

## W. サマセット・モームと聖者

### W. Somerset Maugham and "The Saint"

ニコラス・ウィリアムズ  
N.R. Williams

The author attempted questions but did not speak. Maj. Chadwick encouraged him to ask. Sri Bhagavan said, "All finished. Heart-talk is all talk. All talk must end in silence only." (*Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi, Talk 550*)<sup>1</sup>

The English writer W. Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) traveled to Tiruvanammalai, in what is now the state of Tamilnadu in southern India, sometime in 1938 with the intention of visiting the ashram of Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950). A jocular and self-serving aside to his reader mentions that "various Maharajahs" had "sumptuously entertained him", and were delighted when he turned down the offer of some tiger shooting. Fortunately for the great cats of the Indian jungle, Maugham was not a typical English traveler of the colonial period preferring to meet writers, artists, scholars, and "religious teachers and devotees". This Tamil-speaking "saint" was known by his honorific title, the Maharshi, and was claimed to be an enlightened man, traditionally understood as one released from the egotistical drives of the normal human being.

Maugham's account of his journey to the south of India in his essay "The Saint" (published in a collection of essays entitled *Points of View*, 1958) is short on his own reactions to meeting the Maharshi and far too long on second-hand opinion.<sup>2</sup> More interesting character sketches of religious teachers that Maugham encountered in India are to be found in *A Writer's Notebook* (1949), where the meeting with the Maharshi was first published. His visit to the Maharshi was marked by a genuine curiosity, though he was primarily a writer of fiction and driven by a need for new material. The essay has a continuing life really only because it is one of the few genuinely objective accounts of one of the twentieth century's most unusual religious figures.

The writing of his novel *The Razor's Edge* (1944) was very likely an afterthought of that visit to India in 1938. In the novel, the elusive figure of Larry Darrell leaves behind a middle-class life in pre-war America and the prospect of marriage for a personal quest that begins with work as a coal miner in Belgium and ends in an ashram in south-western India where he meets his *guru*, Sri Ganesha. A non-Western form of religious experience is briefly described in the novel, and Maugham has even used the specific Hindu philosophical term *advaita* or non-dualism in Larry's spiritual transformation. Maugham himself intrudes upon the novel as the sophisticated *persona*, "Maugham" in *The Razor's Edge*. "Maugham" is used as a lazy device to comment on the progress of the novel's

situation and enables Larry Darrell's journey to India to be told in the sort of interview style that one associates with *Time* or *Life* magazine copy of the period. India becomes an exotic backdrop against which Larry is seen, and the reader is never connected with the palpating reality of India itself.

The novel stands out in retrospect as a kind of early hippy optimism, in company with James Hilton's *The Lost Horizon* (1933) and its fictive utopian civilization in the Himalayas. The moral confusion of twentieth century Western society had begun to encourage an appetite for the quasi-religious escapism that led eventually to the New Age cultism of the 1960s and 70s. Maugham, self-exiled in America throughout the Second World War, and in need of a commercial success, employed the notes he had made while in India for writing *The Razor's Edge* for a wartime American readership. There was a later film version which came out in 1946. The film works, quite unintentionally, as an ironic critique of the novel by showing just how wooden are Maugham's characters, especially Larry played as a one-note part by Tyrone Power, redeemed somewhat by the *noir* performance of Larry's spurned fiancée, Isabel, given by Gene Tierney.

Maugham prefers to distance himself from his characters, with few exceptions: the partly-autobiographical *Of Human Bondage* (1915) and the caustic introspection of *The Narrow Corner* (1932). His attitude towards the Maharshi in "The Saint" shows no sign of personal motivation beyond curiosity, and the feeling that Maugham was not in any way persuaded by the Maharshi's teachings or his very presence adds considerable value to his testimony. Maugham's disengagement is most pronounced in his fiction set in the Malay States, the European enclaves of southern China, and the South Pacific Islands. Probably for the reason of a speech impediment, he was forced to become a good listener rather than a talker, professionally advantageous for an assiduous eavesdropper and fabricator of gossip into dialogue. He used what he had overheard in expatriate bars and clubs of the domestic nature of a dying empire and its hothouse atmospheres of intrigue, isolation, and self-deception, with the occasional (usually hushed-up) murder. Unlike Kipling, Maugham had no emotional capital invested in Britain's self-appointed right to rule over large parts of the world; he was equally neutral and dispassionate when it came to the very alien set of practices of Hinduism.

