Putting Words in the Buddha's Mouth: An Analysis of Judith Beveridge's 'Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree'.[1]

Mike Heald

1. From Victor to Vanquished

Siddhattha Gotama, the Indian sage who later became known as the Buddha, would be a recognised figure to most, along with some of what he stands for: compassion, and meditation, for example. However, the precise discoveries he made in the field of meditation, which led to his teaching career, and subsequent fame and often deification, are relatively little known. In some ways this is not remarkable. Most people would know who Einstein was, yet have only a vague idea of what he discovered, and little understanding of his theories. The situation is further complicated, of course, by the fact that no written record of what Siddhattha said or did was made until after his death. Add to that translation after translation, and the problem of describing accurately what the Buddha taught is apparent.

Recent work in the fields of cognitive and neuro-science is suggesting that the modes of consciousness attained in meditation practice are different in kind from other modes.[2] This lends substance to the view that a narrative, such as that of Siddhattha's life, which arises from such practice, may be quite distinct from narratives stemming

from other modes of knowing: the representation of the nature of his journey may vary considerably, depending on the specific way it is being apprehended. The proliferation of meditative techniques in the contemporary scene will also lead to differing versions, and the intersection of these techniques with cultural and artistic values and practices will in turn produce further variation. Past poetic versions of the Siddhattha story and of buddhistic experience have included, for example, Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* (1879), a work which is heavily inflected by Protestantism, in which Siddhattha's own radical rejection of the Brahminical dogmas of his day is transposed so that he may be seen as representing Protestantism's struggles against Catholic orthodoxy. During the nineteen fifties, the 'Beat' poets voiced a version of buddhistic experience very much entangled with post-war American political and social protest.

In this essay, I am proposing that, while Beveridge's poems do show an engagement on some levels with both buddhistic values and practice, her version of Siddhattha's story is most strongly the product of a way of knowing usually termed imaginative. Beveridge describes 'Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree', in her collection *Wolf Notes*, as 'an imaginative depiction of the time Siddhattha spent wandering in the forests and towns before achieving enlightenment.'[3] My argument is that this imaginative approach, strongly bound up with the senses and emotions, is actually one which is quite distinct in some ways from the meditative, and leads to a representation of Siddhattha's story which contrasts quite markedly, in some respects, with one emanating from the meditative tradition. I argue that the imagination produces a conception of transcendence very different from that found in the meditative tradition. It produces what I call a utopian vision, which has unrealisability built into it, as it were. This means that Siddhattha's pursuit, in 'Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree' of transcendence, so conceived, fundamentally alters the tenor of his journey, the tone of his story, and his import as a character.

The story, or myth, if you like, of Siddhattha, is that of a quest to find a way to emerge from the seemingly irremediable suffering of human

Limestone relief carving from the Great Stupa at Amaravati Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh, India. Side 1: Throne under the Bodhi Tree (1st century BCE) (AN00030472) Side 2: Great Stupa at Amaravati (3rd century CE) (AN00030473) (Courtesy British Museum.)

life, to *transcend*, and Siddhattha is traditionally the triumphant figure who rediscovers[4] a means of doing this, thus becoming known as a *buddha*, or fully awakened being. In Beveridge's depiction of Siddhattha's story, however, I am arguing that she has produced a radical variant, in that Siddhattha, rather than figuring as the triumphant embodiment of the reality of transcendence, becomes the embodiment of its elusiveness and implausibility. Thus her Siddhattha frequently voices exclamations of longing tinged with hopelessness: 'O, I don't know / if I'll ever wake, changed, transformed,' ('In the Forest', 96); '*O my Yasodhara!* Then do / I know how emptiness makes / a grove an unquiet place.' ('The Grove', 54). And he yearns, for example, to 'lift on viridescent wings' ('In the Forest', 96), for insight to 'faultlessly deliver some absolutes' ('Benares', 91), and for a reflexive, visceral belonging, 'a home I could call to with / the quick

of my mouth…' ('Monkey', 62). This version, I am arguing, can be read as creating a radically different perspective on the limits and possibilities of human consciousness from that evident in versions based in the meditative tradition. It also, in certain respects, recasts Siddhattha in Beveridge's own image as lyric poet.

