

Reveries and Reminiscences

I

I shall soon be leaving Moseley, the quiet, leafy Birmingham suburb where I have lived for the last fourteen years, and I wonder what memories of my present residence I shall carry with me to my new home in the countryside and how long those memories will persist. I shall certainly remember the garden, with its trees and shrubs, the flights of stone steps down to the lawn, the perimeter path round which I walked every morning, and the pond into which a small boy jumped thinking that the green algae with which it was covered was grass. The sounds of the place, too, I shall remember. I shall remember the hum of bees in the azaleas, the patter of rain on the roof of my study, and the dull drone of the low-flying passenger aircraft on its way to Birmingham airport. Above all, I think, I shall remember the tremulous cry of the owls that lived in the neighbouring trees and called to one another in the late evening. I would remember the cry of the owls, because my memories of the last two places in which I lived are inseparable from memories of the sound of birds. When I lived in Norfolk, on the outskirts of a village, I used to hear the sound of the wild geese flying overhead. They flew very low, so low that I could distinctly hear the regular beating of their wings. I also used to hear the cuckoo. As in the old rhyme, he came in April, sang all day in May, in June changed his tune, prepared to fly in July, had to go in August, and in September was only a memory – until the following Spring. When I lived in East London, as I did later on, I used to wake up every morning in summer to the sound of a blackbird's full-throated song. He sang from the top of a neighbouring chimneypot, and he sang for an hour or more, after which he flew away, no doubt to go in search of his breakfast. I would have liked to celebrate the blackbird as magnificently as Shelley had celebrated the skylark, but this was a feat far beyond my limited poetic powers, and all I could produce was the following verse:

Trill trill trill goes the blackbird
 At the cold blue edge of day,
Trill trill trill goes Apollo's bird
 From the chimney pot across the way.

This became the first verse of 'The Birds and Their Gods', a series of six verses in each of which I describe a particular bird, its song, and the figure in Western mythology with which it is associated.

The poem was written some time in 1992. During the last fourteen years I have written very little poetry, and I shall probably carry with me into my new home memories of only two of them, 'The Pilgrim' and 'Love and Duty'. I shall carry them with me because I know them by heart, and I know them by heart not because I made an effort to memorise them but because they came spontaneously from somewhere deep in my psyche and have remained with me ever since. With me will go, also, all those poems and fragments of poems that I have memorised in the course of my life or which have clung to me almost in spite of myself, from 'Old King Cole' to 'Licidus', and from 'Onward, Christian Soldiers' to 'Sister Helen'. With them would be at least one line by a poet I 'discovered' only in the '90s, though his name was familiar to me long before that. I was then corresponding regularly with an elderly Belgian Buddhist, a teacher of Zen, who was in the habit of sending me the typescripts of the talks he gave to members of his Zen group. The talks were interesting, and I enjoyed reading them. In the course of one of them he quoted the line 'Death is no

different whined at than withstood.’ It was a thunderbolt of a line and it struck me to the heart both as a Buddhist and as a lover of poetry. The line was by Philip Larkin, and came from his poem ‘Aubade’. I was therefore soon deep in Larkin’s *Collected Poems* and delighting in his highly individual style, which I found to be characterised by conciseness, lack of sentimentality, and a kind of controlled lyricism. His view of human existence was rather bleak, but I found it stimulating rather than depressing, and I found myself wanting to know about the man behind the poetry. I therefore read first Andrew Motion’s biography of the poet, then Larkin’s famous – or infamous - *Selected Letters*, and finally his *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*.

Though I have written few poems during the last fourteen years, and will probably carry only two of them with me in my heart to my new home in the countryside, during the same period I wrote three books, besides editing – and to some extent revising – four seminars I had given some years earlier. I say I wrote the three books, but the fact is that I had to dictate them. I had to dictate them, for my eyesight had suddenly deteriorated. The trouble started when I was on a reunion retreat at Il Convento, the half-ruined monastery in Tuscany where, surrounded as we were by olive gardens and arbutus woods, I had led, for many a blue-roofed Italian summer, ordination retreats for men of several different nationalities. One day I woke up to find my vision strangely distorted, and that I could neither read nor write. This did not disturb me unduly, as for the past week my eyes had been sore due to what I took to be eyestrain and they would, I thought, recover if I gave them a little rest from my constant reading and writing. My vision remained distorted, however, and it became obvious that it was time I saw a doctor. Someone therefore drove me to Grosseto, and to the town’s new health centre. This was an imposing place, all white marble and huge, gilt-framed mirrors, and before long I was being seen by a young man in a white coat who may or may not have been a doctor. I told him what had happened, whereupon he wrote it all down, asked me a few questions, examined my eyes, and finally ushered me into the presence of a large elderly man who may or may not have been a consultant. This gentleman read what the young man had written, grunted, wrote out a prescription for pills, assured me that my vision would be back to normal within ten days, and charged me the equivalent of sixty pounds for the consultation. Though I took the pills as directed there was no improvement in my vision, and it became obvious that despite my reluctance to leave the retreat I ought to return to England without delay and seek further medical advice. A few days later, therefore, I was back in Birmingham and my eyes were being examined and my vision tested by a cheerful, friendly ophthalmologist who stank of tobacco. Things were serious, he told me. I had ‘wet’ macula degeneration in both eyes (the ‘wet’ is the more rapidly developing form of the disease) and I ought to have seen him weeks ago. When I showed him the pills I had been taking he snorted contemptuously and tossed them into the wastepaper basket, saying ‘they use a lot of these things in Europe.’ But all was not lost. He would arrange for me to see a colleague of his, he said, and a week later I had my first appointment with her. There followed half a dozen sessions of laser treatment, a cataract operation on my right eye, a series of monthly Lucentis injections into my left eye, and a series of regular vision tests every few months that has continued down to the present day. Neither the laser treatment nor the Lucentis injections resulted in an improvement in my vision, but they prevented any further deterioration, and without them I would probably have become more than half blind by this time. The cataract operation, on the other hand, resulted in a marked change in my perception of colour. I saw the colour blue much more vividly than before. As I wandered round the garden, two days after the operation, the giant delphiniums, in particular, seemed almost to assault me with the intensity of their blueness, and I thought of D.H.

Lawrence's blue gentians and their blazing torches of blueness. Colour has always been important to me, which is why I love artists as different as Titian, Miro, and the Pre-Raphaelites, as well as precious and semi-precious stones and birds like the peacock and macaw. People are also important to me, but that is quite another matter, and I shall return to it later.

The three books I dictated, either wholly or in part, are *Moving Against the Stream* (2003), *From Genesis to the Diamond Sutra* (2005), and *Precious Teachers* (2007). I worked on each of these books with a definite purpose in mind. In the case of *Moving Against the Stream*, only the last ten chapters of which were dictated, I sought to give a complete account of the events that led, not only to my decision to return to England from India as I had promised, but also to the realisation that a new Buddhist Movement was needed in the world. 'Do you know what this means?' I asked the friend who was with me at the time I received a certain letter. 'It means a new Buddhist Movement!' The letter in question was signed by one of the directors of the English Sangha Trust, under whose auspices I had been teaching in London, and in it he informed me, on behalf of the Trust, that they were dissatisfied with me and did not want me back. That was by no means all. He went on to suggest, in the blandest manner, that I should issue a statement saying that I had decided not to return to England after all, as I had changed my mind. But I had *promised* my friends and supporters that I would return to England, and I had *not* changed my mind, and I was deeply shocked that the representative of a Buddhist organization, writing to a Buddhist teacher, should suggest that he should not only break a promise but publicly lie about the reason for his doing so. I also sought, in *Moving Against the Stream*, to give an account of my relationship with Terry Delamare, the friend who had been with me in India when I received the Trust's letter. In the epilogue to the book I tell the story of the last two years of Terry's life, a story of increasing depression that culminated in him taking his own life. He was my closest friend, and I felt his loss keenly.

Whereas *Moving Against the Stream* is wholly autobiographical, *From Genesis to the Diamond Sutra* is only partly so. The reason for this is that I wrote the book with a double purpose in mind. In the first place I wanted to describe how one Western Buddhist saw Christianity, especially in its Roman Catholic form, the form that for centuries had dominated the civilization and culture of Western Europe. In the second place, I wanted to make open acknowledgement of the nature of my sexual orientation, which I had not done in writing before. The two came together in my criticism of the Roman Catholic Church's attitude towards heresy and homosexuality, its attitude towards the latter case still being very much a live issue. *From Genesis to the Diamond Sutra* is thus a very personal book. Probably it is the most personal of all the books I have written. Though the process of dictating it was irksome and laborious, working on it gave me a deep satisfaction. I equally enjoyed giving expression to my rejection of the central doctrine of mainstream Christianity and expressing my admiration for some of the masterpieces of Christian art. Unfortunately, like a much more distinguished predecessor *From Genesis to the Diamond Sutra* fell stillborn from the press. Indeed, it was lucky to fall from the press at all. The people at Windhorse Publications (WP) did not like the book and published it, as I thought, only grudgingly.

Precious Teachers is almost wholly autobiographical, covering as it does my last seven years in Kalimpong, a small town in the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas. If I wrote *From Genesis to the Diamond Sutra* as the result of an inner urge, then I wrote *Precious Teachers* largely in response to requests from disciples and friends that I should write something about my eight main spiritual teachers, six of whom were from Tibet, while one was from India, and one from China. They were

remarkable men. Besides being well versed in the traditions to which they belonged, they were men of deep spirituality, and I benefitted greatly from their teaching and from the example they offered, in their different ways, of a life lived in accordance with the Dharma. Wherever I go I shall carry with me the memory of their great kindness to me and to all who came within the magic circle of their influence. Like visions of a divinised humanity, they soared above the horizon of our petty earthly concerns.

