exhibiting much insight into the nitty-gritty of spirituality. Ironically, or maybe predictably, this is one of the most popularly successful and influential religious novels Isherwood discusses. In Isherwood’s opinion Aldous Huxley is a better essayist than novelist. However, he felt that *Time Must Have a Stop* was not bad as a religious novel but it hid the psychological work of the conversion of Sebastian, the protagonist. He also discusses Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*, as well as two novels by George Moore, a Catholic writer; while he admired Moore’s novels, he criticized them for portraying religion as a joyless affair, which, if you read between the lines through the lens of Ramakrishna-Vedanta culture, indicates that Isherwood felt that Moore had never actually met or, if he had, recognized a living saint.

Curiously, Isherwood left out his own cousin, Graham Greene, who was immensely successful and had written “Catholic novels.”

What Else He Left Out

Isherwood puts great emphasis on character but interestingly doesn’t address plot as either a trick of the writing trade or an element in spiritual writing. He says as much in

²⁰ *The Wishing Tree*, p. 165

²¹ In the retelling, Isherwood makes the editorial comment that faith healing exists and is the product of psychic power, a topic discussed in detail in Patanjali’s *Yoga Aphorisms*, which Chris co-authored with Swami Prabhavananda. Tolstoy himself doesn’t necessarily seem convinced of the efficacy of faith healing. It is rather a useful plot device.

writing about theater “the thing that matters supremely is not plot or situation, but it is character.”²² His fiction tends to be autobiographical, so perhaps the invention of tales is largely taken care of. However, it’s in plot that the Hand of God can play.

As in his spiritual life, he overwhelmingly favors the human aspect when laying out the guidelines or evaluating the success of a religious novel. He is overwhelmingly concerned with how the process manifests itself in the characters rather than with the abstract philosophical or even the superconscious visionary realm. While he mentions the visions as an element to conversion, it is to dismiss them. In dramatizing the character’s “moment of vocation,” Isherwood notes that visions don’t work well, particularly at the early stages of the novel, because they don’t show the mental process “dramatically they are a form of cheating.”²³ He also posits that the experiences themselves are impossible to write about, can only be hinted at or written around. However, his definition of a saint requires the saint to have the Experience of communion with the Reality.

This dismissal of the abstract superconscious reflects how he approaches religion itself. He writes, “I have never been able to grasp any idea except through a person. For me, Vedanta is primarily the Swami and Gerald [Heard].”²⁴ He also freely admits to a dearth of mystical experiences himself, so as visions weren’t playing a significant role in his own religious life, religious fiction could also function without them.

In supporting his opinion that Aldous Huxley’s *Time Must Have a Stop* was a reasonably successful religious novel, he mentions only the character of the mentor (guru figure) and his transforming effect upon the protagonist while faulting the book for the detail of the transformation being presented as a *fait accompli*. However, he takes no notice of the arguably more seductive transcendental sections like the following passage:

There was no pain any longer, no need to gasp for breath...All sound had died away, and it was quite dark. But, in the void and the silence there was still a kind of knowledge, a faint awareness.

Awareness of a name or person, not of things present, not of memories of the past, not even of here or there—for there was no place, only an existence whose single dimension was this knowledge of being ownerless and without possessions and alone.

...In the dark silence, in the void of all sensation, something began to know it. Very dimly at first, from immeasurably far away. But gradually the presence approached. The dimness of that other knowledge grew brighter. And suddenly the awareness had become an awareness of light...instead of privation there was this light... yes, there was joy in being known, in being thus included within a shining presence, in thus being interpenetrated by a shining presence...not privation, but bliss...and then as the light increased, hunger again for profounder satisfaction, for a bliss more intense...and through everlasting durations the light kept brightening from beauty into beauty. ...brighter, brighter through succeeding durations, that expanded at last into an eternity of joy. ...An eternity

²² Isherwood on Writing, *A Writer and the Theater*, p. 90

²³ *Exhumations*, Christopher Isherwood, *The Problem of the Religious Novel*, Methuen & Co, 1984, p. 118.