My method, then, is comparative, but what I am using as the basis for comparison is not one specific text. I will refer mainly to 'traditional' versions of Siddhattha's story, or versions arising from 'the meditative tradition'. My grounds for using a general reference like this are that the two major departures Beveridge makes which I focus upon, related to the form of transcendence, and the successful / non-successful tenor of Siddhattha's journey, are both departures from general features which traditional versions, despite their many more subtle differences, have in common. My generalisation, then, has this specific functionality, and does not incur any compromise of the various traditions' individual differences on other levels. In general, my textual sources are those which draw upon the Pali Canon, or *Tipitaka*, the large collection of documents relating to the Buddha's life and teaching written in the Pali language, which are the oldest records of that time. Nanamoli's *The Life of the Buddha*[5] has been my main textual reference.

I would say, also, that I am not claiming that Beveridge is not aware of, or does not understand, the difference I am seeking to describe here between imaginative and meditative ways of knowing. My claim is a literary-critical one: that the text she has produced displays this difference. Furthermore, I do not approach this analysis with the attitude that the kind of buddhistic tradition I am using for my perspective leads to a dismissal or devaluing of other bodies or modes of experience. Rather, it is *difference* I am concerned to describe and preserve. This certainly does not mean that the particular contribution and quality of the work examined is not valuable in its way. I am arguing only that its contributions are *different* from other alternatives. In this particular case, it is my view that Beveridge's poems contain numerous excellent images of the natural world, moments of subtle

psychological understanding, and comprise overall a very interesting sequence. I do note that Ann Vickery made the comment about the poems I am examining here that 'their Romantic presumptuousness left me rather cold.'[6] I also examine the role of Beveridge's aesthetic lineage and orientation, but my aim is analytical and comparative, rather than that of forming an aesthetic judgement (though the latter is of course also a legitimate procedure).

2. Two Kinds of Transcendence, and Siddhattha's Changed Journey

The kind of transcendence we have in Beveridge's poems I will call utopian: the world is appraised with the senses, emotions, and intellect, and then a state is imagined in which all of the imperfections which these faculties perceive have been rectified. In this way, an end to unsatisfactoriness and suffering is imagined. It is a state, then, in which there is the peace which the emotional state presently lacks, the absolute meaning and coherence which the intellect presently cannot find, the sustained comfort and pleasure which the senses lack, the all-pervasive goodness which the moral faculty aspires to, and the perfectly efficacious art which the aesthetic faculty is in search of. Transcendence in the meditative practice tradition, on the other hand, while similarly a state without suffering (if one takes 'transcendence' to refer to the final state of complete liberation, known as *nibbana*: transcendence may also refer, however, to an ongoing process through practice) is achieved by an examination of how the perception of and reaction to imperfections, or unsatisfactoriness, arises and causes suffering in the first place. This examination is undertaken via the practice, which develops the specialised form of meditative concentration known as *samadhi*, whereby the mind is trained to remain focused on its habitual processes, which feed into our responses, in a sustained and non-judgemental, or non-reactive way.[7] Such concentration is then held, by the practice tradition, to progressively facilitate interventions in habitual reaction, and

also to reveal, somewhat like the steady focus of a microscope, the impermanence, or substancelessness, of all physical and mental phenomena. This latter realisation of impermanence, known as *anicca*, in turn leads to a realisation of selflessness, known as *anatta*, which in its turn leads to the gradual, or sometimes sudden, re-perception of suffering, the experience being that there are no solid entities to be desired or averted from, nor any solid self to desire or be averted from them, which is the usual process generating suffering.[8]

In short, then, meditative transcendence is not defined, even inversely, via conventional perceptions or faculties, but by the different faculty of *samadhi*. Nor is it postulated in the abstract and desired from a distance, but rather worked progressively towards through practice and the personal physico-mental experience which that yields. These are two very different forms of transcendence, and are clearly going to have a significant bearing on how Siddhattha's story is represented.

There have been many formulations, of course, of exactly what the imagination is and is capable of. Here, as with the neurophysiology of meditative states, science is making some efforts to redress the lack which Francis Bacon perceived when he said that he found 'not any science that doth properly or fitly pertain to the imagination.'[9] It would appear that Beveridge has accepted, at least to some degree, William Hazlitt's high estimation that it can enable one to 'foreknow and to record the feelings of all men at all times and places'.[10] The issues involved in defining imaginative mental activity, as against meditative, are of course highly complex. Perhaps, however, it is possible to succinctly indicate in what way differences might arise between an approach like that of Beveridge's imaginative one, and that of the meditative tradition.