Precious Teachers was the latest (and it probably will be the last) of a whole series of autobiographical works, a series which began with *The Rainbow Road* and included *Facing Mount Kachenjunga* (1991) and *In the Sign of the Golden Wheel* (1996), as well as *Travel Letters* (1985) and *Through Buddhist Eyes* (2000). Although I call these works autobiographies, each of them covers only a certain period in my life, not the whole of it, and in the past I have spoken of them as memoirs rather than as autobiographies. Thus I have written no auto-biography, and the 'memoirs' are just that. Their subject is my life at a particular period, as seen through my own eyes. They do not criticize, or evaluate, or compare; neither do they seek to contextualize my life with regard to the cultural and political happenings of the time. But whatever one may call them, I enjoyed writing *The Rainbow Road* and its successors. I enjoyed writing about my immediate surroundings, about my day-to-day activities, and about the various experiences that had befallen me. I enjoyed writing about the products of nature and about the creations of man. Above all, I enjoyed writing about people – the people with whom I had lived and worked, whom I had met in the course of my travels, and with whom I had enjoyed relationships of one kind or another. My descriptions of some of these people, such as the irascible Buddharakshita, or the exigent French Nun, could have come from the pages of a novel. Indeed, the relationship between the two genres seems to be closer than I had supposed. In *Experience*, Martin Amis speaks of 'high autobiography', by which he appears to mean something better than the ghost-written memoirs of a popular footballer or film star. He also suggests that autobiography is in process of replacing the novel as the dominant literary genre. This struck a chord. In the course of my life I had written *one* novel and *seven* volumes of autobiography, and it occurred to me that I might be an example of the general trend from novel to autobiography of which Martin Amis speaks. I wrote my novel when I was seventeen, after reading D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, an experience which I later described as being an emotional revelation. The typescript of the novel has long since disappeared, and I remember very little about it. There are two main characters, the young music master at a girls school (I forget what name I gave him) and Bertha Aldobrandini, his sixteen-year-old pupil, who is of partly Italian descent. They fall in love, Bertha becomes pregnant and has a miscarriage, and the lovers move to Cornwall, my descriptions of which are based on my recollections of Devon. There is also a rather high-flown description of the interior of a Victorian Gothic railway station and a discussion of the art of El Greco, whose paintings I knew only from reproductions in a book by Sacheverel Sitwell. The characters of Bertha and the young music master were not based on people I knew, neither did they have any literary progenitors. I created them, and I still have a strong sense of what they were like. The music master was tall, slim, and dark ('a pillar of darkness', as Lawrence might have said), whereas Bertha was of middle height, plump, and dark. He was serious, even melancholy, while she was carefree and impulsive. She may have been from Venus, but he was certainly not from Mars but Saturn. I had not intended that there should be a neat complementarity between the two main characters of my novel: it simply emerged as I wrote, and may have reflected a division within my own psyche. How good or how bad my novel was I cannot say. It must certainly have needed a lot of revision before it could be published, and

Lawrence's influence on my style could not have been a good one. When I returned to *The Rainbow* some years ago, I found it unreadable. Nonetheless my admiration for Lawrence remained undiminished. Over the years I have read everything he wrote, and regard him as the outstanding creative force of his generation. The last time I was in the United States I spent a few days in hot, arid New Mexico, where I visited the isolated ranch where Lawrence had lived and worked, and saw the little chapel in which his ashes are enshrined.

II

Every language is unique, and for this reason a completely faithful translation from one language into another is hardly possible. To translate is to betray. This is especially the case with regard to poetry, in which language reaches the highest point of its development, and I have more than once noticed how a poem in one language can be translated into another language in half a dozen different ways. The best translations are not translations at all, in the literal sense of the term, but re-creations of the 'meaning' of the original in accordance with the genius of the language into which it is translated, a process of which Fitzgerald's rendition of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam is probably the best example, closely followed by some of Rossetti's translations from the Early Italian poets. It would be too much to expect that poems of mine that have been translated into other languages should be re-creations of this kind, faithful though they might be in many ways to their English originals. Indeed, in one of the 60-odd poems that have been translated into French (*Poemes*, 2009) there is one that perfectly illustrates the difficulty, even the impossibility, of translation from one language into another, particularly in the case of poetry. The line is 'Life is King', which also serves as the title of the poem, but the rules of French grammar do not permit a faithful translation. One has to say 'La Vie est la Reine' (Life is *Queen*), which completely distorts my meaning. Similar difficulties arise in connection with the translation of a novel or other prose work of imagination from one language into another, but here there are probably more ways of getting round such difficulties than there are in the case of a lyric or other short poem, in which so much often hangs on so little. In the course of the last thirty or more years my books have been translated into some twenty European and Asian languages, and since I am far from being a polyglot I have been obliged to rely on the competence of my translators and the judgement of those who commissioned their work. At the same time I was always available for consultation and in this way I became more aware of the distinctive character, even the genius, of the particular language into which I was being translated. It has been said that to learn a new language is to acquire a new soul, and perhaps one can acquire a little of that soul, or at least get a glimpse of it, on the strength of a very modest knowledge of the language in question. I remember that my old friend Lama Anagarika Govinda, who was equally at home in German and English, once told me that in his opinion my newly published book *A Survey of Buddhism* (1957), would translate well into German, indeed would read better in German than in English, by which I understood him to mean that the two languages had very similar souls. Despite Lama Govinda's prognostications, the *Survey* has not yet been translated into German in its entirety. Complete translations of the *Survey* have however appeared in two other languages, Spanish and Polish, and I have had the satisfaction of knowing that what many regarded as my foundational work on Buddhism was now accessible to a wider circle of readers.

I have travelled in Spain with a friend, have spent months together in a secluded valley high in the mountains near Alicante, and on the shelves of my cottage there I have a small collection of books on Spain and its people. Even before my first visit to Spain, which took place in 1986, I had some knowledge of the country's history, and was acquainted with the literature and art of what has been called the golden age of Spain. Of Poland and its people I knew, until fairly recently, almost nothing. I knew that World War II had started with Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939, and that thousands of 'Free Poles' had fought on the side of Britain – and that was about all. In 1945 Poland disappeared behind the Iron Curtain, and it was only with the emergence of Solidarity in 1980 that I again became aware that there was a country called Poland and that it was part of Central Europe. Thus for many years Poland hardly existed for me, or existed as a *terra incognita* which it was unlikely I should ever visit. Then ten years ago, in 2001, there came from the heart of this *terra incognita* a letter informing me that *A Survey of Buddhism* had been translated into Polish and inviting me to visit Krakow and launch the publication of the book. The result was that in May, 2002, I spent ten days in Krakow, the ancient capital of Poland, having flown there from Gatwick with two of my Polish friends. Those ten days in Krakow were the most delightful I had spent for a long time. In retrospect they were all the more delightful in that they preceded the upheavals and tribulations of 2003, my *annus horribilis*. I did not keep a diary while I was in Krakow, and I cannot recall all the things my friends and I did there in the order in which we did them. Not that this matters very much. As I now look back on the events of those ten days, they have 'the glory and the freshness of a dream' and as often is the case with dreams it is difficult for me to remember what came first, what last, and what between. Certain experiences touched me deeply, simple though they were, and after returning to England I wrote three Krakow poems, as I called them. In the first poem I am having breakfast on the balcony of the first floor apartment where I am staying. Sparrows are flying in and out of the leaves, chirruping loudly. There are a lot of them, and they make quite a noise, but I do not mind. I am glad to have the company of the little brown birds, for it is a long time since I saw so many of them together, the sparrow population of England having declined steeply in recent years. While having breakfast I watch the men working in the fields below. It is early morning, and Spring has come to the Polish countryside (our apartment is in a house outside Krakow), and soon the sky will be a cloudless blue, as it would be for all ten days of my visit, except for a sudden heavy downpour late one afternoon. In the second poem it is evening, and I am sitting outside one of the restaurants in the great square of Krakow, said to be the second largest square in Europe. With me are the two Polish friends who flew with me from Gatwick, as well as six or seven other friends, mostly Polish, who have come from London, Brighton, and Paris. Some are staying with me at the apartment, others at hotels in the city. They are all here in Krakow for the launch of the Polish translation of *A Survey of Buddhism*. I drink tea, join in the conversation from time to time, and watch the passers-by. The young men are tall, and bear themselves well, as though they had spent time in the army. Nearby, there is a group of gypsy musicians, and I listen to them. Their ancestors came from India, many centuries ago, and the weird, wild music makes me think of the many years I spent in that country, eating its food, and sharing its culture. The third poem was addressed to my interpreter, Michal Balik. He was one of those staying with me at the apartment, and without him it would not have been possible for me to visit Krakow.

Between breakfast on the balcony in the morning and the evening cup of tea in the great square there was always much to see and much to do. There were occasions when all the members of our party kept together, and others when they split into little groups to explore different parts of

the city or pursue particular interests. One of the things we did as a party was to attend a performance of a piano concerto by Chopin (I forget which one) given by a young Polish pianist at the Philharmony Hall. It was a very bad performance; but the audience was in a forgiving mood, and applauded warmly. After all, they seemed to be saying, the pianist was a Pole, he was performing the music of Chopin, their national composer, and young talent ought to be encouraged. To this the young man responded by performing a short piece by Chopin by way of an encore. This time he played brilliantly and was rewarded with an outburst of spontaneous applause. After the concert those who had cameras took photographs of the rest of us as we stood in a row outside the Philharmony Hall. I carried out my personal exploration of Krakow in the company of Michal and a few others. Much of the exploration took place within the old city, which was agreeably located within a circular park. If the park was the ring, then the stone in the ring was Wawel Castle, the seat of the old Polish kings, and it was only at this point that the circular park was interrupted. One morning Michal and I and a few others made our way up the steep, winding ramp that led to the Castle entrance, passing on our way the official residence of the archbishop of Krakow. Inside, the principal object of interest was the beautiful three-storeyed courtyard in Renaissance style. Open to the blue sky, and filled with sunshine, it had been built by, or for, an Italian princess who was married to the King. It was this princess who brought with her from Italy a painting that is the City Art Gallery's greatest treasure: Leonardo da Vinci's 'Portrait of a Lady with an Ermine'. This was a favourite painting of mine, and I was overjoyed at having the opportunity of spending some time in front of it. Besides the Renaissance courtyard, we saw underneath the Castle, on the river, the cave from which the legendary Krakow dragon had terrorised the people of the surrounding countryside. One could not be long in Krakow before hearing of this celebrated monster. Indeed, at the airport I had been presented with a small statue of the dragon by my Polish publisher. The people of Krakow in fact seem rather proud of their dragon, especially now that it was dead and could not do any harm. According to one account it had been killed by a shoemaker's apprentice known as 'Little Twine' who had stuffed a dead sheep with gunpowder and left it outside the dragon's cave. The dragon naturally ate the sheep, but when the gunpowder reached its fiery entrails (for the dragon was a fire-breathing one) it exploded, blowing the unfortunate creature to pieces. In the course of my travels in Italy, Germany and Spain I had always been keen to visit their churches, mainly for the sake of seeing their art treasures; but in Krakow I felt no such inclination, even though the city was full of churches and monasteries and was the ecclesiastical capital of Poland. Even the cathedral was left unvisited. I did however see the inside of the Franciscan Church, which was situated not far from the great square. This was because Michal wanted to show me a beautiful mural in Art Nouveau style painted by a Krakow artist in the early 20th Century. Though the friars had commissioned the mural, when they saw what the artist had done they were horrified and wanted to withdraw from the project. It was too bright and colourful for a church, they said. Nevertheless, in the end they had been obliged to accept the work. There were also big stained glass windows by the same artist, one of which showed God the Father creating the world. Since the church was poorly lit, and I was partially sighted, I could hardly see the mural, though I could see the reds, blues and yellows of the stained glass windows. Though the cathedral might be unvisited, it could hardly be ignored, for it was an imposing structure and dominated part of the great square. Neither was it possible for one to ignore the bugle call which sounded from a window at the top of the cathedral tower. The first time I heard it Michal and I were sitting in the sunshine outside a cafe in the great square, and I looked up to see where the sound came from. It was the Krakow bugle-call signal, Michal told me, and it was played every day on the hour by a member of the fire brigade, as well as being played live on Polish