²⁴ Isherwood, *Diaries*, Vol. 1, 228.

of radiant knowledge, of bliss unchanging in its ultimate intensity. For ever, for ever.²⁵

We see in Huxley's writing not only an explicitly wrought description of an abstract superconscious experience but also something new to most of his 1944 reading public. Contrast this to Isherwood's attempt at the transcendental in the opening and closing passages of *A Single Man*, which arguably have no relation to what comes between these transcendental bookends. It is pale compared to Huxley's romp in the far out and, incidentally also echoes a passage from the Gita he co-translated and invites a wider interpretation of the ending than presented in the Tom Ford film:

Day dawns, and all those lives that lay hidden asleep
Come forth and show themselves, mortally manifest:
Night falls, and all are dissolved
Into the sleeping germ of life.

Thus they are seen, O Prince, and appear unceasingly,
Dissolving with the dark, and with day returning
Back to the new birth, new death:
All helpless. They do what they must. (Bhagavad Gita 8:18-19)

Some readers consider *A Single Man* (1964) a very spiritual novel, and many consider it his best novel. It is the latest to spawn another award-winning film and a theatrical production starting on the London stage in 2022, reintroducing Isherwood as a relevant voice in the 21st century. However, many readers don't consider it a spiritual statement. One such review, which eloquently and thoughtfully praises the body of the novel argues as follows:

My only quibble with the book is its bizarre ending, in which George's story gets co-opted into a quasi-spiritual fantasia of global consciousness and eternal return. Like Huxley and other Californian liberals of the 1960s, Isherwood was a dedicated student of Vedanta (Hindu-based) philosophy, and translated a number of important Vedic texts into English. In this context, it reads as an awkward attempt to shoehorn in a (then-fashionable) idea into what until then has been a taut realist psychological drama. It's the only moment when Isherwood's "writerly" voice imposes on and interrupts the story. That said, his writing is so gorgeous that you almost forgive him this intellectual posturing.²⁶

It can be argued that if the opening and closing passages were intended to echo the verses from the Gita, it is a religious statement, positing that human beings are prisoners of Samsara, helpless but to return to the Maya of their own making. But the book's real interest is in what happens in that captivity. But *A Single Man* doesn't meet Isherwood's

²⁵ Aldous Huxley, *Time Must Have a Stop*, Harper & Brothers, 1944, pp 138-142.

²⁶ Anonymous, <https://hoorayfordeadwhitemales.com/2021/06/13/a-single-man/>

own requirements for a religious novel, and he himself apparently didn't consider it a spiritual piece. He describes *A Meeting by the River* (1967) as his first successful spiritual fiction. A detailed account of the very messy origins of *Meeting* is found in the section *A Passage from India*, pun intended.

APPENDIX
For Your Consideration: Jean Valjean

Dear Mr. Isherwood,

CC: Swami Prabhavananda

In response to a comment about checking back in 25 years, you snapped, rather sharply I thought, "What are you going to do, have a séance?" It was 1975. I sure would like that option now because since then I've read Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* and also what you wrote about it in terms of being a spiritual novel. I think *Les Mis* (as we've come to call it) thoroughly satisfies your requirements for a successful spiritual novel. I would love the opportunity to argue that case. So, belief system notwithstanding, whether you're listening, or able to listen, or not, here I go. And as I've CCed Swami, I'll supply context as he/you, Swami, may not have read the novel:

In your essays on the spiritual novel, you list requirements that the author establish for a successful religious novel:

- The future saint must be presented as being just like anyone else; this creates a bridge between the saint and the reader so the reader believes that he too can become a saint.
- Rather than make a vague reference to "the war," say, the writer must explain the psychology of the turning point satisfactorily while not relying on visions.
- The saint is free to act as he chooses, liberated from his surface ego. But his actions will always be benign.
- Neither the saint nor his struggles must be gloomy.
- The saint should be more than a fleeting character.

The Disappearing Saint

In *The Problem of the Religious Novel* you list Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* as one of many attempts at a religious novel in which the "saint," in this case the Bishop of Digne, Monseigneur Bienvenue, who is the catalyst for Jean Valjean's turning point, makes only a brief appearance. You call them "brilliant glimpses" and note the incident of the candlesticks as one such glimpse. But, in fact, *Les Mis* is lousy with "saints," the most meticulously unfurled of which is Jean Valjean himself. The entire novel is the painstaking description of the sanctification of Valjean culminating in a religious experience born of perfected selflessness and resulting in enlightenment.