In an interview in the *Encounter* series on Radio National, Beveridge says that poetry 'brings us back to the fundamentals of consciousness. That is, back to our creativity. It seems to me that our human nature is such that creativity lies at the heart of what we are about. We are programmed for creative self-discovery through a

dialogue with our environment.'[11] Beveridge then identifies imagery as a tool enabling this self-discovery, and goes on to speak of how she feels that metaphor allows her, in a poem, 'to make the active perceiving central rather than have the perceiver as the motivating influence, which is a position or a central position, to a lot of Buddhist notions where the eye slips away and what is foregrounded is the Web of Connections, where the qualities of one thing are dependent on those of another.[12] Having thus established a connection between her technical aesthetic practice and Buddhist 'notions', Beveridge then goes on to describe, using terminology associated with Buddhism, her hope to 'attain a particular type of awareness, penetrating, focused, yet also permeable and open.'[13] And a little further on she states that writing 'for me is a relinquishing to the unknown, to the unpredictable, to uncertainty, and paradoxically, *concentration or absorption* does seem to appear at the moment that deliberate effort vanishes. There's great joy in *falling into* the object of one's attention, in vanishing into awareness itself [my italics].'[14] Beveridge then reads the poem 'The Kite', from 'Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree', in part to illustrate her point.

In order, then, to give a brief indication of how the meditative tradition's approach may diverge from Beveridge's articulation of the processes of self-discovery and awareness, and to raise the possibility that she may not, in fact, be talking about the same kind of experience which that tradition is referring to, I will briefly point out some specific distinctions which the tradition makes on the subject of awareness. Firstly, the phenomenon of 'absorption' has a specific place in the meditative tradition: a distinction is drawn between meditative states which are the result of feats of absorption, or 'vanishing into' the object, usually known as *samatha* (calm abiding) and those in which the mind retains a kind of lucid perspective, realising the conditioned nature of the meditative state itself, usually known as *vipassana* (insight). Where Beveridge is endorsing the former, for the tradition, one of Siddhattha's most distinctive meditative achievements, along with the rejection of extreme asceticism, is the

realisation that absorptive states alone *do not* lead to the desired goal of enlightenment. For the tradition, Siddhattha's unique contribution was the development of a meditative state which is not merely a form of intense awareness, (*sati*), or absorption, but rather is characterised by the maintenance of what is called 'constant thorough awareness of impermanence' or *sampajanna*, along with a firm moral basis. This latter kind of meditation is traditionally seen as the breakthrough which Siddhattha made, which allowed him to finally get to the roots of suffering. This *vipassana*, or 'insight' meditation, is seen as providing the 'wisdom' component (*panna*), missing from merely absorptive states, which allows the final liberation from suffering. Thus, buddhistic awareness is specifically *not* a 'falling into the object', as Beveridge describes, but rather the observation of the object with a very specific and firmly self-aware orientation.[15]

The poem which Beveridge reads in the interview, 'The Kite' (82–3), is presented as an instance of buddhistic awareness:

The Kite

Today I watched a boy fly his kite.
It didn't crackle in the wind—but
gave out a barely perceptible hum.

At a certain height, I'd swear I heard
it sing. He could make it climb in
any wind, could crank those angles up,

make it veer with the precision of
an insect targeting a sting; then he'd
let it royal in rapturous finesse, a tiny

bird in mid-air courtship.When
lightning cracked across the cliff—
(like quick pale flicks of yak hair

fly whisks)—he stayed steady. For
so long he kept his arms up, as if
he knew he'd hoist that kite enough.

I asked if it was made of special silk,
if he used some particular string—
and what he heard while holding it.

He looked at me from a distance,
then asked about my alms bowl,
my robes, and about that for which

a monk lives. It was then I saw
I could tell him nothing in the cohort
wind, that didn't sound illusory.