Maugham was, by his own account, a self-taught student of Western philosophy. The novel of ideas is frequently a failure unless harmonized with the contradictions of character portrayal. Better examples of Maugham's fiction tend to an alliance of narrative and philosophical positioning, as though the writer wants to be popular and yet thought more highly of by his peers. *The Narrow Corner* (written six years before his visit to India) is an unfairly neglected novel, as Maugham's endeavor offers a decent enough comparison with Conrad's particular mental-world of the displaced European. The novel is set in China and the South Pacific, and Maugham influences the interpretation of the novel by the cynically wise character, the opium-smoking English doctor, who has been apparently "struck-off" the medical register—perhaps for his opiate addiction that alters his perception of the world. The quotation of the novel's title is from the Stoic philosopher, Marcus Aurelius, who is describing not so much the physical restrictions of life, that cannot easily be changed, but the

psychologically damaging attitudes that, according to Aurelius, are open to rational thought and self-examination. The solipsistic musings of the English doctor deny any reality to the exterior world: "I believe in nothing but myself and my experience. Everything knowable, every object of experience, is an idea in my mind, and without my mind it does not exist."<sup>3</sup> Such a state of consciousness is precisely that which the *advaita*—or non-dualistic aspect of Vedanta Hinduism—identifies as the only begetter of the mind's confusion (*maya*).

Maugham's strength lies with his psychological portraiture of his male characters—though he usually relies on dated stage stereotypes when writing his female characters. The difficulty is that psychological portraiture is often impervious, even disruptive of the generalizing statements of philosophy. He had set out to explore the making of his idealistic and later disillusioned alter-ego Philip Carey in *Of Human Bondage*. (The title refers to the human suffering of Spinoza's *Ethics*.) This human suffering is stated in the physical deformity of Philip's clubfoot; a metaphor suggestive of Maugham's hidden feelings about himself. The conclusion of the novel gets rid of any philosophical pretension it might have had, and puts in its place the trite "common sense" notion that career and marriage for Philip Carey will tie up all the loose ends.

More exalted is *The Razor's Edge*, a phrase taken from the *Katha Upanishad* that summarizes the human passage through life as being as nearly as impossible as walking on the edge of a razor. And so the *Upanishads*, when speaking as maxims and prescriptions, insist on the spiritual path of self-discipline and renunciation. Yet there is no suggestion that Larry Darrell learns much more than how to focus the mind; his ability to heal and serve others is attractive demonstration without bothering with too much detail. "Larry" appears to the reader as not much more than a cipher for an idea. Asceticism may not be obviously part of Maugham's emotional make-up, quite the reverse in actual biographical fact; but the need to find another medium in which to grow is palpable in the better examples of his fiction. A final example will suffice. The artistic English stockbroker in *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) sets out to emulate Paul Gauguin's retreat to the South Pacific in an attempt to leave behind his social self and all its responsibilities. A removal to another quite culturally alien environment is—and here Maugham is quite clear-sighted—pointless, if not ridiculous. No-one has ever really changed by moving somewhere else even if they possess an artistic talent. If Maugham had integrated the ideas of the *advaita* teaching, he might have come up with a developed set of ideas to explore within the characterization of Larry Darrell. As it is, Larry's transformation is taken for granted and has no obvious structure to it. His essay on the Maharshi contains enough about Hindu mysticism and philosophy to support the view that, in his 1944 novel, he was manipulating this newly acquired material to create a different kind of modern hero, however superficially Larry was portrayed.

According to the *advaita*, the individual self belongs to a universal consciousness in the same way that an empty cup is related to infinite space. But if the cup (the individual self) is filled to the brim with its own content—such as memories, images, prejudices, or what passes for the "normal"

state of mind—then it will obstruct any release into an impersonal, unaffected state of mind. The Theravada Buddhist texts, similarly, emphasize the mind's imprisonment by *itself*. Inner space and ultimately emptiness are what the monk tries to attain day-after-day at his meditation. Thus the individual self, with its never-ending stream of involuntary images and judgments, is seen as fit only for self-destruction. The non-dualistic perception of Hinduism, of course, requires an act of faith. For the presumption of a "True Self" is beyond empirical investigation. Liberation is, when the ordinary mind is not—the end point of *advaita* understanding. The awakened consciousness is—so *advaita* philosophical writings will have it—that of an unmediated experiencing of the world: one where the distinction between the Knower and the Known has finally disappeared. This state is beyond any description, so it cannot be rationalized, at least as far as we know.