Perhaps you read the novel early in your life, before becoming hooked on spiritual life, and therefore the spiritual elements flew below the radar, which often happens with us politicians. The spiritual component of *Les Misérables* is a victim of its own success. It has many powerful themes and is overwhelmingly focused on injustice and the suffering of the poor, so for those of us with a political bent at the time of reading, the sociopolitical component will probably eclipse other ideas.

You identify the most obvious saint, Monseigneur Bienvenue, the Bishop of Digne, as making only a brief appearance. He reappears briefly in the story but disappears as a major character after his culminating act of renunciation, which serves as a holy siege on Valjean's soul. But page one, sentence one of the novel actually begins with the bishop and stays on his story long before we meet Jean Valjean or Fantine or Javert or Cossette, who will live on to sing and dance in *Les Mis'* future truncated incarnations.

Hugo presents Bienvenue's backstory not from the omniscient point of view easily available to him as the author and the one he eventually settles into; rather it is a reconstruction of largely speculative village gossip. You demand to see the mechanics of the turning point. Hugo offers not a certain "point of vocation" for Bienvenue but two possibilities, even though, as the author, he's free to assign one; but the two seem to cover the possibilities. Bienvenue's renunciation, late in life, is the product either of disappointments in life: the crumbling of his family status due to the French Revolution, horror at the violence of the Revolution, and the death of his wife from illness, "did these inspire him with thoughts of renunciation and solitude?" or "was he suddenly overcome by one of those mysterious, inner-blows that sometimes strike the heart of the man who could not be shaken by public disasters of his life and fortune?"²⁷ While this may strike you as needlessly vague, as we'll see, Hugo's description of Valjean's transformation is positively microscopic.

Bienvenue not only abounds in the qualities you'd expect in an ideal saint—untiring charity, compassion, affection, humility, treating the rich and poor equally, unflinching courage in the line of duty, frugality, austerity that he did not perceive as suffering—he is also cheerful and witty. But his spontaneous humor wasn't empty; rather it packed a dose of truth. While well-loved in his provincial parish, he was also considered an odd duck. "Clearly he had his own strange way of judging things. I suspect he acquired it from the Gospels."²⁸

Bienvenue's household was made up of an elderly housekeeper and his sister, who gladly shared his life of poverty and chastity. She is one of several minor characters who twinkle briefly within the narrative on their way to holiness. Hugo describes her thus: "her whole life, which had been a succession of pious works, had finally cloaked her in a kind of transparent whiteness, and in growing old she had acquired the beauty of goodness. What had been thinness in her youth was in her maturity a transparency, and this ethereal quality permitted glimmers of the angel within. She was more of a spirit than a virgin mortal...large eyes, always downcast, a pretext for a soul to remain on earth."²⁹

Was the bishop perfect? Most authors would have been satisfied with their creation. But not Hugo. In the chapter *The Bishop in the Presence of an Unfamiliar Light*, Bienvenue behaves uncharacteristically in begrudgingly accepting a self-imposed duty, visiting a dying man who is a hermit and pariah, despised for his politics. Bienvenue shares the villagers' contempt. Hugo refers to the dying man as a Conventionist, one sympathetic with ideals of the French Revolution and, in Bienvenue's eyes, an atheist. For the first

²⁷ *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo, translators Lee Fahnestock & Norman MacAfee, based on C.E. Wilbur, Signet, p.2.

²⁸ *Ibid* p. 14.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p.3.

time in the narrative, Bienvenue treats a man with undisguised aversion. Of the inclusion of this incident, Hugo explains, "We must tell everything, for the little inconsistencies of great souls should be mentioned."³⁰

Bienvenue arrives as the man is about to die. A heated discussion about the plight of the poor ensues. While Bienvenue was radically charitable, sacrificing to the bone his own luxury and hounding the rich, including the invariably wealthy clergy, to share with the poor, he took a "thousand points of light" approach, not exploring the role politics plays in either the perpetuation of poverty or the potential alleviation of it. Hugo writes of the discussion:

The revolutionary did not know that he had successfully demolished all the bishop's interior defenses, one after the other. There was one left, however, and from it the last resource of Monseigneur Bienvenue's resistance, came forth these words, in which nearly all the harshness of the opening reappeared.

"Progress ought to believe in God. The good cannot have an impious servant. An atheist is an evil leader of the human race."