The boy's absorption, or concentration—his seeming oneness with his activity—is presented as a kind of exemplar of buddhistic consciousness. Yet it could only be taken to illustrate, if rather approximately, the absorptive state I have described above. The comparison is often given, to illustrate this point, that a murderer may be utterly concentrated and absorbed in his task, yet be in a state of the worst ignorance and moral depravity, and quite oblivious to connectedness of any sort. It is also significant that 'The Kite' ends with Siddhattha daunted, and as regarding his own transcendental project, 'that for which / a monk lives…', which presumably includes his knowledge of awareness, as insubstantial, to the point where, if he tried to voice it, it would 'sound illusory'. Beveridge's own conception of sensory, physical absorption, here, as the way to transcendence, is seen as proving itself more real and compelling than a monk's implicitly less engaged activities.

In raising these two comparisons, then, between what Beveridge on the one hand, and the tradition on the other, present as buddhistic consciousness, whilst I have not provided a great deal of detail, I have aimed to at least give a sense of the specificity of the experience which

the tradition is dealing with. In doing so, it may perhaps become more apparent how certain distinctions become extremely important. I hope also to show, of course, that Beveridge's own conception of imagination and creativity, and how this is linked to buddhistic consciousness, does result in a particular narrative dynamic for Siddhattha's journey. My main point here is that Beveridge's adherence to absorptive states, and her reliance on often sensory-based imaginative procedures, means that although Sidhhattha makes some specific kinds of forays towards his reconceived goal, overall we see him in stasis, rather than progressing.

In terms of the actual content of the narrative, first of all, many key events, found in traditional versions of Siddhattha's journey, such as his change of clothing, cutting of his hair, visiting other teachers, rejecting asceticism, his first normal meal, and confrontation with the disillusioned followers, do not appear in Beveridge's sequence. This creates the impression, I would argue, of a demurring from participation in a celebratory spirit of *progress* of the story, and, by implication, of a withholding of acknowledging the credibility of such progress. These omissions also tend to mean that the sense of momentum, of Siddhattha passing symbolic markers on his way towards full enlightenment, is not present. Based on a reading of these poems, the title, 'Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree', I would argue, could well be taken to indicate not a transitional zone at all, but rather to define the state in which the poems regard us as always *inescapably* existing. This has been recognised, I think, in Jennifer Strauss's comment that Beveridge has 'a fine ear for the internal contradictions of human desire—for the way we are pulled between palace and bodhi tree, flesh and spirit, earth and sky',[16] invoking those dualisms, (flesh / spirit, earth / sky) and the predicament they incur, characteristic of utopianism.

Siddhattha's stasis also results from his portrayal by Beveridge as, if not quite an 'ordinary guy', then very much closer to that than the meditative tradition would suggest. Beveridge's Siddhattha is clearly distinguished, in the sequence, by a very refined sensibility. Yet he

is also wracked by doubt, nostalgia, longing, and guilt. Although we cannot, of course, verify exactly what Siddhattha did experience at that time, nevertheless a contrast arises when one considers the meditative tradition's view. In that tradition, Siddhattha at that stage was a *Bodhisatta*, a person who is able to take the final step to full enlightenment, and whose mind is therefore at a highly extraordinary level of development.[17] Again, one cannot make the pronouncement that Siddhattha would not have experienced the emotions attributed to him by Beveridge at all. However, my point is that, to the meditative tradition, Siddhattha's journey would both be characterised by the specialised activity of meditation, subsequent *unusual* responses to experience, and also by identifiable progressive stages of development as his practice changed and proceeded. He is said, for example, as a small child to have sat down under a tree and spontaneously attained the meditative state known as the first *jhana*, a state of deep absorptive concentration. And according to the tradition, soon after he left his home, and therefore early in the period Beveridge's poems deal with, he visited several renowned teachers, quickly attained the most advanced meditative states which they taught, and yet struck out on his own again, convinced that their techniques did not remove suffering at its very roots in the psyche. The first teacher visited was Alara Kalama, and his meditative attainment is described as the jhanic realm of 'Nothingness'.[18] The second was Udaka Ramaputta, whose attainment is described as the state of 'neither perception nor non-perception'.[19] If one considers, then, as the traditional story relates, that Siddhattha, well before taking his ultimate seat under the bodhi tree where *nibbana* is said to have been achieved, easily mastered such rarefied meditative states as those of these teachers, one gets an idea of how unusual his mental processes are traditionally regarded as being during the transitional period between palace and bodhi tree. One may also see how, for the tradition, the development of meditative technique and the specialised experience it yields really *is* the story, and that when this experience is by and large excluded, the story looks very different indeed.