radio every day at 12pm in full. It dated back to the Middle Ages, when it announced the opening and closing of the city gates. The bugler also sounded the alarm whenever he saw an outbreak of fire or an enemy army approaching the city. The Krakow bugle call was a long one, not unlike the Last Post, but it ended abruptly. This was said to commemorate the bugler who was shot through the throat by a Tatar archer when the Mongols besieged the city in 1241. The Mongol armies were then penetrating deep into Europe and the Middle East. Four Centuries later, Eastern and Central Europe were threatened by the forces of the Ottoman Empire, and it was a Polish King, John Sobieski, who played a leading part in turning back the tide of advancing Islam. The name of John Sobieski came up in the course of a conversation I had with Czarek Wozniak, the publisher of the Polish *Survey*. He wanted to know how many famous Poles I had heard of, apart from Chopin and the Pope. I could think of only three: Paderewski, the pianist-president, Gorecki, whose 'Symphony of Sad Songs' was then very popular in England, and John Sobieski. I failed to mention Copernicus, the famous astronomer, and Wozniak reminded me that he, too, was a Pole, despite his name.

My publisher was a cultured man who lectured on philosophy and had written a book on Heidegger. He was also a member of a Dzogchen group and in his capacity as a publisher he had brought out a number of books on Buddhism. Having read *A Survey of Buddhism* he had not only commissioned a translation but had invited me to come to Krakow to launch the book in its new garb and in that connection he had arranged for me to give three lectures. The first lecture was on 'Buddhism and Art', a favourite topic of mine, and I gave it at the Manggha Japanese Centre, a modern building overlooking the river. The subject of the second lecture was on my own life and work as a Western Buddhist and the founder of a new Buddhist movement, and it was followed by a documentary film showing the various activities of that movement in different parts of the world. This time the venue was a gallery of modern art. The third and last lecture was on 'The Tension between the Academic and the Practical Approaches to Buddhism', the venue being the religious studies department of the Jagiellonian University, one of the oldest universities in Europe. All three lectures were fairly well attended, which was not the case with the formal launch of the Polish *Survey*, which took place at the Empik bookshop, next to the cathedral. Since I did not speak Polish, I had to use an interpreter, and for all three lectures my interpreter was Michal. I could not have had a better interpreter. He was fluent and confident, and only once or twice was momentarily at a loss for a word, and it was evident that he was communicating the spirit as well as the letter of what I had to say. Several members of our party commented that we seemed to be in complete harmony with each other, as though we were of one heart and one mind. In a way this was surprising, considering how different we were in age, in temperament and in personal history. Moreover, we had not known each other for very long, nor had we spent much time together. I had first met Michal a year or two earlier in Berlin. We met at a conference organised by the German Buddhist Union. He could not attend the talk I was about to give, as he had to go and cook a meal for me at the flat where I was staying with a German friend. Our next meeting also took place in Berlin, at a club where I was giving a short series of talks. This time he was accompanied by four or five friends from Frankfurt University where he was then studying. In 2000 he came to England and joined Friends Organic, a team based Right Livelihood business based in Bethnal Green, East London. He also moved into a residential men's community. In late January or early February he came to see me in Moseley, and we went for a walk in Cannon Hill Park. He was then about to leave for Poland, where his mother was ill in hospital. She died in March. During the months that followed Michal continued to work at Friends Organic and live in a men's community. He also liaised with Czarek

Wozniak regarding the publication of the Polish *Survey* and the arrangements for my visit to Krakow. Finally, he organized a meeting of the friends, mostly expatriate Poles, who were interested in being with me in Krakow for the launch. The meeting was held at the London Buddhist Centre and was attended by eight or nine people, including me. The result was that early in May we were all in Krakow, and Michal was staying with me at the rented apartment, translating my lectures, and accompanying me wherever I wanted to go. In the course of one of our explorations we came across a tablet commemorating the Katyn Massacre. It was a reminder that terrible things had happened during the War, and that Auschwitz was only 60 miles away. Horrors of a very different kind were to be found nearer home – architectural ones. An acquaintance of Michal's had invited our party to eat at the pizza restaurant he had recently opened in Nowa Huta, a sort of satellite town that the Communist government had built in an effort to lure the inhabitants of Krakow from their ancient city, away from the influence of its 'uncooperative' civic authorities. They had even built a church there! On our arrival at Nowa Huta, which was more like a sleazy suburb of Krakow than a separate town, I saw row upon featureless row of multi-storey apartment blocks, all grey and dingy, and separated by what seemed to be waste ground. As for the new restaurant, the food was remarkable for quantity rather than quality, and I soon realised that we had been invited not as guests but as customers and would have to pay for our meal. The host-proprietor nonetheless sat and ate with us. He was more than half drunk, and had evidently been reading books on Zen Buddhism, for he kept firing 'Zen-like' questions at me from the opposite end of the table. I amused myself by responding in similar fashion, often monosyllabically and forcibly, which puzzled and confused him, so that in the end he subsided into silence. After the meal it was a relief to feel the cool night air and look up at the stars. Another exploration took Michal and me to the Arcade, a huge building situated almost in the middle of the great square. On our entering at one end, I saw that for its entire length it was lined on either side with brightly lit shops. We were there because we would soon be leaving Krakow and I wanted to take back with me a few presents for friends. I could not have come to a better place. The shops specialized in traditional Polish handicrafts, of which there was an amazing variety on display on open counters or under glass. I bought an amber egg for Paramartha, with whom I had travelled in Spain and elsewhere, an onyx chess set for Prasannasiddhi, with whom I had travelled in Italy and elsewhere, and little painted wooden boxes and T-shirts for various other friends. On my last day in Krakow the members of our little party met for a farewell meal at an Indian vegetarian restaurant where Michal and I ate more than once in the course of our stay. I ordered a *masala dosai*, which was one of my favourite Indian dishes; but no sooner was it set before me, and I had raised the first morsel to my lips, than I experienced an utter revulsion to the very idea of food and started retching violently. So violent was the retching that I thought I was about to vomit and made a dash for the toilet. The intense revulsion I felt was probably akin to the kind insight known to Buddhists as 'the perception of the loathsomeness of food'. Be that as it might, I soon recovered, the uneaten *masala dosai* was distributed among our friends, and a few hours later, with Michal and another friend, I was flying back to England, ten wonderful days in Krakow now behind me.

The liner had left port a few days before. She was a new ship, though some of her timbers had been salvaged from an ancient craft that had come to the end of its sea-faring days. On board there were more than a thousand passengers. The majority of the passengers were middle aged, but there were old people and young people too, and a few children. Manning the liner there was a crew of thirty, headed by the captain, an experienced officer who had been associated with the ship since the laying down of its keel. Besides having a strong sense of duty, he loved his beautiful ship, with its clean lines; he loved his well-trained crew, and he loved his passengers and was concerned for their safety and comfort. During the voyage the passengers occupied themselves in various ways. Some of them spent much of their time in the ship's gym, others sat on deck watching the rising and falling of the waves, while a few simply counted the hours to the next meal and slept a lot. As might have been expected, disagreement sometimes broke out among the passengers, and occasionally these were so serious that the captain had to intervene personally to restore peace and harmony. Thus life went on more or less smoothly from day to day. The sky was generally clear, the sea generally calm. Only once did the ship encounter a storm, when it pitched and rolled dreadfully and a number of passengers were seasick.

One morning some of the passengers noticed that the captain was not on the bridge as usual. They thought nothing of it, however, and life on the ship went on much as before. But another morning came, and yet another, and still the captain was not seen on the bridge. Nor was that all. Other figures appeared on the bridge from time to time. First it was one of the ship's officers, then a small group of crew members, all talking loudly and apparently disagreeing with one another. But still there was no sign of the captain, and before long a rumour went round the ship that he was seriously ill and was confined to his cabin. This was later confirmed and the passengers were informed that the captain was seeing no-one except his personal steward. By this time it was clear that the ship was no longer steaming straight ahead but was veering now to the right, now to the left, in a highly erratic and even dangerous manner. Some of the passengers welcomed the change. They were tired of always travelling in the same direction, they said. Most of the passengers wished the captain well, and hoped he would soon be better; but a minority criticized him, saying that he was not properly qualified, that he wore his cap at the wrong angle, and so on. A few were of the opinion that the passengers should take over the ship and elect their captain. A few others declared that they had never trusted the captain, and they wished they were travelling on another liner. As if in answer to their wish a vessel suddenly appeared out of the early morning mist. So many passengers rushed to get a better view that the ship listed dangerously and the crew had to remonstrate with them. The strange ship flew a variety of flags, and from bow to stern was so swathed in colourful bunting that it was difficult to make out its outline or even whether it actually was a ship. The passengers who wished they were travelling in another liner at once lowered one of the lifeboats, rowed themselves over to the strange ship, and were welcomed on board. A few of the other ship's passengers then jumped into the now empty lifeboat, rowed back the ship it came from, climbed up over the side, and joined the passengers. All this time the captain remained in his cabin, cared for by his personal steward and, occasionally, by a couple of crew members. It was rumoured that he was very ill, even dying, though no-one knew what was the cause of his illness. Some thought it was a bug he had picked up in the tropics, others that it was bad karma catching up with him. But the captain did not die, and eventually appeared on the bridge again, though less frequently than before, and looking paler and thinner. The liner was set on its old direct course, the

crew was reorganised, the passengers reassured. Having seen to this, the captain then sat down in his cabin and wrote his report.