The old representative of the people did not answer...He looked up at the sky and a tear gathered slowly in his eye...he said...talking to himself...his eyes gazing inward:

"O thou! O ideal! Thou alone dost exist!"

The bishop felt an inexpressible emotion.

After a brief silence, the old man raised his finger toward heaven, and said, "The infinite exists. It is there. If the infinite had no *me*, the *me* would be its limit; it would not be the infinite: in other words, it would not be. But it is. Then it has a *me*. This *me* of the infinite is God."

The dying man pronounced these last words in a loud voice and with a shudder of ecstasy, as if he saw someone....

The bishop...glanced at those closed eyes, he took that old, wrinkled, icy hand and drew close to the dying man....

"Monsieur Bishop...I have spent my life in meditation, study, and contemplation. I was sixty years old when my country called me and ordered me to take part in her affairs...I am about to die. What have you come to ask of me?"

"Your blessing," said the bishop. And he fell to his knees....

The bishop went home profoundly absorbed in thought. He spent the whole night in prayer...From that moment he redoubled his tenderness and brotherly love for the weak and suffering.³¹

Throughout their dialog, the Conventionist is the only one who mentions Christ. Hugo refers to the Divine as the One when It is passively present, as Providence when It takes a hand in the action, and the Infinite when it is the impersonal substratum.

The scene just quoted is very similar to the scene in *The Brothers Karamazov*, which you so often sited and shared with Prabhavananda, who also quoted it, the scene when Father Zossima's conversion is completed by falling at the feet of his bewildered

³⁰ Ibid p. 37

³¹ Ibid p. 43-44

servant, whom he has abused, and begging his forgiveness in utter self-abnegation. Dostoevsky was a great admirer of Hugo and loved *Les Miserables* in particular, so as *Les Miserables* was published 17 years before *Brothers*, it's not a stretch, or an insult to Dostoevsky's genius, to speculate that Zossima's scene was spawned by the one above, which marks Bienvenue's perfection.

We have listed among Bienvenue's virtues courage in the course of duty, but he also exhibited consistent courage by living his mundane life by his principles. Bienvenue refused to lock the door of the house, even overnight. His sister mentioned, "Even if Satan came into the house, no one would interfere...There is One with us who is the strongest."

Enter Jean Valjean.

When we finally meet Jean Valjean (Had I read it at 18, I might not have stuck with it through all that religious sweetness—unless it was required reading.) Valjean has just been released from prison after serving 19 years of hard labor for stealing a loaf of bread for his widowed sister's starving family of seven children.

Prison has brutalized Valjean, hardening him emotionally and spiritually; but it has also given him preternatural physical strength and agility as well as a seemingly limitless ability to endure suffering and an ability to focus, all of which serve him well in the odyssey that lay before him. He is filled with hatred for society, civilization, and humanity itself. What germ of light is inside him is struggling for its life in a dark roiling sea of animus.

Even though he has a little money, no one will sell a convict a bed or food. Bienvenue is literally Valjean's last resort. The bishop treats him with the same respect and hospitality he would show any guest, setting out the best silverware, which along with a pair of silver candlesticks, is the final vestige of Bienvenue's worldly attachment to a bygone time of life. Valjean, of course, absconds with the cutlery in the middle of the night. Being a suspicious-looking character, the police pick him up in no time and stop by Bienvenue's house to return the silver on the way back to prison with Valjean. The bishop tells the police that he has given Valjean the silverware and reminds Valjean that he has forgotten the candlesticks, which he throws in. Valjean is stunned, but the reader is not, having come to expect an almost Disneyesque goodness from the bishop.

What might surprise the reader is *Valjean's* reaction. The bishop has destroyed Valjean's peace of mind. "He was prey to a mass of new emotions. He felt somewhat angry, without knowing at whom. He could not have said if he was touched or humiliated. At times, there came over him a hard relenting, which he tried to resist with the hardening of his past twenty years. This condition wore him out. He was disturbed to see within him that that frightful calm which the injustice of his fate had given him was now somewhat shaken. He asked himself what might replace it. At times he really would have preferred to be in prison with the gendarmes, and free from this new development; it would have troubled him less."³²

His knapsack full of silver, his next act is to steal money from a child. It's only after coming to his senses after this depravity that Valjean confronts himself with the choice he *himself* must make: become Bienvenue or become a monster. He saw Valjean from outside himself, no longer identifying himself with Jean Valjean, and is horrified. His mind conceptualizes the bishop in beautiful imagery as a creature made of celestial light, but the whole time being independent of the two, knowing he would have to exercise free will to decide who he would become. Has Hugo met your requirement of showing the psychology of the "moment of vocation" and without resorting to visions? Let's look at Hugo's precise language (in translation, of course).