In Beveridge's version, then, we tend not to get a sense of someone located in an unusual psychological terrain, and of having specific means to gain purchase on and traverse such terrain, and therefore of being poised on the brink of an extraordinary discovery. One effect of this, I would argue, is to make the kind of radical change implied by transcendence seem highly improbable. Siddhattha seems *becalmed*, rather than developing any specialised kind of calm that may allow transcendent insight—a kind of renunciate without a cause, as suggested by his comment in the poem 'At Urevala (1)' (80): 'I keep to myself and idle away / the time…' This immobility is a symptom of utopian transcendence, in that one is caused to pursue intrinsically unreachable opposites to present reality. To the meditative tradition, on the other hand, Siddhattha's task during the time period Beveridge deals with is seen as highly specialised, in keeping with his special status and capacities, and also extremely arduous, rather than allowing for idleness. He is regarded as fine-tuning his meditation, already of a virtually unparalleled efficacy, by realising that the techniques he had used thus far had left the very roots of suffering in place, dormant, and therefore persevering to discover and extract those.

In Beveridge's version, Siddathha is not well underway like this, but rather is placed far behind the meditative tradition's starting line, a situation that is further exacerbated when he seems to retain a fascination with self-imposed suffering, for example in the poem 'At Urevala (2)', (80):

> Yama, disfigure me. Blemish me with thorns.
> Give me a cough as sharp as a leper's clapper.
> I will eat only dust swept up…

Beveridge here, and in a number of other poems, articulates the extreme ascetic drive, which does play a role in Sidhattha's efforts in traditional versions, but only a *preliminary* one, as a dead end. Yet the momentous turn *away* from extreme asceticism, and consequent

opening of a clear way in which to progress, so vital to the meditative tradition, does not receive conspicuous mention. The significance of such a modification of emphasis in the story is very difficult to overestimate, since the rejection of self-imposed suffering in favour of a more moderate 'middle way' is traditionally one of Siddhattha's most spectacular and definitive technical discoveries. The key decision to take a meal, rather than persist with severe abstinence from food, is narrated in the traditional versions, followed by the negative reaction of Siddhattha's followers, which provides a crucial turning point in his journey: 'As soon as I ate the solid food, the boiled rice and bread, the five bikkhus were disgusted and left me, thinking: 'The monk Gotama has become self-indulgent, he has given up the struggle and reverted to luxury.'[20] These episodes are excluded from Beveridge's narrative. It would seem that just as Beveridge's Siddhattha appears closer to ordinary in terms of his emotions, as I described earlier, so here he remains conditioned by conventional psychological dynamics—in this case the dialectic of the drive towards pleasure, yet fascination with its opposite, suffering—rather than the *un*conventional psychological dynamics of meditation practice, where the experience of suffering is progressively modified.

Finally, of course, the truncating of the story to omit the triumphant ending, the attainment of final liberation, or *nibbana*, and presentation of what remains as a complete literary structure, has significant consequences for narrative impetus. The climax of Siddhattha's struggle for transcendence is traditionally encapsulated in the 'house-builder' verses:

> House builder, you have now been seen;
> You shall not build the house again.
> Your rafters have been broken down;
> Your ridge pole is demolished too.[21]

Stopping the narrative before transcendence is a natural gesture of humility on Beveridge's part: an acknowledgement of the inaccessibility

to her, and ineffability generally, of 'enlightened' experience. Yet at the same time, a strongly operative effect, I would argue, is that of casting great doubt on the possibility of transcendence, by placing it in permanent parenthesis, or even sealing its fate as untrue 'myth'. Certainly, Siddhattha's quest is de-coupled from the engine traditionally drawing it onwards, and the ending Beveridge has chosen tends to strand Siddhattha permanently in his sufferings and uncertainty, as if that situation were these poems' conclusion about the human condition.

