

Dis-locations and *Re*-locations: Christopher Isherwood and the Search for the “Home Self”

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Summary

British expatriate writer Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986) spent more than half his life in California. In addition to his work with the Hollywood movie studios he continued to publish novels, travel writing and four autobiographies, the last of which, *My Guru and His Disciple*, was published in 1980. Given the notoriety that had accrued following the publication of his earlier, “out” autobiography, *Christopher and His Kind* (1976), following which he was fêted as a literary standard bearer for the Gay Liberation movement, for him to provide testimony of his religious life was in direct contravention of the prevailing discourses that would cast unapologetically “queer” men as pariahs from religious communities, at least in those groups adhering to the Abrahamic lineages.

The marginalisation extended into other fields, too, including psychological medicine, which interpreted sexual orientations beyond the standard binary model as pathological, examples of failure along the normatively-defined pathway of “healthy” psycho-sexual development. Worse, in this late testimonio, he was acknowledging training in an alien, Vedanta tradition which positioned him well beyond the conventional fold of the Anglican, Christian religion of his upbringing.

Isherwood found his way “home” through the sincere study of the teachings of the non-dual *Advaita Vedanta* under the guidance of his *guru* – Swami Prabhavananda, of the Ramakrishna Order of monks – who presided over a temple in Hollywood, California.

This article investigates how his Vedanta study, sustained over forty years, enabled Isherwood to realise a deep connection to a “home” that had less to do with geography, culture, or family ties than with a deep, internal re-orientation that shifts the notion of a personal self into a re-alignment with the unified field of consciousness that underpins all life forms.

Opsomming

Die Britse uitgeweke skrywer Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986) het langer as die helfte van sy lewe in Kalifornië deurgebring. Benewens sy werk met die Hollywood-rolprentateljies het hy steeds romans, reismateriaal en vier outobiografieë gepubliseer. Die laaste outobiografie, *My Guru and His Disciple*, is in 1980 gepubliseer. Gegewe die berugtheid wat hy verwerf het ná die publikasie van sy vroeëre, “bieg”-outobiografie, *Christopher and His Kind* (1976), waarna hy bestempel is as ’n literêre vaandeldraer vir die Gay-bevrydingsbeweging, was hierdie getuienis van sy godsdiensige lewe lynreg teen die heersende diskoerse wat onberouvolle homoseksuele

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mans as verstoteling uit godsdiensgemeenskappe gewerp het, ten minste in daardie groepe wat Abraham se stamboom aangehang het.

Die marginalisering het na ander terreine oorgespoel, insluitend sielkundige geneeskunde, wat seksuele oriënterings wat afgewyk het van die standaard- binêre model, bestempel het as patologies en as voorbeelde van mislukkings langs die normatief gedefinieerde baan van “gesonde” psigoseksuele ontwikkeling. Erger nog, in sy laaste “testimonio” het hy erken dat hy opleiding ontvang het in ’n volksvreemde Vedanta-tradisie wat hom onteenseglik buite die konvensionele terrein van die Anglikaanse, Christelike godsdien van sy grootwordjare geposisioneer het.

Isherwood het sy weg “huis toe” gevind deur die opregte studie van die leringe van die niedualistiese *Advaita Vedanta* onder die leiding van sy ghoeroe – Swami Prabhavananda, van die Ramakrisjna-monnikeorde – wat ’n tempel in Hollywood, Kalifornië, bestuur het.

Hierdie artikel ondersoek hoe sy studie van Vedanta, wat veertig jaar geduur het, Isherwood in staat gestel het om ’n diepe verbintenis te bewerkstellig met ’n “tuiste” wat minder te doen het met geografie, kultuur of familiebande as met ’n diepe, interne heroriëntering wat die idee van ’n persoonlike self verskuif na ’n herbelyning met die verenigde terrein van bewussyn wat aan alle lewensvorme ten grondslag lê.