This then was like a vision [*like a vision, not was a vision, as if he'd anticipated your requirement*]. He truly saw this Jean Valjean, this ominous face, in front of him. He was on the point of asking himself who the man was, and he was horrified at the idea of asking himself such a question.

His brain then was in one of those violent, yet frightfully calm states where reverie is so profound it swallows up reality. We no longer see the objects before us, but we see, as if outside ourselves, the forms we have in our minds.

He saw himself then...face-to-face, and at the same time...he saw, at a mysterious distance, a sort of light, which he took at first to be a torch. Looking more closely at this light dawning on his conscience, he recognized it had a human form, that it was the bishop.

His conscience considered in turn these two men placed before it, the bishop and Jean Valjean. Anything less than the first would have failed to soften the second....the bishop grew larger and more resplendent to his eyes; Jean Valjean shrank and faded away...suddenly he disappeared. The bishop alone remained. He filled the whole soul of this miserable man with a magnificent radiance.³³

I would argue that Hugo has dramatized Jean Valjean's turning point in masterful detail, embracing the task rather than fleeing before the complexity. He has seamlessly merged the psychological work of it and the transcendental element by having the drama play out in the theater of Jean Valjean's mind. And just as Hugo left the ultimate decision to Jean Valjean himself, the reader is free to interpret how much to attribute to psychology and how much to grace.

Were there more like him, or was Jean Valjean the bishop's masterpiece?

The Bridge

Has the bridge between Everyman, the reader, and the saint-to-be been made? Many readers might think they are much further along the path of righteousness than is Valjean, a hardened criminal. These readers would be the Sunday religionists you decry

³³ Ibid. 111

in *The Writer and Vedanta*. What they don't take into account, as a more sophisticated reader would, is Valjean's desperate intensity, which absolutely gives him a leg up.

So that the reader may identify more completely with the protagonist, after introducing Valjean Extreme, the hardened criminal, Hugo introduces us to Valjean Original. As a young man he has meekly but sullenly accepted the duty he's been saddled with, providing for his widowed sister and her seven perpetually hungry children. He is already spiritually and emotionally muted by the responsibility with neither escape nor improvement in sight. A few outstanding native qualities are present but stifled: he is intelligent, although he doesn't learn to read till prison, but more importantly, he is fair-minded. Once in prison, he doesn't shrink from fearless self-analysis; while condemning society and the harshness of the law and the horrible conditions of the prison, he also recognizes that his act was rash, that there were other possibilities in solving what was not necessarily a fatal problem.

Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch...

Some years later when we next meet Valjean, he is a new man, M. Madelaine, affectionately and respectfully known as Father Madelaine. Through ingenuity and diligence, he has prospered and brought up a whole small town, even neighboring towns, with him, a prototype of conscious capitalism, benefiting the worker, the consumer, and the business simultaneously: win-win-win. He enriched his workers and the poor before enriching himself and lived quite humbly while also financing hospitals, schools, and a private welfare system. He is a leading citizen, religiously observant, but rarely socializes or even speaks. He is offered prestigious positions and awards and is eventually invited to join high society but rejects them all. After being offered the position of mayor a second time, he finally accepts it at the urgings of the locals, who want a decent government. However, he also attracts the malevolent attention of Inspector Javert.

While we think of Javert as the villain of the piece, and as much as we want him to back off, you gotta love him. He is certainly merciless, humorless, and rigid, but from the another standpoint he has some commendable qualities, chief among them is that he is dedicated to truth. Hugo describes him as "unenlightened, but stern and pure" an "oddly honest man."³⁴ His obsessive pursuit of Valjean is the fruit of this fixation; but we see that in situations where he thinks he's been wrong, Javert unflinchingly offers up his own head in the interest of truth.