One of the changed directions in which Beveridge takes Siddhattha in his pursuit of transcendence is that taken by the lyric poet, so that he voices his progress, in the poem 'Path' (100), in terms of being increasingly able to 'give each feeling the subtlest form', the implication being that it is by the increasingly subtle formulation of given feelings that the human spirit is developed, in contrast to the practice tradition's analysis of how givenness itself occurs. An image from 'New Season' (57) illustrates these values, as Siddhattha, wracked by memories of his wife, remarks 'I can almost hear you wiping away your tears / with your sari hem'. This lyrical absorption in sense-experience intensifies to the pitch of shamanism at times, launching Siddhattha on another alternative route out of the ordinary, yielding avatars in the form of horses, for example in 'Horse' (63), and here in 'Dark Night' (68):

…Even its eye

was loosening mine with sand.
And when I touched its landscape
of wild waters, I felt

hooves of a thundering godhead
and lightning whips of warlords
ravage my deltas…

This *merging into* the animal world contrasts with the increasing *distinctness* within (though not *from*) the world of nature which buddhistic practice is held to develop, in its cultivation of uniquely human qualities of consciousness. Beveridge says in the *Encounter* interview that 'the predominant theme that emerges' in 'Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree' is 'the importance of finding a connection with the natural world'.[22] She goes on to say that 'that's certainly one of those fundamental tenets of Buddhism, a vision that our place is within an overarching system of relationships, that life is simply a flowing interactive exchange, between a myriad number of life forms.'[23] Clearly, these are complex ontological and epistemological issues, which Beveridge's term 'simply' rather understates. My point here is that the kind of connection humans have with the natural world, and how this connection may be perceived, are highly specific matters in meditative practice, and that this specificity is not accommodated by either the kind of general formulation of interconnectedness which Beveridge gives in the interview, or by the responses to the natural world which the poems articulate. A reference which could serve to indicate how far the meditative tradition is, in its aims and experience, from a kind of absorption into nature, is this catalogue of what Siddhattha aspires to attain, as he sets out from home on the meditator's path:

> Then I thought: 'Why, being my self subject to birth, ageing, ailment, death, sorrow and defilement, do I seek after what is also subject to these things? Suppose, being myself subject to these things, seeing danger in them, I sought after the unborn, unageing, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, undelfiled supreme surcease of bondage, Nibbana?'[24]

Siddhattha is here resolving to *disassociate* himself from what could be considered the natural world's natural tendencies and characteristics. An image emblematic of Beveridge's contrasting move here is one where Siddhattha is literally enveloped by animals, when

he is covered in bees: 'A long robe of bees flows about me' ('Tree', 67), which can also be read, if one were to assume that the bees are seen as more or less yellow, as an ironic subversion of the distinctness symbolised by the yellow robes of buddhistic practitioners.

The association of lyric poetry with shamanism is of course well-established. The view that Beveridge's portrayal of Siddhattha is in some respects a poetic self-portrait, and that in this sequence she is dramatising specific preoccupations that have long been central to her work, is lent substance by a look back at her earlier poem 'Girl Swinging', for example, from her first book *The Domesticity of Giraffes*.[25] This poem contains many of the key characteristics of the transcendental drive in the form in which we see it exhibited by her Siddhattha. The terms in which this earlier poem envisages transcendence, and indeed its very movement, is strikingly similar, for example, to 'Quarry' (52) from 'Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree': in the former we have 'Quietly, I wait, / listening to myself', and in the latter 'For a long time I looked into myself'; then in 'Girl Swinging', 'when, suddenly innocent of misery— / that feeling comes / of being lifted into the air', and in 'Quarry', 'Then I let go of all thought— / and I felt like a bird / floating in the clear, excavated air'.

The transcendent process is figured and developed, in 'Girl Swinging', in the recognisably symbolist terms of music, as being a kind of absorption into pure aesthetic form— 'I long to be a symphony / levitated by grace-notes'— a figure also prominent in 'Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree', as in this example from 'The Krait' (58): '…I thought the world should / be in harmony with my every act.', or this, from 'Grass' (86–7):

> …wishing
> I too could find precision among
>
> unweighable songs; here where
> the river curves, here where the moon

dies, here where the wind eddies—
and here where the men poise—

then scythe their absolute measures.