The liner in the parable is the good ship FWBO (since refurbished, and re-named Triratna Buddhist Order and Community), and the captain is the present writer. Given this key, even those who were not around in 2003 will have little difficulty interpreting the parable and understanding something of what happened to me and to the FWBO in that year. They should, however, bear in mind that not every detail of the parable corresponds to something that actually happened, while not everything that happened to me in 2003 has its parabolic counterpart.

From the beginning of May 2002, when I returned from Krakow, to the beginning of January 2003, when the events shadowed forth in the parable began, I continued to lead quite an active life, despite my age. After my return from Krakow I spent the rest of May first at Madhyamaloka, dictating the epilogue to *Moving Against the Stream*, then at Guhyaloka, the men's retreat centre in Spain, where I dedicated the stupa that had been built to enshrine a portion of the ashes of Dhardo Rimpoche. Guhyaloka was a favourite place of mine. Over the years I had spent many a month in the high valley in the mountains, usually in the summer, drinking in the silence and inhaling the pine-scented air. Later on in the year I spent time at Padmaloka, another favourite place, where I lived in the eighties, besides visiting Sheffield, where I 'cut the ribbon' at the opening of the new Sheffield Buddhist Centre, and London, where I lived in the nineties. Despite being busy in these and other ways, I kept in touch with Michal, who was still living and working in East London. Both he and I were keen to develop the friendship that had sprung up between us in Krakow, and which was to be such an important part of both of our lives in the years ahead. When I was in London, staying in my old flat above the London Buddhist Centre, we spent as much time together as we could, and one evening I had dinner with him and the other members of the Amritakula community. In August Michal came to see me. It was my 77th birthday, and he gave me a silver spoon with a bear handle. I was much moved by the gift, especially as the spoon had been given to Michal by his brother, and soon afterwards I wrote a poem entitled 'The Silver Spoon'. One of my friends thought the poem sentimental, but it was a true expression of my feeling for Michal. It was at about this time, I think, that Michal started coming up to Madhyamaloka every other weekend in order to study with me. But black clouds were already gathering on the horizon, and a storm was brewing. In October I had to pull out of a study retreat I was leading at Madhyamaloka, as due to insomnia I was too tired to continue. As I wrote at the time to Padmadaka at Padmaloka, I was 'half dead from sleeplessness'. In all the years that I had lectured and led retreats and seminars, this was the first time I had been forced to let people down in this way, and I was much mortified. But insomnia was only part of the problem. Writing to Vidyadevi in Herefordshire a few weeks later, I confided, 'At the moment I am enjoying a relative respite from my sleeplessness but the underlying problem is still there and will no doubt shortly be confronting me again. It is a combination of high blood pressure, insomnia, and palpitation, which appear to reinforce one another and between them to create a cycle which is difficult to break through.' The underlying problem was indeed still there and a week later I was writing to the same friend that I had 'experienced a few ups and downs with my health, including an alarm on Christmas Eve that took me to the primary care unit of the Selly Oak Hospital for a consultation, and I am not sure what the future holds.' The alarm in question was the sudden acceleration of my pulse rate to a dangerously high level, and for this the doctor at the primary care centre prescribed beta blockers, which together with other prescription drugs I am still taking ten years later. Though my pulse rate had been stabilized, at least for the time being, as regards my

insomnia there were still ups and downs. In fact there were now more downs than ups, and I was fast moving into a period of chronic sleep deprivation that would last for a year or more. Michal was aware of these developments, and at the beginning of January 2003 he moved into Madhyamaloka. I had already asked him, some time in the autumn, if he would like to keep me company and study with me, and he was thinking about it. The reason he did not say yes immediately was that he quite liked his life in London, where he attended classes at the London Buddhist Centre, and where he had a girlfriend, and in any case he was debating whether to spend half the week in London and half at Madhyamaloka. Before he could make up his mind, however, my insomnia became much worse, and I told him that I needed him. He hesitated no longer, and moved to Madhyamaloka as soon as he could leave Friends Organic.

By this time I had been living at Madhyamaloka for six years. Paramartha and I had moved there straight after returning from a seven-month tour of the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, in the course of which we had visited all the FWBO Centres in those countries. Though I did not then know it, this was the last time I, at least, would travel outside Europe. The house to which we moved was a large, late Victorian property, and it stood halfway down a winding, tree-lined street of properties of a similar size and similar design. The house had a garage, and above the garage there was a flat consisting of three small rooms, together with a kitchen and a bathroom. There was also a small guestroom downstairs. During our absence abroad the flat had been thoroughly renovated, not to say redesigned, and it was into this flat that Paramartha and I moved. My books, manuscripts, archives and images had been brought from Padmaloka, so that for the first time for many years I had them all under the same roof as myself. I did not have Paramartha's company for long. Three or four months after our arrival at Madhyamaloka he went to live with his girlfriend in Beaconsfield and I turned his room into a private office, where I kept my dozens of box files and my scores of ring binders on improvised shelving. Despite Paramartha's departure I was not alone. Next door to me, occupying the four-storey Victorian house, there was the Madhyamaloka men's community, the members of which were senior members of the Western Buddhist Order. I had brought them together at Madhyamaloka in the hope that as a result of living and working in harmony under one roof for a few years they would be better prepared for the time when I handed on to them, and to their counterpart in the women's community nearby, the leadership of the new Buddhist movement I had founded. My hope was fulfilled only to a limited extent, but that is another story, a story that does not belong here. My insomnia was naturally a cause of much concern to the community, as it was to many friends both far and near, and they were greatly relieved when Michal arrived and moved into Paramartha's old room, the box files and ring binders having been distributed round the rest of the flat and a bed installed in their place.

I had started trying some of the traditional remedies for insomnia towards the end of 2002, and I carried on taking them well into the following year. First I tried Camomile tea, drinking a cup of it before I went to bed, and sometimes getting up to make a second cup in the course of the night. Next I tried Valerian tea, which disagreed with me, so I experimented with some of the Bach flower remedies, which reminded me of Bishop Berkeley's belief in the efficacy of tar-water, and seemed to be based on a similar understanding of the natural world, the world of trees and flowers. Lastly, I tried drinking brandy and hot water last thing at night. Dr Johnson had extolled brandy as the drink of heroes; but I could not have been much of a hero, for I found both the smell and the taste repugnant, and soon stopped taking it. With the exception of Valerian, all these remedies had a slightly relaxing effect, but they made not the least difference so far as the insomnia was concerned.

In the end, I went to see my GP, Dr Cromby, whom I was already seeing in connection with my high blood pressure and palpitation. She prescribed Temazepam, a popular sleeping pill, which at best gave me a couple of hours of something that was not really sleep, and which in the event I was to take for much longer than I should have done. At the suggestion of a doctor friend, I also started taking acupuncture treatment. Eight years later I am still taking it, and from the same practitioner, Rosi Roper, now a good friend. The first time she saw me, Rosi afterwards related, my face was green. As a result of the insomnia, which by then amounted to chronic sleep deprivation, I was extremely debilitated, had very little energy, and was on the verge of collapse. Though I have spoken of 2003 as my *annus horribilis*, the latter did not exactly correspond with the calendar year. The period of my chronic insomnia in fact lasted for more than a year, and though I know roughly when it began I find it difficult to say when it ended. During the whole of this period I carried on more or less as usual, except that early in 2003 I told Subhuti, Sona, and Mahamati, and the rest of the community, that I did not want to hear anything of a disturbing or controversial nature, with the result that for about a year I did not know about the upheaval that was going on within the community and within the FWBO. I dictated letters to Khemavira, my secretary, who was a member of the community, worked on *Living with Awareness* with Cittapala, also a member of the community, continued to have laser treatment at the hands of Miss Tsaloumas, my consultant ophthalmologist, walked in the garden, and went through a number of Buddhist texts with Michal. I did all this while living, at the same time, in a kind of hell, the hell of chronic insomnia. The insomnia was cumulative in its effect. Tiredness was piled on tiredness, suffering on suffering, torture on torture. I more than once declared, to whoever would listen, that prolonged insomnia was in fact torture, and that I could well understand how a prisoner who had been deprived of sleep for four or five days might well be prepared to confess to anything, sign anything, in order to end the torture and get some sleep. Even when, on a 'good' night, I had three or four hours sleep, I did not have it *en bloc*, so to speak, but in anything up to eight or nine bits, each separated from the other by a period of wakefulness. Thus the clouds were very black, but they had, from time to time, a lining not of silver but of gold.