Maugham's essay is too often dull and unsatisfactory because he is over-reliant upon Maharshi's first biographer, Narasimha Swami, and, more damningly, he forsakes his writer's role as skeptical enquirer.<sup>4</sup> He simply records the standard explanations of Hindu metaphysical concepts. Maugham does not consider how very rare the phenomenon of religious enlightenment actually is. Here we arrive at the extraordinary case of the Maharshi. His younger self was born of Brahmin background, whose name was originally Venkataraman Iyer. Yet the 17-year-old Venkataraman had apparently realized this state of non-duality with no more knowledge of it than one found in a standard hagiography of Hindu saints. One looks to Maugham for a more sharply critical approach to the Maharshi. A much earlier meeting with a Chinese philosopher has a politely satirical edge to it, but then he was interviewing an expert on European philosophy, so the rules of the game were essentially Western and placed the Chinese philosopher within his reach (*On a Chinese Screen* (1922)).<sup>5</sup>

With the Maharshi, he was out of his cultural depth. This may explain the brevity of Maugham's account of his actual meeting with the Maharshi: occupying only five out of a total of forty pages of the essay-text. The official reason for his failure to ask more searching questions of the Maharshi was that Maugham was very unwell at the time and was unable to say anything to him. In consequence, the Maharshi appears as a silent presence; without the normalizing of speech with its pleasantries and personal adjustments. Silence leaves the writer with the only tool he has left: the ability to create a word-picture, but what lies behind the physical appearance remains unknown. This enigma is a convenient barrier to understanding—as for the devotee this enigma will stand as a mark of sacredness.

Maugham employs the clinical approach of the medical doctor he had trained to be as a young man (one thinks of Chekhov here) in his description of the Maharshi. [He had the] "complexion of a dark honey colour, with close-cropped white hair and a close-cropped beard...plump rather than stout...wore nothing but an exiguous loin-cloth...walked slowly, leaning on a stick. His mouth was somewhat large, with thickish lips, and the whites of his eyes were bloodshot...he did not give me the impression of a scholar, but rather of a sweet-natured peasant ..."<sup>6</sup> A kindly late middle-aged man emerges from the description, with the unusual difference that he was exerting some kind of

power of his own to help Maugham, who had suffered an episode of heart failure on his arrival at the ashram. The Maharshi had merely smiled when Maugham said he was unable to venture a question or even speak at all as he felt too ill. "Silence is also conversation", was all he heard the Maharshi to say. Both before and after he spoke, Maugham had noticed "a sidelong stare of a peculiar fixity, gazed, as it were, over my shoulder". He was, Maugham believed, in a state of "concentrated meditation".<sup>7</sup>

The devotees of the Maharshi saw this meeting from a quite different perspective. The context of this conversation has been radically altered in the ashram's record. Solicitude has been replaced by a didactic opportunity. "All talk is finished. Heart-talk is all talk. All talk must end in silence", says the Maharshi, but one may protest that Maugham had been unable to speak, to his regret.<sup>8</sup> (Was the Maharshi speaking in English, so that Maugham could understand? And was "Silence is also conversation" actually heard by him?) But this would be too literal an interpretation as the devotee would be quick to point out: for whatever the Maharshi had to say was always on a different level from the mundane. Maugham's dead faint was interpreted as very fortunate for Maugham because the "influence" of the Maharshi "had caused me for a while to be rapt for a while into the Infinite". Yet Maugham never showed any later sign of spiritual contentment at all—and his creation of Larry Darrell can be conjectured as a fictive surrogacy for what he had been unable to experience himself.

There are two further points to make. Among Maugham's sketches, printed in *A Writer's Notebook*, there is a very detailed portrait of a "Major C." whom he met at the ashram. Surely he is none other than the "Maj. Chadwick" of the ashram record of Maugham's visit? Chadwick is interesting as he eventually renamed himself and adopted the title of *sadhu*, that of a wandering ascetic. More might have been said about the few Western devotees present, let alone the number of educated English-speaking Indians in attendance who Maugham could have easily spoken to. Outside witnesses to the Maharshi were in fact many, according to ashram records of the pre-war period, and included various Indian and British administrators; the translator of Tibetan texts, W.Y. Evans-Wentz; the Polish-born advisor to Gandhi, Maurice Frydman—obviously men of established intellect and discernment, and not the neurotic kind of individual who comes to the enlightened teacher as a form of therapy.

Another lack in Maugham's essay is that he fails to provide any plausible commentary for what actually happened to the young Venkataraman. He was, after all, a well-qualified observer as a trained medical doctor (although he only practiced for a short time and his clinical training was late Victorian) , and neurology is the branch of medical science that has the best chance of attempting a rational explanation of what had happened to the Maharshi. Instead Maugham simply repeats the well-known story of Venkataraman's "Illumination". The story goes like this. The young Venkataraman was seized by an ordinary child's fear of death, apparently precipitated by the recent passing of his father. He would have observed the complete destructibility of the physical body to a pile of ashes by the funeral pyre. In his imaginative recreation of his own death, he explains "I feel the full force of my personality, and even the sound "I" within myself apart from my body. The material body dies, but the spirit transcending it cannot be touched by death."<sup>9</sup> Simple common

sense would surely find other explanations, but Maugham says nothing further. The story is allowed to fulfill its own teleology. Venkataraman's early awakening will eventuate in *samadhi* and his apotheosis as the Maharshi. This Hindu conception of (what is usually translated as) "enlightenment" is akin to the austere state of "No Mind" in Zen writings. Venkataraman can be taken as a very rare instance of an individual attaining to a level of consciousness beyond logical explanation.