Martin Duwell has, persuasively I think, spoken of the 'Rilkean strand' in Beveridge's poetic sensibility.[26] In their aspirations towards what Charles Chadwick defines, in recognizably utopian terms, as 'a perfect supernatural world'[27] both the symbolists' lives and poetic careers are often represented as object lessons in the misguidedness of pursuing transcendence. Chadwick's comment that Valery 'returned to reality and…recognized that the mind cannot remain turned in on itself'[28] is characteristic, as is, to bring matters closer to Beveridge's poetic home, Adrian Caesar's on Kenneth Slessor: 'Slessor's great articulation of failure in 'Five Bells' might then become for us a means to understanding the necessity to forge a poetry and poetics that do not depend upon transcendentalism…'[29] And with regard to Rilke himself, Robert Hass echoes these judgments when he says of the later poems that it 'is wonderful to be able to watch *the world* come flooding in on this poet, who had *held it off* for so long. [my italics]'[30] It is a plausible reading then, that in the poems in 'Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree', Beveridge's poetic lineage has contributed to transforming Siddhattha from an embodiment of the reality of transcendence, to the avatar of a 'frustration' she may feel at its inaccessibility, a frustration Martin Duwell remarks upon thus, in the context of transcendence, symbolism and musicality:

> Carefully placed at the poem's ['The Herons'] centre is a single bird which can serve to introduce what might be called the Rilkean strand in Beveridge's poetry. This bird [in 'The Herons] stands as though it 'saw and heard the single / far off, crystal note'. It recalls the language of a poem from earlier in *The Domesticity of Giraffes*, 'For Rilke', a poem which expresses the drive towards transcendent unity in the poems. It celebrates the poet's ability to

> transform the multiple noises of contingent reality into a 'voice pure as a tuning fork / independent / of what it's struck off.' The poem includes its author in the category of those unable to do this, those who are overwhelmed by the noisy world's 'blaring decibels' and whose voices reflect this by their 'severe grating, unbearable / dissonance'. This inclusion looks, originally, like a kind of modesty, a way of acknowledging the vastly greater poet, but it may be a little more genuine than this— an expression of high goals and creative frustration.[31]

The preeminence of imagination rather than *samadhi* as a way of knowing results in a changed tone for Siddhattha's journey. Rather than the tone being one of positive attentiveness to palpable modulations of consciousness which provide the basis for an expectation of further change, as in the meditative tradition, the tone becomes that of a yearning fraught with intimations of its own futility. The images of the transcendent state which Siddhattha produces are essentially intensifications of dissatisfaction, being inversions of present conditions, and as such are imbued with a doleful sense of impossibility, proclaim a tacit affiliation with the non-transcendent as the only real site of vital existence, or seem to betray, in their unconvincing poetic realisation, Beveridge's underlying lack of conviction with regard to the positive and achievable transcendental project as we find it in the meditative tradition.

The poem 'Monkey' (62), illustrates this, as well as how the imagination's fusing of senses, emotions and intellect, which contrasts with *samadhi's* aim to disentangle components of mentality, constructs its utopia. Siddhattha listens to the 'whimpers' of an injured, isolated grivet, which suggest that its relatives in the mountains may be waiting to welcome it back. This in turn leads to the envisaging of a kind of organic, perfect belonging, which then becomes a component of the utopian transcendence Siddhattha yearns for:

> And I wish I too had a home I could call to with
> the quick of my mouth, the madness of my tongue.

Siddhattha's continuing affiliation to the sensual as the real alternative to suffering is epitomized in 'A Vow' (70), where the transcendent state is imagined as one in which even the most apparently deprived forms of life will receive maximal physical comfort, so that

> bindweed, burdock, beggar's ticks
> and burr will know the perfume of asphodel
> and the softness of lamb's tongue…

And sensualism gets, rather spectacularly if implicitly, the very last words of the whole sequence, when Siddhattha resolves 'to sit until I no longer want / to burgeon in paradise.' ('Ficus Religiosa', 102): the word 'burgeon' connotes all manner of sensual, vegetable expansions of pleasure, so that the word 'paradise', when it occurs in this sentence, rings with its full range of hedonistic resonances, which overwhelms the renunciatory tone. The body-language of the language, as it were, contradicts its explicit meaning. Thus we leave Siddhattha under the bodhi tree not, as in the meditative tradition, about to conclusively overcome dependence on sense pleasures for happiness, but rather expressing a tacit declaration of their irresistibility. It is interesting to note, in this context, that Beveridge has herself been aware of her attraction towards the senses, and how this may possibly draw her away from buddhistic consciousness. In an interview with Greg Mclaren in *Southerly*, Beveridge says that if