That lining was made up of the dreams and visions that came to me during my *annus horribilis*, whenever I was able to enjoy a little sleep. In the earlier part of that period I used to find myself sitting in the midst of a group of monks. Sometimes the group was yellow-robed, sometimes red-robed, but it was always either the one or the other. The monks I saw in my dreams were not monks I had known in real life, but I always knew the monks very well, in those dreams of mine, and I felt quite at home with them. I did not always find myself with the other monks in the same kind of place. Sometimes it was a temple, sometimes the forecourt of a monastery cut out of the rock. In front of us there would be a shrine, and we were all chanting. I do not know in what tongue of men or angels we chanted, but there was a sense of our worshipping the Buddha and chanting his praises. Reflecting on these dreams, I concluded that they were not just a reminiscence of my days as a monk, even though such reminiscences may have provided those dreams with their 'language'. What the dreams really expressed, I believe, was the upward thrust of my being, a thrust which showed itself in my lifelong devotion to the Buddha and his teaching, in my enjoyment of poetry, music, and the visual arts, and in my love of noble friendship. These 'monastic' dreams were succeeded but not entirely eclipsed by dreams in which I saw glittering displays of precious stones, mostly diamonds. Some displays took the shape of many-petalled flowers, others that of necklaces and tiaras, and yet others that of complex geometrical designs. All these displays were constantly

changing, so that they were more like clouds than solid objects. There were also occasions when I saw diamonds strewn across a dark background like stars across the midnight sky. Once I found myself walking down a broad tunnel that led into the depths of the earth. The tunnel was not dark but filled with a soft golden radiance, while the walls of the tunnel were lined at every turn with diamonds which flashed and glittered. My dreams also assumed a variety of architectural forms. Many times did I find myself, for example, alone in a dark, empty, cathedral-like structure which I seemed, in successive dreams, to take over. Once there was carried into the vast building, in a little procession, the dead body of an ecclesiastical dignitary of some kind. The atmosphere of these dreams was one of solemnity and awe. At other times I was walking in the mountains, amid the most beautiful scenery, each turn of the road revealing a prospect more glorious than the last. Far below me there was a river, while away in the distance, on the horizon, was a strip of dark blue that was the sea. In more than one dream did I make my way down from the mountain to the scattering of sunlit, white villas lying at their foot, walk through them to the beach and the sea, or up and down the promenade, mingling with the holiday crowd. These 'mountaineering' dreams were accompanied by feelings of expansion, exhilaration, and joy. In another dream I found myself not beside the sea but high above it, looking down on a small white cruise liner far below. There was nothing but the blue sky above, nothing but the blue sky all around. I think I intended to drop straight down onto the deck of the liner, but before I could do so the dream ended and I awoke. Most of my dreams during this period were not so much dreams as visions, but there were a few in which I heard music. On one or two occasions the music came from a hall, outside which I was standing, and once it simply came from above. It was not orchestral music, but the music of a thousand human voices. The music from above, in particular, was of an indescribable beauty and sublimity, far surpassing any music I had ever heard, and it threw me into an ecstasy. What was strange, it progressed, but at the same time it stood still. Paradoxically it was static music. It united time and eternity. At the time I did not know Thomas Tallis's 'Spem in alium', but when I did happen to hear it, years later, I was at once reminded of the heavenly music I had heard in my dream, of which it seemed a distant echo.

I was about half way through my *annus horribilis*, in which dreams went some way towards redressing the imbalance between pain and pleasure in my life, when there occurred an incident that gave everyone cause for concern. Michal and I often spent the morning in Cannon Hill Park, where after walking round the bigger of its two ponds we would settle down in the courtyard in front of the tea house over a cup of tea and get on with Dharma study. After finishing Sogyal's *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, on which we had made a start during my visits to London, we passed on to select portions of the Pali scriptures, and, I think, some of my own writings. The road from Madhyamaloka to Cannon Hill Park was partly downhill, which meant that on the way back it was partly uphill. One day I took the acclivity more quickly than I should have done, and arrived at the top hot and a little out of breath; there was a cold wind blowing. Ten or fifteen minutes later, when Michal and I were back at the flat, I suddenly felt sick and dizzy. Michal sat me down on a chair, and I fainted. The next thing I knew was that two burly paramedics were bending over me, and administering oxygen, Michal having telephoned for an ambulance. I was chairlifted down the stairs and taken by ambulance to Selly Oak Hospital, where I was given a number of tests and told that I had suffered neither a heart attack nor a stroke and that there was nothing wrong with me. Nonetheless, during the time that I was unconscious my pulse had been barely discernible for three or four minutes, and Michal and other friends urged me to have a proper health check. After all, I

was now seventy seven! I therefore went to see Dr Crombie, who gave me a referral to Dr Sandler, a 'general specialist', who after giving me a thorough physical examination gave me referrals in his turn, first to a radiologist, then to a psychiatrist. The radiologist looked at my heart and other internal organs (I looked with him), while the psychiatrist, with whom I had an interesting conversation, assured me that Freudian psychoanalysis was out of date, having been superseded by cognitive behavioural therapy, which was much more effective. The next time I saw Dr Sandler his opening words to me were that he had only good news for me. As I wrote to Paramartha the following week, 'he went on to say that my heart was quite sound organically and was functioning well, as were my other internal organs, and I therefore had no cause for concern. In fact he said that I was in robust physical health and that there was no reason why I should not be good for another ten or fifteen years.' This was good news indeed, especially as my sleep seemed to be gradually improving and my energy returning, though there were frequent blips and though the end of my period of chronic sleep deprivation was not yet in sight. The improvement was due principally to the acupuncture treatment I was receiving from Rosi, whom I now saw only once a week, instead of twice a week as before. More than once, when I was not well enough to go to her for treatment, she came and treated me at the flat, and I well remember the smile with which she manoeuvred herself round my bed on her knees so that she did not risk straining her back by having to bend over me. But although it certainly did seem that acupuncture worked, I had no idea how it worked. In particular, I was not sure whether it worked, in my case, by attacking the insomnia directly, so to speak, or whether it worked by building up my energy so that I was better able to tolerate the insomnia.

Be that as it might, I soon noticed that the improvement in my sleep was being accompanied by a change in the nature of my dreams, which were now less visionary and more mundane. Not that the more visionary dreams entirely disappeared, especially those in which I was surrounded by magnificent mountain scenery, which I continued to have for some time. In these more mundane dreams I often found myself walking through darkening streets, occasionally going into a shop, usually a second-hand book shop. Before long I would happen to meet two or three friends (friends in the dream, not in real life), and together we would go to a cafe or a tea shop, where I would have a cup of tea and a cake. Strange to relate, I never consumed more than a cup of tea and a cake, even though the food and drink of the dream seemed to stand for food, and I was as hungry for sleep as a starving man is for food. In the early days of my acupuncture treatment with Rosi I had once dreamed of a fierce black bull, a bull that I was trying to stop escaping into another field. Rosi thought the bull represented my natural energy, of which the insomnia had deprived me and which I was now trying to 'capture' or regain. Much later on, when I was beginning to get a little more sleep, I started having dreams of very young animals, usually puppies or kittens. Both puppies and kittens were very playful, and sometimes I played with them. Rosi saw these dreams as a sign that my energies were returning, and I was inclined to agree with her. They were like the green shoots which show that spring is on its way. But although I may not have survived without Michal's unfailing care and support and the regular sessions of acupuncture with Rosi, there were other friends who in various ways also helped me to get through my *annus horribilis*. One of these was Saraha, a member of the Madhyamaloka community, who on many an afternoon sat and meditated beside me as I had my siesta, in the hope that the positive atmosphere thus created would help me to sleep. It *did* seem to help! On two or three occasions I was suddenly plunged into a deep sleep which lasted for twenty or thirty minutes, from which I woke feeling refreshed. Another friend who helped me was

Mahamati. Once, when I was getting even less sleep than usual, and Michal was in London visiting his girlfriend, Jenny, and other friends, he remained at my bedside all night, holding my hand and talking to me in a way that made the time pass more quickly. Other members of the community must have helped me from time to time, but it is Saraha and Mahamati whom I remember in this regard. 'Get well' cards came from friends both old and new, and around the time of my 78th birthday there arrived at Madhyamaloka hundreds of birthday cards, some of them very large and colourful and signed by scores of people. There was also a small group of friends who helped me in a special way, and to whom I am particularly grateful. These were Bodhaniya in Birmingham, Karunamati in East London, Kularatna in Stroud, and Shantachitta in Brighton - four doctor friends, whom I felt free to telephone for information and advice, since my own GP was not easily available. There were times when I telephoned at an unreasonable hour, but they never minded, and were invariably sympathetic and helpful. So far as I remember, I needed to consult them not about the insomnia but about the alarming vagaries of my blood pressure and my pulse.

In October, 2003, I left Birmingham for the first time for more than a year. For the first time in many months I was separated from my usual environment and all my customary supports, except for Michal and the cocktail of prescription drugs I was now having to swallow every day. The cottage Michal had found for us was situated in the depths of rural Shropshire. Completely isolated, with no sign of other human habitation in any direction, it was surrounded on all sides by hills, including the Stiperstones, which legend associated with the Devil. During our three days at the comfortable, well appointed cottage we did not do very much. We went for walks (I now had to use a walking stick), talked, and took photographs, and in the evening sat back with legs stretched out towards the warmth of a blazing fire, which Michal kept well supplied with logs. So far as I remember, we did not do any study. My most vivid recollection of the place, and of the time we spent there, is of its intense silence. At night, when I stepped outside to look up at the sky, there was not a sound to be heard – not even the bark of a dog. All was utter stillness and silence.

It was also in October that I issued a report on my *annus horribilis*, which I termed 'the most difficult year of my life'. In the report I traced the rise and progress of my insomnia, acknowledged how much I had been helped by acupuncture treatment, and insisted that any attempt to diagnose the cause or causes of my insomnia was purely speculative and that nobody, myself included, really knew why it had been visited upon me. I also confided that the sleep deprivation had made me even more sensitive than usual, so that I had 'shed many more tears than usual, sometimes to relieve tension and sometimes because I was touched by hearing of some noble or inspiring action or experience.' Some of these actions and experiences belonged to well known figures of the past; others to men and women of our own day. What touched me most often, however, and most often brought tears to my eyes, was seeing how day in and day out, week after week, in small matters and in great, Michal (later to become Nityabandhu) regularly put my needs before his own. It therefore was not surprising that in these circumstances the friendship between us should have deepened.

I concluded my report with the hope that I would eventually be able to return to something like normal health for one of my age.