It is not home that one cries for, but one’s home self.
Christopher Isherwood,
Kathleen and Frank

Introduction

Texts that testify of experience outside the frame of conventional morality and religious teachings, as well as of normative psychological modelling, may stand as sites of resistance to the often-hostile narratives prescribed by authorising agencies – Religion, Family, Law, Psychology, etc. – that have heretofore been in charge of the production of Meaning.

To write autobiographically can carry both implicit and explicit political, even polemical intention, then, for the ruling discourses that control the production of Meaning do not give up their power easily, perhaps not even recognising a need to adjust. Writing the life of oneself becomes a dissident practice that enables one to recuperate the parts of selfhood ruled out of bounds by these authorising agencies.

Marginalisation *Versus* Full Human Status

Commenting on Judith Butler’s critical work on gender, editor Sarah Salih (*The Judith Butler Reader* 2004: 12) notes how “the violence of exclusion narrows the categories by which subjects ‘qualify’ for full human status”. Such manoeuvring for the high moral ground has serious consequences in the lives of people trying to come to terms with their sexuality, so there are quite pragmatic reasons why institutionalised, normative discourses need to be interrogated in order to find

one's place in the world, for the effects of such marginalisation are not only psychological, but ontological as well. Studying the life and writings of Christopher Isherwood within such contexts proves to have relevance well into the 21st Century.

My discussion also draws upon sociologist Peter Berger's analysis of the functioning of "plausibility structures" in the sociology of knowledge systems, and the mechanisms by which different sources of knowledge and information are accorded "differential plausibility", with "deviant" views marginalised or excluded. "The threat to the social definitions of reality" writes Berger, with Thomas Luckmann (1966: 133), is neutralised by "assigning an inferior ontological status, and thereby a not-to-be-taken seriously cognitive status, to all definitions existing outside the symbolic universe".

These "definitions of reality" are instruments of power, de-authorising that which is not in accord with their models, and according to which Isherwood – as a notorious "homosexualist" (Savage 1979) – should not have anything to say about religion, especially as a sincere practitioner. Nor, in the same analysis, should insights drawn from a training in an "alien" religious tradition be considered plausible, or of an equivalent ontological status to that accorded the privileged constructions of the Abrahamic – in Isherwood's case, specifically the Christian, Anglican – traditions. The British colonial project was underpinned by an Imperialist Christianised discourse and, as a member of the landed gentry and a son of Empire, Isherwood ought not to have been seen fraternising with a colonised people.

The religious training that he adhered to, from his late thirties on, was based on the study and praxis of *Vedanta*, specifically in its *Advaita* or non-dual construction, under the guidance of a monk in the Ramakrishna Order, based in Hollywood California, where Isherwood worked in the movie studios. In spite of his forty-plus years of Vedanta study and practice, Isherwood's adherence to this modelling of the spiritual life earned little respect from commentators steeped in the British colonial tradition, given that tradition's commitment to a form of Imperial Christianity that accorded little respect to the religious beliefs and practices of colonised peoples, which were seen as merely superstitious. Even Isherwood's friend, the poet W.H. Auden, regarded it all as "Hindoo mumbo jumbo" (Isherwood 1980: 204).

Isherwood had previously stepped away from the religion of his upbringing and regarded himself as an atheist. Giving himself permission to rehearse different, independent possibilities for selfhood, he moved restlessly through different national and cultural settings, in the at times desperate process of investigating and re-inventing himself. Ultimately, he found effective tools for his searching and often painful self-inquiry from within a completely different religious tradition that was not at all fashionable at the time, in spite of the assertions of some recent commentators (see Sutherland 2004). His late autobiography *My Guru and His Disciple*, although modest in its tone, inscribes strikingly original testimony into the cultural record, and models new possibilities for courageous

spiritual research that has repercussions, beyond his personal experience, forward into the twenty-first century, as a model of successful integration for people marginalised by the conventional ordering of their queer subjectivities.

Isherwood's personal transformation was aided by a tolerant guru who did not regard his student's sexuality as an insurmountable obstacle to his spiritual practices. Yet critical response to his work sometimes suffers from the reflex tendency of a Christianised worldview to deem its superior epistemological status as self-evident, and its application universal; a tendency that has worked not only to naturalise the assumptions of one particular *Weltanschauung* but also, in some cases, to paralyse the intelligent exploration of the religious life by queer men and women.