As Chris Bohjalian points out in this edition's Afterword, it is only Javert who fully grasps and most succinctly articulates Valjean's character:

A beneficent malefactor, a compassionate convict, kind, helpful, clement, returning good for evil, returning pardon for hatred, loving pity rather than vengeance, preferring to destroy himself rather than destroy his enemy, saving the one who had struck him, kneeling on the heights of virtue, nearer angels than men.³⁵

³⁴ Ibid, 208-209

³⁵ Ibid 1465

As for his relationship with the bishop, Hugo mentions that after the bishop's death, Valjean feels his constant presence. This is how you, Swami, often described the guru-disciple relationship after the death of your own guru—that there is no longer any separation.

“The world's great sea in its wrath seems shrunk to the puddle
that fills the hoof print in the clay.”

In other words, small world. Until Javert has focused his energy on Madelaine, Valjean's story has become tranquil, his blossoming effortless. But with this attention, tribulations set in. As the massive story unwinds we see the effects of his actions, past and present, both good and bad, playing chess on the field of our hero's life. His fate is often determined by synchronicities. You don't call on plot as an important element of the religious novel and you eschew visions or the supernatural, but these “minor” miracles of coincidence often play a role in real life as well as fiction. In fact, when recounting the performance of a Bengali play at the Star Theater, you describe the plot as “Wildly complicated, with old-fashioned coincidences...Sheer Dickens.”³⁶ For some lucky few, synchronicity plays in their lives frequently and frivolously, like clues from an affectionate playmate in a game of hide and seek. But for many real life survivors of dangerous adventures, they survive solely by divine intervention in the form of synchronicity. Such was Jean Valjean's case.

He has adopted a child, Cosette. Although he was emotionally deadened by the duty of assuming responsibility for his nieces and nephews as a young man, he accepts Cosette as a duty but soon finds that the child animates his heart. But after years of sweetness, adolescence inevitably rears its ugly head and the once-loving child becomes a brat and is predictably withdrawing from Valjean, which breaks his heart. In the face of this rejection, Valjean overcomes his own self-interest and performs a superhuman sacrifice. To rescue Cosette's lover, Marius, whom he unequivocally hates, Valjean risks his own life and freedom to flee the scene of a bloody protest with Marius' unconscious, possibly already dead, body, through the sewers of Paris. Javert is on his tail. In trying to shake Javert, Valjean has entered an area of the sewer where the filth is no longer solid, like quicksand. Neck deep in it, risking a grotesque drowning, he plods on and through and manages to emerge. Hugo writes:

On coming out of the water, he struck against a stone, and fell onto his knees. This seemed fitting, and he stayed there for some time, his soul lost in unspoken prayer to God. He rose, shivering, chilled, filthy, bending beneath this dying man, whom he was dragging on, all dripping with slime, his soul filled with a strange light.³⁷

You require the character of the saint to have “an experience which has led to enlightenment.” The word enlightenment has a range of meanings, some not

³⁶ V 2 316 December 1963. The Star Theater was where Girish Ghosh put on his plays and where Sri Ramakrishna attended to see Girish. By the way, Isherwood enjoyed the play although he couldn't understand a word. He found it quite lively.

³⁷ Ibid, 1294.

necessarily religious, and even in the religious context is vague but apparently ubiquitous, the Divine Light making its appearance to the holy ones in most, if not all, religions. Vedanta is specific in describing levels of spiritual attainment. An experience of light makes its appearance when the kundalini reaches the heart chakra; and even though the experience isn't permanent at that level, its appearance revolutionizes the goals of the recipient. Conversely, when Hugo describes Javert, he begins with "unenlightened" before listing Javert's positive qualities, perhaps indicating why those attributes were insufficient in themselves to redeem Javert.

So to review your requirements: Valjean has been presented as a character the reader can (and does) identify with; Hugo has given an intimate accounting of his conversion; Valjean has exercised free will over his ego; and while the theme of the story is the misery of the human condition, Valjean has found happiness within himself, even at the times he loses everything.

There are more sacrifices and a glorious death before Valjean, but these few episodes demonstrate that while not necessarily the most obvious elements of Hugo's compelling story (and a dimension that was dispensed with in most of the many dramatizations) the religious, by its very placement and frequent refrain, was the very armature upon which the clay of the story is constructed.