IV

Above the mantelpiece of my study in East London, long ago, there hung a reproduction of Holman Hunt's *The Scapegoat*. It hung there for quite a few years. Visitors sometimes looked askance at the evil-eyed goat who was the subject of the painting, evidently wondering how it had come to occupy the place of honour in the study of a Buddhist writer and teacher. There was a reason for its being there. I had always liked and admired the Pre-Raphaelites, of whom Holman Hunt was one, and *The Scapegoat* (of which there are two versions) is one of his finest works. I also wrote two poems entitled, respectively, 'Scapegoat' and 'The Scapegoat', the second poem being a sonnet in which I describe the version of the painting in which the goat is white-haired and there is a background of dayglow yellow sky and line of mauve-pink hills. Both poems were written a few years before I hung Holman Hunt's painting on my study wall, and several of my friends speculated that my fascination with the subject was due to my having been made a scapegoat by the then British Buddhist establishment. Yet although I had indeed been cast out by that body, I did not feel in the least like a scapegoat and was quite happy to live in the wilderness, where instead of dying like the poor goat, as my critics had expected, I became the founder of a new Buddhist movement. However, scapegoat or not, my mood must have changed, for eventually Holman Hunt's *The Scapegoat* was taken down and replaced by Turner's *The Bridge of Sighs, Ducal Palace and Custom-House, Venice*. I had paid my first visit to Venice thirty-three years earlier, in 1966, and Turner's well-known painting, where the pink and white facade of the Doge's Palazzo gleamed from across the olive green water and the pink and white finger of the Campanile points into the blue Italian sky, reminded me of the days I had spent in the great and glorious city, which for centuries was Europe's gateway to the mysterious East.

In 1997 I moved from East London into a different city and a different flat. My study in the new flat had no mantelpiece, and there was very little wall space, two walls being lined with bookshelves, while a third was taken up by a picture window. Any picture I favoured had to be hung or pinned on the inside of the door, so that seated at the opposite side of the room in my red armchair, with the picture window behind me, I could have it directly in view. Over the years many a picture had taken its turn on the door, as my mood or interest dictated, but there is one picture that has lasted longer than any other and which, for the last five or six years, has confronted my gaze whenever I looked across the room. It is a small picture of the Egyptian god Thoth, the ibis-headed inventor of writing, author of the sacred texts, and patron of the arts and sciences. He wears a short kilt, the whiteness of which contrasts strongly with the reddish brown of his body. He is depicted in profile; his left hand holds up a tablet, his right a brush or stylus, as if in readiness to take down a message from the gods. He is the very embodiment of Ancient Egypt, with its pyramids, its temples, and its priestly lore. I came across that Egypt, as I came across so many other things, in the pages of the *Children's Encyclopedia*. I marvelled at the strange yet comprehensible art, the colours of which were still fresh after more than three thousand years; at the bewigged men in their still white garments, and at the beds of tall papyrus reeds from which there protruded the mild head of a cow. Above all, I marvelled at the colossal temples, which seemed built not for men but for giants. Nor, indeed, had they been built for men but for the gods, whose houses they were, from which through the semi-divine pharaohs and priests they ruled, dynasty after dynasty, over a humble, happy, and hard-working people who, if they had honoured the gods and lived rightly, could look forward to an even happier life hereafter. In many ways it was an attractive picture.

It was a picture that formed the backdrop of Joan Grant's evocation of Ancient Egypt in *Winged Pharaoh*, which was the first book I borrowed when, after three years of invalidism, I rejoined the children's section of the Tooting Public Library. A *winged* was an *initiated* pharaoh, and according to the author the pyramids of Egypt were not tombs, as was commonly believed, but places of initiation, in whose central chamber a pharaoh underwent, alone, the spiritual trials that would transform him from a human being into a semi-divine personage. What was more wonderful still, Joan Grant claimed that *Winged Pharaoh* was a work not of imagination but of recollection, that she had once lived in Ancient Egypt, and that she was simply recording what she remembered of her life in that particular existence. I cannot remember how literally I took that claim, but I could have offered little resistance to the idea of reincarnation, which from then on came to be entwined with my thinking. Even so, the effect that *Winged Pharaoh* had on me was less philosophical than literary, for not long afterwards I started writing a short story set in Ancient Egypt. The story began, and perhaps ended, with a detailed description of a lotus pond (I am by nature fond of detail). The pond was situated in the garden of a white marble palace or temple surrounded by cypresses, and it was here beneath an eternally blue sky that the hero of my story lived. Unlike the author of *Winged Pharaoh* I had no memories of a previous life in Ancient Egypt on which to draw, but it was not difficult for me to imagine - or to dream - that I had lived beside the Nile in the days when Stonehenge was new or perhaps not yet built. Probably I would have been a priest, shavenheaded and clad in stiff white garments, and had spent my life in the service of one or other of the gods, whether Ra, or Thoth, or Ptah, or the dead and resurrected Osiris; and perhaps, when I was old, I would have spent the cool of the evening in the temple garden, beside the lotus pond, and perhaps, when the moon rose, the young priest would come and ask me about my life, and I would say: 'I was born into a baker's family, and as a boy I used to take a basket of fresh loaves to the temple every morning. The pillars and walls of the temple were decorated with pictures of men and beasts, and with strange signs. I was fascinated by the pictures, and used to stop and look at them. One of the priests noticed this, and one day he asked me if I would like to know the meaning of the picture. I said I would, so a few days later, with the consent of my parents, I entered the temple as a novice. For the next few years I swept the temple floor, served the priests, learned how to arrange the tray of offerings to the gods, and eventually learned to read the sacred text. Soon afterwards I became a priest, and from that time onward I spent my days performing the sacred rituals, studying the sacred texts, and exploring the mysteries of our religion. Now I am old. I have passed on what I know to the younger priests. Soon I shall die. My body will be embalmed, Thoth will conduct me to the Hall of Truth, my heart will be weighed, and I trust I shall be found worthy to enjoy the company of the blessed gods for all eternity.' No, it was not difficult for me to imagine all this, and I could almost hear the sound of the old priest's voice as he told the story of his life to his young auditor. Nor did I find it difficult to imagine myself living in Ancient Egypt centuries later, during the time of the Ptolemies and the Roman occupation. Then, too, I would probably have been a priest, and perhaps, when a visitor asked me about myself, I would say: 'All my life I have lived here in Hermopolis, serving the great god Thoth, whom the Greeks call Hermes. In my younger days we had few Greek visitors. Now there are many. They are a young upstart people. They think they know everything. But a few of them have begun to realize that we, the priests of old Egypt, far surpass them in wisdom, and that they have much to learn from us.'

Thoth and Hermes each possessed a number of different attributes and functions, and since they possessed some of these in common it was not difficult for the Greeks to see in Thoth an

Egyptian version of their own god Hermes. Both Thoth and Hermes were originally moon gods, we are told, for the moon has no light of its own and simply reflects the light of the sun. Thus Thoth is called 'ray of Ra', the Egyptian sun god. Similarly, when Hermes, the divine messenger, delivers a message from Zeus, the words he speaks are not his own but 'reflect' the words of Zeus, as when he tells the nymph Calypso, in the *Odyssey*, that she is to allow Odysseus to leave her island, where she has detained him the last seven years. Thoth and Hermes have two important functions in common. Both are communicators or messengers, and both are psychopomps, guides or conductors of the souls of the dead from this world to the next. Thoth is the scribe of the gods, as well as being the inventor of writing and author of the Book of the Dead and other sacred texts, so that it is not difficult for us to see him as the revealer or communicator of divine wisdom to mankind. Hermes, similarly, communicates the will of Zeus to the lesser gods and to mortal men. Both Thoth and Hermes are channels of communication between heaven and earth, the divine and the human, even the transcendental and the mundane. Moreover, just as Thoth conducts the deceased person to the Hall of Justice, in the same way Hermes drives the ghosts down to the river Styx. As Virgil says of Hermes in the *Aeneid* (Dryden's translation):

'But first he grasps within his awful hand
The mark of sovereign power, his magic wand;
With this he draws the ghosts from hollow graves;
With this he drives them down the Stygian waves;
With this he seals in sleep the wakeful sight,
And eyes, though closed in death, restores to light.'

I had first learned about Hermes and the other Greek gods, as I had learned about the gods of Ancient Egypt, from the lavishly illustrated pages of the *Children's Encyclopedia*. Later I became better acquainted with them through the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. From then onwards they were no less real to me than were the characters in a play by Shakespeare or a novel by Dickens. In a way they were more real, for the greatest of them had, considered as archetypes, a numinous quality that characters in a novel and the drama did not possess. At the same time they all had a distinct individuality that was evident in everything they said and did. Reading the *Iliad*, in particular, in Chapman's translation, I found Hera and Pallas Athena at least as believable as Agamemnon and Achilles, and I followed debates among the gods with the same eagerness that I followed the skirmishes between the Greeks and the Trojans. I sided with the Greeks, though I was sorry for the Trojans, for I was well acquainted with the events that led to the armies of the Greeks being encamped before the walls of Troy. The story began with a secret. The secret concerned Thetis, one of the sea nymphs, and was to the effect that she was destined to bear a son who would be greater than his father. Now Zeus wanted to marry Thetis, but when he learned the secret he changed his mind and Thetis was married to Peleus, a mortal. All the Olympian gods took part in the wedding feast, in the course of which a golden apple was thrown onto the festive board. It was thrown by Ate, or Discord, and it was inscribed 'For the Fairest'. Hera, Pallas Athena, and Aphrodite each laid claim to the apple, and in the end Zeus decided that the case should be judged by Paris, one of the sons of Priam, the King of Troy. Each of the three goddesses showed herself naked to Paris and at the same time offered him a bribe. Hera offered him power, and Pallas Athena knowledge, but Aphrodite offered him the love of the most beautiful woman in the world. It was therefore to

Aphrodite that Paris awarded the golden apple. The most beautiful woman in the world happened to be Helen, the wife of Menelaus, the brother of Agamemnon, King of Argos. Paris therefore sailed for Argos, in the Peloponnesus, with Aphrodite's help abducted Helen and sailed away with her, and Helen of Argos became Helen of Troy. Soon Agamemnon and Menelaus had gathered an army and a fleet and set off in pursuit of the fugitives. Thus began the Trojan War, in which Hera and Pallas Athena sided with the Greeks, and Aphrodite and Ares with the Trojans, and which resulted in the utter destruction of Troy and the death or enslavement of her people. The real subject of the *Iliad*, however, is not the Trojan War but 'the wrath of Achilles', the son of Peleus and Thetis, who was the handsomest of the Greeks and their greatest warrior – the baneful wrath that 'imposed infinite sorrows on the Greeks and many brave souls loosed from breasts heroic', due to Achilles' quarrel with Agamemnon. But that is another story.