The Political Potentials of Autobiography

In this context, life-writing texts assertively “talk back” (as bell hooks would have it) to dominant cultural narratives, becoming sites for staging what Judith Butler calls “unforeseen and unsanctioned modes of identity” (Salih & Butler 2004: 10). They disrupt authorised versions of masculinity and femininity and destabilise the construction of the homosexual-as-religious-pariah, or as psychopathological specimen, or both.

Isherwood's insistence on maintaining both aspects of his life – his spirituality and his unconventional sexuality – makes him of exemplary interest today, then, as queer thinkers research ways of re-connecting with systems of meaning and identification that integrate all aspects of their being, beyond the familiar and conventional divisions produced by the stigmatising cultures of shame.

With the help of his guru, Isherwood was able to re-assess his life experience without the shame-based constructions common within Christianity as he knew it. Australian scholar Rosamund Dalziel (1996: 132) has written about the issue of shame in contemporary autobiography and shown how shaming is related to an exercise of power whereby “the economically and socially powerful maintained a “discourse of respectability” by shaming those who did not conform to their mores”.

Biographical Sketch

Isherwood was born into the landed gentry of Edwardian-era England, in 1904. In his twenties he joined his friend, the poet W.H. Auden, in Berlin, where he roomed for a short period in The Institute for Sexual Research run by the great early sex researcher, Magnus Hirschfeld. (Notably, the first books burned by the Nazis were looted from Hirschfeld's unique collections.) In Berlin, Isherwood enjoyed the freedom to explore his sexuality, released from

the stifling social pressures of Edwardian society. He was to set his early stories in Berlin.

He formed a relationship with a younger partner, Heinz Neddermeyer, later spending five years travelling restlessly around Europe, in an attempt to keep Heinz away from conscription into the German army and avoid the growing influence of the Nazis. He was unable to get this partner into England, on two attempts. Heinz was eventually captured, jailed and inducted into the German army, leaving Isherwood depressed and disillusioned.

This was a period of multiple *dis*locations and *dis*illusionments that destabilised his sense of self. In his 1938 diaries he describes himself thus:

I once read the title of a German novel (I forget the author's name) *Der Mann ohne Eigens[c]haft*. [The Man without qualities/character/attributes]. For the more I think about myself, the more persuaded I am that, *as a person*, I really don't exist. That is one of the reasons why – as much as I'm tempted to try – I can't believe in any orthodox religion. I cannot believe in my own soul. No, I am a chemical compound, conditioned by environment and education. My "*character*" is simply a repertoire of acquired tricks, my conversation a repertoire of adaptations and echoes, my "feelings" are dictated by purely physical, external stimuli *Der Mann ohne Eigens[c]haft* is never to be trusted.

(Diary 20 Aug 1938, qtd in Parker p. 391; emphasis added. The novel was by the Austrian author, Robert Musil.)

After the disillusionment of losing his lover to the Nazis, Isherwood travelled to China with W.H. Auden, witnessing the Japanese invasion of that country. On the way back to the "homeland", he and Auden called in to New York, which impressed them both. Before too long, they had both emigrated to the US, declaring themselves to be pacifists. While Auden stayed on the East coast, Isherwood went to California to seek some intellectual support for his conscientious pacifist stance from the writer Aldous Huxley and another Briton, Gerald Heard, who was prominent at the time. Isherwood arrived in California in 1938.

With Britain soon to be drawn into the second, major World War, to accept having two of its leading writers and young intellectuals declaring themselves to have adopted the pacifist stance, was hugely controversial back at home in Britain; but Britain was feeling less and less like home to Isherwood. His recent experiences in Europe had left him rootless, not only geographically but psychologically, and one might even say ontologically, as well. His sense of identity was deeply disorientated, utterly dislocated from his cultural and political moorings.