Maugham must have realized how Hindu practice had implications for Western notions of selfhood. As surely he was aware, the Hindu *advaita* tradition was at critical odds with the dualistic relationship at the heart of Christianity—and to the Western philosophical emphasis on the division of the Knower and the Known. Maugham had already alluded to the illusory nature of the mind (without naming it) in his 1932 novel *The Narrow Corner*—when the Doctor says "Everything knowable, every object of experience, is an idea in my mind, and without my mind it does not exist".<sup>10</sup> A drug-induced perception is certainly not "normal", but still highlights what could be called the objective fallacy: that what you experience of the world is, in fact, your very own creation. The Irish Idealist philosopher, Bishop Berkeley had argued that God is the only possible objective viewpoint on the world and its happenings. But without God, the unique obstacle to a direct perception of reality and freedom from mental static is that which corresponds to the Hindu (and Buddhist) concept of *maya* or illusion. *Maya* is no more than human subjectivity in all its wild imaginings, and it becomes the obligation of the religious mind to overcome this barrier to clear-seeing and sublime objectivity. The Maharshi had fulfilled this promise and was, it was believed, now released from that illusory state.

Yet even if Maugham had asked the Maharshi questions about this process of transformation, he would probably not have been satisfied by his answers. The ashram's record of the Maharshi's responses to his various questioners tells us a great deal about the nature of the *guru*-student discourse. Personal questions were always re-framed and replied to as universal problems of the limited self. There was indeed much more that Maugham could have found out: this absence of questioning explains why the essay ends up as a slightly superior example of a Western traveler's memoir of colonial-era India. The great pity is that Maugham could have filled that very large empty space with a genuine enquiry into what lay behind the Maharshi and his ashram—instead of being so reliant on his own limited observation and, uncritically, the opinions of others.

## Endnotes

1. *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk 550, Foreword by T.M.P Mahadevan, Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, 1955;2009:537
2. W. Somerset Maugham, "The Saint", *Points of View* (1958), Vintage Classics, 2000:56-95
3. W. Somerset Maugham, *The Narrow Corner* (1932), Vintage Classics, 2001:196
4. Narasimha Swami, *Self-Realization*, (1931), Sri Ramanasraman, 2002

5. W. Somerset Maugham, "The Philosopher", *On a Chinese Screen* (1922), Vintage Classics, 2000: 90-99
6. "The Saint", *Points of View*:58
7. Ibid:58
8. *Talks with Ramana Maharshi*, Talk 550:537
9. "The Saint", *Points of View*:71
10. *The Narrow Corner*: 196

## Afterword

In reviewing V.S.Naipaul's *Half a Life* (2001), J.M. Coetzee re-tells the story of Maugham's meeting the Maharshi. It has been given another life as "the germ" of Naipaul's comic novel. Coetzee summarizes Naipaul's stance towards "the holy man" as being "less concerned with the question of whether Venkataraman and similar dispensers of gnomic wisdom are fakes—he takes that as read—than with the more general phenomenon of religious practice that centres on self-denial. ... To see the prestige of self-denial, Naipaul suggests, we need to see Indian asceticism historically." Naipaul points out that there was great loss of revenue to Hindu temples as a result of Muslim and British invasions—his idea being that self-denial or asceticism became for the Hindu temple priests and their followers an economic necessity that was transmuted into a virtue. In the case of the young Venkataraman, the rejection of bodily needs was not a deliberate choice, but came about because of being in a semi-conscious state of meditation for, literally, years. It would be a distortion of his life to say otherwise. In today's India, religious asceticism is far less respected, and often regarded as self-indulgence. For Naipaul (brought up as a Hindu in the Caribbean), it merits only a scornful comedic treatment.

But to take this young Hindu boy's story at its face value, scientific modernity should have something rather more interesting to say than Naipaul's willful cynicism. No doubt a powerful young imagination can produce effects on the mind that may be capable of radically affecting how it functions—to the point of silencing it completely. "Enlightenment" in the Hindu or Buddhist sense needs to be taken down off the shelf and looked at very carefully. As the Roman playwright Terence once wrote, "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto" [I am a human being, (and) I consider nothing of human (behavior to be) alien to me]. A proper enquiry into religious phenomena has been mostly neglected except by the already converted. The future voyage of discovery will inevitably be to Mars, but a greater exploration of the human mind is more highly recommended.

(J.M.Coetzee's review was originally published in *The New York Review of Books*. It is now included with Coetzee's other essays in *Inner Workings*, Vintage, 2007:272-291)