Not many years after I first 'heard Chapman speak out loud and bold' I paid my first visit to the British Museum and, in particular, to the galleries of Greek and Egyptian antiquities. Almost the first thing I noticed was that the gods of Greece and the gods of Ancient Egypt were represented in very different ways. With few exceptions, the former were represented in human form, whereas the latter were theriomorphic, having human bodies but the heads of animals, including reptiles and birds. There were male divinities with the head of a ram or a hawk and female divinities with the head of a hippopotamus or a cow. Whether because of the skill of the sculptor or for some other reason, these hybrid deities were artistically and spiritually credible, and I did not find it difficult to imagine them being objects of worship. I was especially fascinated by the figure of the lioness-headed goddess Sekhmet, the personification of the hot wind that blows in from the desert, bringing with it clouds of dust. There were several representations of her in the museum's collection, all hewn from black stone and all of full human size. The finest of these showed her seated, upright, as though on a chair. Dignified and composed she sat there, her hands on her knees, and her leonine face had what I thought was a grandmotherly look. By contrast, the gods in the adjacent Greek and Roman galleries were represented in human form, indeed in *idealised* human form. Hermes, the divine messenger and intermediary between gods and men, was represented as a beautiful young man, naked except for his winged sandals and winged hat, and carrying the caduceus, a rod round which two snakes were twined, one male and one female. The image of the divinely beautiful, slightly androgynous young man is not confined to Ancient Greece or to the figure of Hermes. In the Christian art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance angels are often represented as beautiful young men, albeit decently clad in flowing robes and equipped with a pair of multicoloured wings. In this connection it is noteworthy that when, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton describes the archangel Raphael, whom God has sent to warn Adam and Eve to be on their guard against Satan, who has just escaped from hell, he can think of no-one better with whom to compare the beautiful archangel than Hermes, the son of the mountain nymph Maia and Zeus.

Like Maia's son he stood,
And shook his plumes, that heavenly fragrance filled
The circuit wide.

In Christianity the angels have no feminine equivalent, though the Virgin Mary may be seen as an equivalent to some extent. She is invariably depicted fully clothed, so that her youthful beauty has to be expressed, even concentrated, entirely in her face. In the Buddhist art of the East the beautiful young man appears in the form of the Mahayana bodhisattva, the wise and compassionate being

who, in the popular imagination, gives up his own salvation in order to work for the salvation of others. He is depicted neither naked nor fully clothed but wearing the armlets and jewelled headdress of an Indian prince. There are also the devas and brahmas of pre-Mahayana Buddhist cosmology who when they appear to human beings do so in the form of a beautiful young man radiating brilliant light in all directions.

The story goes that Govinda, the learned brahmin, has heard that anyone who remains in solitude for the four months of the rainy season and cultivates the absorption in universal compassion, sees Brahma face to face and converses with him. Having so heard he decides to practise that discipline, and informs the king, his brahmin students and his wives accordingly, and has a new rest-house built to the east of the city. There he wholeheartedly cultivates the absorption in universal compassion for the four months of the rainy season, pervading each of the four quarters in turn with thoughts of compassion for suffering living beings. Despite all his efforts, however, at the end of the fourth month Govinda does not see Brahma, nor does he converse with him, and he experiences anguish and distress. Becoming aware of Govinda's thoughts, Brahma Sanatkumara, the Eternal Youth, vanishes from his own heaven and appears before Govinda in the form of a beautiful young man radiating brilliant light in all directions. Govinda is struck with fear and trembling at the sight, so that his hair stands on end, and he exclaims, 'Oh Glorious vision, tell me who you are'. To which the vision replies 'in the highest heaven I am known as Brahma Sanatkumara, the Eternal Youth. Know me as such.' Govinda asks his divine visitor what offerings he requires, and Sanatkumara replies that he takes the offerings as already given, and says that Govinda should ask him for whatever he desires, whether it pertains to this world or the next. After reflecting Govinda puts a question that will be not only for his own benefit but for the benefit of others. He wants to know what mortals have to do in order to reach the deathless world of Brahma. Sanatkumara's reply goes to the heart of the matter:

He among men, O Brahmin, who eschews
All claims of 'me' and 'mine'; he in whom thought
Rises in lonely calm, compassion-filled,
Aloof from 'stench', from lust exempt and free -
Established thus, and training thus, I say,
Can mortals reach the deathless Brahma world.

Govinda then says that he understands, in detail, what Sanatkumara has told him. The one thing he does not understand is what he means by 'stench'. Sanatkumara therefore goes on to explain what he meant, giving a long list of negative mental states, from anger and lying down to dullness and delusion, all of which prevent a man from reaching the world of Brahma. Govinda realises that these negative mental states are not to be overcome if one lives the household life and resolves to go forth as a homeless wanderer, a decision which Sanatkumara approves.

It seems that the story of the brahmin Govinda and the brahma Sanatkumara was a popular one among the Early Buddhists, and several versions of it have survived in various Buddhist scriptures. My own telling of the story is a free adaptation of the Mahagovinda Suttanta (*Digha-Nikaya* XIX), as translated by Rhys Davids and by Walshe, though in the case of the story's central event, the exchange between Govinda and Sanatkumara regarding the way to the deathless world of Brahma, I have produced a composite version of the work of the two translators. The fact that the

story of Govinda and Sanatkumara was popular with the Early Buddhists, and indeed came to be incorporated in a text regarded as *buddhavacana* or 'word of the Buddha' suggests that it is worthy of serious attention. To begin with, it would appear that the deathless brahma world (*amatambrahmalokam*) of which both Govinda and Sanatakumara speak is none other than the 'Deathless State' (*amatampatam*) of the *Dhammapada* and other Pali texts, the Deathless State being synonymous with Nirvana. Sanatkumara is thus a hypostasis of this deathless world or deathless state, as his name, the *Eternal Youth*, clearly suggests. Moreover, when Govinda asks Sanatkumara how a man may reach the immortal (or deathless) world he is using much the same language as the Buddha uses in the *Ariya Pariyesana Sutta* (*Majjhima-Nikaya* 26) when, speaking of his early struggles, prior to his attainment of Supreme Enlightenment, he relates how, having formerly sought that which was subject to birth and death he decided to seek what was *not* subject to birth and death. The brahmin Govinda is in fact Everyman. When he asks Sanatkumara how mortals can reach the immortal world of Brahma he is humanity becoming aware of its contingent nature and aspiring to go beyond all contingency. At the beginning of the story Govinda has political power, social position, and domestic happiness, but he wants to find out for himself if, as he has heard, one who practises the meditation on universal compassion for the four months of the rainy season really does, at the end of that period, see Brahma and converse with him. Govinda practises the discipline faithfully, but despite all his efforts Brahma does not appear and he is overwhelmed by anguish. Here two points are worthy of comment. Govinda practises the meditation on universal compassion, but not universal love. However, it is universal loving kindness (*metta*) itself that becomes universal compassion (*karuna*) when confronted by the suffering of living beings. Secondly, and more importantly, Sanatkumara appears to Govinda not because he has completed the discipline but in response to his anguish, for his anguish reveals how deep and how sincere was his longing to see Brahma and converse with him. An intense feeling of spiritual failure, or remorse for unethical behaviour, or of one's own utter contingency – all may serve to precipitate a spiritual experience, or even a liberating insight.

In my view the story of Govinda and Sanatkumara is an example of what may be called pre-Buddhist Buddhism. After his attainment of Supreme Enlightenment the Buddha had no alternative, at first, but to communicate his radical message through the medium of the existing religious language. He was obliged to put his new wine into the old bottles. Later he devised a religious and philosophical language of his own, and for a while the two 'languages', the old and the new, appear to have existed side by side within his community. Later still, however, when the Buddha's new wine was increasingly being stored in bottles of his own design, the old bottles came to be regarded as containing the old brahminical brew. Thus when the compilers of the *Majjhima-Nikaya* came to include the story of Govinda and Sanatkumara in their collection a sequel was added in which the Buddha is represented as declaring not only that he himself was Govinda in a former life, but that the path he had then taught, the path to union with Brahma, did *not* lead to Nirvana: it led only to rebirth in the brahma world, that is, to the brahma world in the sense of a heaven within the sphere of mundane existence. Here for 'former life' we must surely understand - reading between the lines - 'early stage in the Buddha's teaching career'. Elsewhere in the *Mahagovinda Suttanta* Sanatkumara assumes the form of a minor divinity called Panchasikha or Five-crest, and with this we pass from early Buddhism to the Mahayana, in which the 'archetypal' bodhisattva Manjughosha or Manjusri is depicted wearing on his head a wreath of five blue lotuses. Like Hermes, he appears in the form of a beautiful young man, radiating light, and indeed his full name is Manjusri-kumarabhuta, or Manjusri-

‘who became a youth’. Like Thoth, he is the patron of the arts and sciences and is associated with writing. One of my own precious teachers, the incomparable ‘Jamyang’ Khyentse Wangpo, was widely revered as a manifestation of Manjughosha, and it was from him that I received initiation into the *sadhana* of Manjughosha, whom I have come to regard as a hypostasis of the Buddha’s transcendental wisdom.

V

‘How big is God?’ This was a question that perplexed me when I was a child and I thought about it from time to time. I had probably been told about the greatness of God at Sunday school, and thinking that ‘great’ meant ‘big’ I tried hard to imagine how big he was. From the way this greatness was described I concluded that God was not only very big but that he possessed, moreover, a giant human form. I therefore tried to imagine an enormously big foot, no doubt thinking that with this as a starting point I could work my way up to an idea of just how big God really was. The foot I imagined was a hundred miles long from heel to toe, and in my mind’s eye I saw it stretching from where I stood into the far distance. To visualize a foot of such enormous dimensions was difficult enough, but when I tried to visualize the leg to which that foot belonged I failed entirely. I could not get even as far as God’s ankle. Most human beings tend to identify great with big, so that it is not surprising that as a child I should have tried to work out how big was God. This very natural tendency finds expression in the field of the visual arts. In Michelangelo’s ‘Last Judgement’ his Hercules-like Christ is of superhuman dimensions, while colossal images of the Buddha are to be found throughout the East. I think in particular of the twin Standing Buddhas of Bamiyan in central Afghanistan, both of which were carved out of the side of the cliff in the Sixth Century CE. One was 180 feet high, the other 121 feet. For fifteen-hundred years they looked out over the fields of the peaceful Bamiyan Valley. They looked out over them until March 2001, when on the orders of Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban leader, they were blown up with dynamite, the government having declared the two Buddhas to be ‘idols’.