Arriving in California, he was surprised to find his mentors sitting at the feet of an Indian *guru*, a Swami in the Ramakrishna Order of monks. The guru, Swami Prabhavananda, had been politically active in the struggle against British colonial power in India, but had taken the renunciate vows of a celibate monk in the Order, deeply impressed as he was by his own guru, who was one

of the first rank of disciples of the Bengali saint, Paramhansa Ramakrishna, in Calcutta. Ramakrishna's fame spread beyond India due to the proselytising work carried enthusiastically and articulately by one of the first rank of disciples, Swami Vivekananda, who did so much to represent the teaching of the Ramakrishna version of Vedanta teachings and practices.

Now Isherwood, as a conscientious Socialist in the period between the wars, had abandoned the religion of his Anglican Christian upbringing, and was inclined to satirise the God-figure of that religion in Marxist terms, as a kind of Capitalist Super Boss, exploiting the masses; so he was not inclined to take up with religion, *per se*. His initial response to his mentors' new affiliation with this guru figure was sceptical, then, and he tended to regard the phenomenon in conventional, stereotypical terms. For him to take up with the religion of a colonised peoples as an Englishman, especially for one coming from the privileged class, was really beyond the pale.

Rather than presenting him upfront with an alien religious philosophy, the *guru* Swami Prabhavanada invited Isherwood to try some elementary meditation practices, and a year later, initiated him into the practice of *japam*: meditation using a *mantra*, or sacred phrase, using rosary beads to count off the number of repetitions. The guru's temple was located in Hollywood and fitted well with Isherwood's professional life, as he had begun working on screenplays for movies in development at some of the big movie studios.

One of the issues that smoothed the way for Isherwood to go more fully into the study and practices of Vedanta was the guru's remarkably non-judgemental approach to sexuality. Isherwood raised the issue in his first formal interview with the Swami (this was in 1938 or 1939) and was both surprised and impressed by the Swami's approach. He recalls the occasion when he asked Prabhavanada whether it would be possible to lead a spiritual life while at the same time having a sexual relationship with another man, and the Swami answered: "You must try to see him as the young Lord Krishna." (Isherwood 1980: 25)

"I wasn't at all discouraged by the Swami's reply," Isherwood writes: "Indeed, it was far more permissive than I had expected. What reassured me – what convinced me that I could become his pupil – was that he hadn't shown the least shadow of distaste on hearing me admit to my homosexuality" (1980: 25-26). It should be noted that before the imposition of the British penal code, with its strictures on homosexual behaviour, pre-colonial India recognised *three* possibilities of gender expression. (See Vanita & Kidwai 2000)

One feature of the form of Vedanta operating in the Ramakrishna mission was the distinctly non-dual philosophy that underpinned its teachings. Often known as *Advaita* Vedanta, with "A" meaning not, and *dvaita*, meaning two. Here the "God" theory as not posited in contradistinction to the individual soul. The "atman", in this system, is of the same essential nature as the all-encompassing divine. In essence, the core of human being is of the same nature as "Brahman". The absolute, termed *Param Brahman*, is a kind of

“Absolute ground of Being” within which everything lives and moves and has its being. As 15th Century poet Kabirdas sings: “The drop is in the ocean and the ocean is in the drop” (Kabirdas 2006)

Further, this divine nature can be known, and realised through spiritual instruction and practice. Part of that knowing (the *gyani yoga*, the *raj vidya*) involves engagement with an introspective meditation practice that takes the everyday mind back away from the obsessions of daily life, and the pre-occupations of the personal “self”, to re-focus that attention into an awareness of deeper layers of conscious awareness. The process could be compared to changing the focal length of a lens, or of a microscope, say. At one focal length, certain phenomena are in focus; if one were to change the length of the lens and *re-focus*, different phenomena become apparent. Here the focusing practice is within the field of consciousness itself, rather than in the field of material phenomena. Such praxis brings the rootless mind into experiential awareness of the deepest layers of consciousness and feeling, at the root of being, and heals the deep-seated alienation and anxiety that stems from being disconnected to this unified field. Practitioners sometimes speak of the profound peace that gradually seeps into awareness as a “home-coming”.