The destruction of the Buddhas was widely condemned, though it should not have come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the history of Islam. It was no coincidence that the second name of the mullah who ordered the destruction should be Omar, that being also the name of the Muslim general who was responsible for the burning of the great Library of Alexandria, with its 700,000 volumes, in 640 CE. There were commentators who characterized the Taliban’s action as pure vandalism, or vandalism for the sake of vandalism. But I do not think it was that. There are in fact two kinds of vandalism: pure vandalism, such as the wanton vandalism of boys defacing a poster or Napoleon’s soldiers using the Sphinx for target practice, and what may be termed *principled vandalism*, or vandalism which is the practical corollary of a philosophical or theological principle. The Taliban’s vandalism was of the second kind. They demolished the Twin Buddhas because they saw them as idols and because they hated idolatry as the greatest of sins. When I first heard that the Bamiyan Buddhas had been reduced to a heap of rubble I felt shocked and dismayed, both as a Buddhist and as a lover of art. At the same time, I reminded myself that images, and the worship of

images (if indeed it is the image itself that is being worshipped), had not always been part of Buddhism. Was it not well known that for at least two centuries after his parinirvana the Buddha's presence was indicated by such symbols as a tree, a wheel, and a pair of footprints? Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine a Buddhism that is without images, and therefore without image-worship, and even without religious art of any kind, and a Buddhism of this stripped down kind may well exist somewhere in the Buddhist world. What I, for one, cannot imagine is a Buddhism that did not include among its spiritual practices puja or worship, in the sense of the inward and outward expression of a heartfelt devotion to the Buddha, whether as represented by a material image, a painting, or a mental image. I also reminded myself that what I have called principled vandalism was by no means unknown in England and other countries to which the Reformation had spread. In the 17th Century, under Oliver Cromwell, English Puritans destroyed an enormous amount of religious art on the grounds that statues and paintings of Christ and the saints were idols and that their worship constituted idolatry. Even today there are Protestants for whom the Roman Catholic Church, which continues to worship what Milton in a celebrated sonnet derisively calls 'stocks and stones', is idolatrous and hence not truly Christian. The Eastern Orthodox Church, after a good deal of internal conflict, decided to allow the worship of two-dimensional paintings (commonly known as 'icons') but not that of their three-dimensional counterparts.

Principled vandalism is fuelled by hate, an emotion which in Buddhism is regarded as a highly unskilful mental state. When its object is a material image it may be termed iconophobia. Iconophobia had its origins in Ancient Judaism, from which it passed to some forms of Christianity and to Islam. It appears in conjunction with monotheism, but seems to be unknown to polytheism and pantheism. Perhaps the most characteristic feature of iconophobia is its conviction of its own absolute rightness, a conviction that enables it to override all other considerations. The Taliban soldiers who dynamited the Twin Buddhas of Bamiyan did not care that they were hurting the religious feelings of millions of Buddhists throughout the world. They may even have been glad to hurt them, for in their eyes were not the Buddhists idolators and therefore deserving of punishment and even death? Neither did the Taliban soldiers care that in demolishing the Buddhas they were destroying *works of art*, or, at the very least, works of archaeological importance that were part of the cultural heritage of the people of Afghanistan and of mankind. For the Taliban, the need to destroy idols trumped all other values. Principled vandalism also has its more secular forms. Besides being responsible for a great deal of human suffering, Communist China's 'Cultural Revolution' of 1966-1969 saw the wholesale destruction of works of art of every kind. Acts of principled vandalism may be committed not only by governments but also by individuals, whether as a form of political protest or as a means of drawing attention to a personal grievance. I remember Leonardo da Vinci's drawing of the Virgin Mary and St Anne, in the National Gallery, being slashed with a knife or razor for this kind of reason (the gash was invisibly mended, and the drawing is now behind glass), while a few years later a student set fire to the Chinese Room at the Brighton Pavilion, destroying the ornate, gilded interior almost entirely. The cost of restoration ran to tens of thousands of pounds, but so far as I remember the culprit was not even fined. In my view such principled – or rather unprincipled – vandalism should be treated as a crime, and punished regardless of the merits of the cause for whose sake it was committed. I am aware, however, that it would be difficult to arrive at a legally satisfactory definition of vandalism, and still more difficult to decide how an object the destruction of which constitutes vandalism is to be defined. Were the two visitors to Tate Britain who jumped up and down on Tracey Emin's 'Unmade Bed', thus disturbing its carefully arranged

disarray, guilty of vandalism? Or was Lady Churchill guilty of it when, after her husband's death, she destroyed a portrait of the former prime minister by Graham Sutherland that others thought a masterpiece, but which she detested?

In his *Novum Organon* Francis Bacon speaks of the idols of the tribe, the idols of the cave, the idols of the market place, and the idols of the theatre, which represent the false ideas that prevail in the four principal areas of human life and activity. Thus the word 'idol' can not only be used literally, as referring to figures of wood, stone, or metal considered to be objects of worship; it can also be used metaphorically, as when it refers to ideas, as in the *Novum Organon*, or to a book, a nation, or a person. But where there are idols there will be iconoclasts, or breakers of idols, regardless of whether the idols in question be of the literal or the metaphorical variety. And behind the iconoclasm fuelling it, there will be at least a degree of iconophobia. This means that iconoclasm is of various kinds according to the nature of the object against which it happens to be directed. In apophatic theology or mysticism, for example, whatever concept that can possibly be predicated of God, the Absolute, or Ultimate Reality, however abstract or rarefied it may be, is rejected as inadequate. Similarly, in the *animitta* or 'signless' *samadhi*, which is achieved through deep contemplative insight into the transitoriness of conditioned existence, the Buddhist meditator realizes that the Unconditioned is altogether beyond words. This 'apophetic' trend within Buddhist thought and spiritual practice finds its fullest expression in the Prajnaparamita or 'Perfection of Wisdom' scriptures, the best known of which is the Heart Sutra, in which the most cherished doctrinal categories of Buddhism, from the five *skandhas* or 'heaps' to Nirvana, are one by one negated. The Heart Sutra might therefore be described as the manifesto of transcendental iconoclasm. As Buddhaghosa observed long ago, "As on the unwholesome plane hatred does not cling, does not stick to its object, so wisdom on the wholesome plane. As hate seeks for faults, even though they do not exist, so wisdom seeks for the faults that do exist. As hate leads to the rejection of beings, so wisdom to that of all conditioned things". The radically iconoclastic nature of wisdom is symbolised in the Vajrayana by the figure of the wrathful Vajrapani. Dark blue in colour, and surrounded by flames, he holds in his right hand the vajra with which he annihilates all mental constructions. Perhaps Nietzsche's 'philosophizing with a hammer' may be seen as a distant reflection of Vajrapani's vajra.

But let me return to the Twin Buddhas of Bamiyan. Many years ago I saw, in a book or magazine, a photograph of them as they loomed up out of their cliff, the pleats of their robes accentuating their extreme verticality. At their foot was a scattering of black dots that I took to be human beings but so tiny that I was unable to tell whether they were local people, or travellers, or Buddhist pilgrims. Whatever they were, they were utterly dwarfed by the figures of the two Buddhas. Had they been pilgrims, they would have had an overwhelming sense of the spiritual greatness of Vairochana and Shakyamuni (as the two Buddhas are said to have been called); for although bigness and greatness are not synonymous, it is certainly possible for the former to suggest, or symbolise, or shadow forth the latter, so that I was not entirely on the wrong track when, as a child, I tried to ascertain how big was God. I was not on the wrong track because I had, even at that age, an obscure sense of something not merely greater than me but immeasurably *higher* in the scale of existence. This sense has always been strong in me, and as I grew up it became increasingly focused on the person of the human, historical Shakyamuni, the Buddha or Enlightened One. Between the Buddha and the ordinary, unenlightened human being there is an immense gulf. The Buddha attained Nirvana, a state utterly free from greed, hatred and delusion. The ordinary, unenlightened

human being is dominated by these three 'poisons', which in depictions of the Wheel of Life are represented by a cock, a snake, and a pig. This is not to say that human beings are not potentially enlightened, or that they may not from time to time give evidence of generosity, compassion, and wisdom, but the path to the actualisation of that potential has to pass through many steps and stages. Scratching the surface of one's being with a little meditation will not be sufficient to reveal the Buddha within. If one thinks one is near Enlightenment, one is far from it; and if one thinks one is far from it, one is near.

I began writing these pages around the tenth anniversary of Nine-Eleven, the day when hijacked passenger aircraft were deliberately flown into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York and into one wing of the Pentagon, the US government's military complex in Washington DC. I do not remember precisely where I was when I first heard of the attack, or what I was doing at the time, but I must have been in my study and have heard about it on the radio not long after it took place. Being partially sighted I neither saw what had happened on television or read about it in the newspapers; but so graphic were the radio reports of the atrocity that I could see it all in my mind's eye. I could see the twin towers, see the hijacked aircraft approaching their target, see one of the towers blazing, see scores of people jumping, some of them hand in hand, to their deaths hundreds of feet below. The picture of all those bodies falling through space, as in a Magritte painting, haunts me still. Some years after the attack I wrote a poem on Nine-Eleven. More than three thousand people had lost their lives on that fateful day; but I did not write about this, for it was a subject beyond poetry – beyond any poetry that I could write, at least.

Proudly they stood, those towers, a monument
 To money, and the power that money brings.
 But hate was stronger. Now they lie in dust,
 And impotent hands a mighty nation wrings.

On second thoughts, I decided that the inversion in the last line was clumsy, and therefore changed the line to 'And a mighty nation wrings its impotent hands', albeit at the cost of two hypermetric syllables. Thus from being a rhymed quatrain the poem became four lines of blank verse. But if the terrorists were motivated by hatred, those who had built the World Trade Centre were surely motivated by greed and worshipped what Francis Bacon called the 'idols of the market place'. These idols are of two kinds, the first of them being words which are names of things that do not exist. Some years ago I had a long discussion with a friend who had co-authored a book on money, and the conclusion to which we came was that there was no such thing as money: money did not exist. At the same time, although money does not really exist those who possess or control this non-existing thing have tremendous power, as we have been reminded by the economic events of the last few years. However, this is not a suitable topic for a reverie or reminiscence, at least not at present.