In the guru’s instruction, the relationship of the self as an independent unit is seen as fundamentally delusional, and a connection is realised with an underlying reality as the basis of being and consciousness. One Self, with a capital “S”, if you will, embraces all apparently separate entities. Felt experientially in regular meditation practice, this may become a profound relief for a personal identity marginalised by the forces of respectable, bourgeois conformity enshrined in religion, the heteronormative policeman *par excellence*.¹

In this change of focus, the tight grip of the personal self is relaxed and released to return awareness to a deeper, impersonalised feeling of being, a being that is not a product of effort, of personal history, family history, national history, nor of memory, as it finds its way home within what is

1. Even today, conventional representatives of a dualistic Judaeo-Christian worldview seem to be obsessed with policing gender boundaries. But looking beyond the framework of the Abrahamic imaginary one finds other cultures in which a third or even more genders are not only recognised, respected but even accorded certain spiritual status. See the study done by Walter Williams of the “two-spirit” traditions in indigenous North American and Pacific societies (*The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture*, 1992) for example, and the study of Indian attitudes towards a “third gender” type before the colonial imposition of the British penal code, described in Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai’s *Same Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, 2000. Also, Amara Das Wilhelm’s 2005 online treatise, “Presenting the Third Gender as described in Ancient Vedic (Hindu) texts.” <<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/galva108/>>.

sometimes called “the unified field of consciousness”. This space is ultimately unbranded, free of doctrinal barriers.

In California where he had gone to seek intellectual support for his pacifist stance, Isherwood sought out the influential British writer Aldous Huxley. Huxley, who was to write his syncretist study, *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945), saw that Isherwood’s quest was part of an all-encompassing project to recover his roots – not in the history of a personal, or familial or national self, for he was deeply disillusioned with all that – in this truly universal leveller that Huxley had been studying with the Swami and which he posited as the purpose of human life:

[M]an’s life on earth has only one end and purpose: to identify himself with his eternal Self and so to come to unitive knowledge of the Divine Ground.

(Huxley 1944: 13)

It was by re-locating his personal self in relationship to that original Ground – rather than in London, Berlin, or Santa Monica – that Isherwood found the “home self” for which he had been searching.

Further, as we have seen, in the Vedanta system as taught by his guru, Isherwood understood “the phenomenal world of matter *and* of individualized consciousness – the world of things and animals and men [sic] and even gods”, as the manifestation of “a Divine Ground” within which “all *partial* realities have their being, and apart from which they would be non-existent” (Huxley 1944: 13).

Isherwood’s Concept of the “Home Self”

Isherwood often delved back into his earlier life to develop material for his autobiographical and even fictional writings and in his biography of his parents, *Kathleen and Frank*, he described the first shock to his psyche resulting from the de-personalisation that he underwent with his early initiation into boarding school life. Here he recalls how he was uprooted from the comfortable life in the nursery, complete with a doting nanny, and transplanted to St Edmund’s boarding school:

[T]he images which remained in the memory are not in themselves terrible or rigorous: they are of boot-lockers, wooden desks, lists on boards, name-tags in clothes – yes, the name pre-eminently; the name which in a sense makes you nameless, less individual rather than more so: Bradshaw-Isherwood, C.W. in its place on some alphabetical list; the cold daily, hourly reminder that you are not the unique, the loved, the household’s darling, but just one among many. I suppose that this loss of identity is really much of the painfulness which lies at the bottom of what is called Homesickness; *it is not Home that one cries for but one’s home-self.*

(qtd in Parker 2004: 40-41; emphasis added)

This may appear to be nothing more than a very young boy feeling sad to be away from the womb of family life, but the alienation was intensified for the boy when his father was killed, near Ypres, during the first World War. Isherwood was ten years old and he was deeply disgusted with the heavy indoctrination of the Warrior ideal being promulgated from all sides, including from his mother, who identified strongly with her role as the war widow.

The dis-illusionment, that was intensified by his later years in Germany, had a deeper ontological significance that was ultimately assuaged for him through the re-orientation of a spiritual practice that re-locates the anxious little ego self into a profound connection with an underlying reality that embraces all things.

Intimately present within each being, Atman is indispensable for consciousness, and is the “real” source of peace and bliss, because its nature is unchanging. The personal self, which is acquired as the outward persona, forming in response to the external world – it might be called the predicate self – is subject to change and, as such, an unreliable basis for stability, happiness and satisfaction.

It must be said that the goal of spiritual practice is not to destroy that relatively illusory, “false” self – which is needed to function as the mediator with the changing world – but to shift one’s centre from close and exclusive identification with it in order to recover the deepest roots of being within the zone of the unchanging; the eternal, underlying basis of all life and consciousness, the *Param Brahman* in Vedanta philosophy, which may or may not be what Christian existentialist theologian Paul Tillich called the “Ground of Being” (Tillich 1952).

As taught by his *guru*, the object of existence is not to transcend, but to realise what we really are, a realisation obtained not through logic but through the direct intuition modelled by the sages. In the *Advaita*, or non-dual form of the teachings, only Brahman, the supreme principle, has existence, and ignorance (“*avidya*”, as opposed to “*vidya*”) of this reality leads to the erroneous belief that phenomena can exist apart from the Absolute. The idea of the personal self as a “separate” entity, then, is a delusion that produces unnecessary stress and anxiety. For the restless, deluded entity to be brought back into re-union with the One that contains the many, what will be required will be not only a shift in the focal length of awareness to recover the root of the self, but also a revisioning of previously held notions of identity that formed in ignorance of the real state of affairs.²

2. While Isherwood was engaged in the empirical meditation practices, the understanding of the philosophical tenets came from the close work he was involved with alongside his guru in translating key texts in the non-dual tradition according to the reforms of Vedanta by Shankara (pp. 788-820). During the 1940s, Isherwood found the “very Indianness” of Vedanta helpful and he was “grateful to Vedanta for speaking Sanskrit”, as he put it. He could learn a religion afresh, without the associations carried from the Anglicanism of his upbringing:

In Isherwood's case, we see that "the confusion, hopes and fears" of an entire era (Colletta 2005: xi) in the life – the political uncertainties between two major world wars, compounded by a personal crisis of identity – is reflected in the texts. The Vedanta study and praxis would become one of three major contributors to resolving the psychological and ontological crises for Isherwood, providing him an unprecedented opportunity (and a challenge) to benefit as a student of a profoundly integrative system.

In the context of spiritual praxis, loosening the grip of the personal, or ego, self is assisted by practices such as selfless service ("seva" in the Indian traditions). Isherwood was soon engaged, especially through the 1940s, with translation work, as his guru sought to bring classics of the *Advaita* tradition to the attention of Western readers, with Isherwood, the professional writer, as his scribe.

In addition to his late-life autobiography *My Guru and His Disciple*, Isherwood wrote about Vedanta in various publications, publishing an edition of Swami Vivekananda's lectures, editing the magazine of the Vedanta Society and publishing a biography of Paramhansa Ramakrishna, the Bengali saint who was the inspiration for the push of Advaita Vedanta teachings outside of India.

Although not given much attention by the literary commentariat,³ Isherwood's Vedanta study and practice, sustained over a period of 40 years, enabled him to realise a deep connection to a "home" that had less to do with geography, culture, or family ties than with a deep internal re-orientation that shifts the notion of a personal self into a re-alignment with the unified field of consciousness that underpins all life forms. After years of restless searching across the world, Isherwood's homecoming and his ontological relief was not realised through mere physical relocations but by a reorientation directed from and towards the root of his being in the original timeless zone of pure Being.

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I needed a brand-new vocabulary and here it was, with a set of philosophical terms which were exact in meaning, unemotive, untainted by disgusting old associations with clergymen's sermons, schoolmasters' pep talks, politicians' patriotic speeches. (*My Guru and His Disciple*: 49)

3. For example, Paul Robinson's (1999) massive study of "gay" autobiography, *Gay lives: Homosexual Autobiography from John Addington Symonds to Paul Monette*, devotes some sixty-seven pages to Isherwood, yet mentions *My Guru and His Disciple* only in a footnote.

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