> you're a serious practitioner [of Buddhism] then everything you do should be practice. Everything. But in reality I find this very difficult, and sometimes I feel that my writing may be a kind of anti-practice in that my work is very sense-oriented, and so much of a Buddhist practice seems to be about getting away from the senses.

> I often feel I revel in the senses because they fuel my writing. I simply love the physical world and I'm extremely attached to my visual sense. In that regard I feel a real conflict, and I worry that I may be falling deeper and deeper into a sense of dependence.[32]

Even though highly important objections may be raised, from a traditional point of view, to the dualism implicit in Beveridge's description of Buddhist practice as involving 'getting away from the senses'—since, for example, many forms of meditation involve not a departure from, but a re-focusing *on*, sense experience, such as the touch of the breath and other bodily sensations—her disquiet over the way she reacts to and values the senses, in relation to Buddhism, is interesting in the context of my observations here.

The poem 'Doubt' (76) exhibits the utopian desire for intellectual, as against sensual, comfort: for the intellect's dilemma of contingency to be resolved, when Siddhattha says that he will sit 'until the edges that implicate my doubt— / faultlessly deliver some absolutes.' In 'Benares' (91), the intellect similarly projects a transcendence conceived on its own terms, as Siddhattha searches for what he calls 'my implicate law'. In this poem, the repetition and rhyme create the sense of an endlessly recurring longing, perennially part of the human spirit, for which the musicality of its expression is the real consolation. In 'Ganges' (97), this music seems almost to turn Siddhattha's story into something reminiscent of Bollywood, when he is given the line 'But you know me, I can't agree. Yet, vis a vis / …' The push towards transcendence seems to wilt, here, into self-deprecating humour.[33]

When Siddhattha's uncertainty is given direct expression, in 'In the Forest' (95–6): 'O, I don't know / if I'll ever wake, changed, transformed, / able to lift on viridescent wings', the senses and spatiality are the dominant conditioners of the image of transcendence as one of *ascendance*, accompanied by the intensely visual 'viridescence'. The result is a perhaps over-familiar image, recalling many ugly-grub-to-beautiful-butterfly motifs. We also seem to be in the presence of a wistful sentimentality, rather than moral confidence, when Siddhattha

vows to sit until 'the nests of all birds / are given gifts by the cuckoo.' ('Ficus Religiosa', 101)

Finally, later in 'In the Forest', Siddhattha expresses his experience of an intimation of transcendence, when he says that he feels his 'mind enter / a vast space in which everything / connects.' This is, again, an image of the intellect's dream of perfect coherence. And yet its expression is conspicuously abstract and formulaic, perfunctory here almost to the point of caricature. The poetry appears merely to be going through the motions. This seems echoed in the lines' aural quality: the first two enjambed beats of the line beginning with the word 'connects', seem to enact a twofold mechanical connecting: *ker-clunk*. The effect is that a strange *dis*connect is created, between the notion of 'everything' somehow coming awesomely together in a cosmic unity, and this incongruously banal structural event.

Concluding Remarks

My argument has been, then, that in the representation of Sidhattha's journey found in 'Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree', certain philosophical, artistic, and personal orientations have played a part in its construction such that the reader's experience may well be quite at odds with that which would be gained from traditional versions. The reader, that is, may feel that they have encountered, in Beveridge's Siddhattha thus recast, a figure who bodies forth the ineluctable suffering of the human condition, and thus the perennial elusiveness and implausibility of transcendence, rather than one who embodies the promise and indeed successful realisation of transcendence. Since Siddhattha is a figure who focuses these fundamental issues of the limits and possibilities of human consciousness, and the nature of suffering, such a transposition of his journey and import may be viewed as very significant.

It is perhaps prudent to say, however, in these times of literalism, and its off-spring, religious fanaticism, that an idea of 'heresy' has nothing to do with the analysis I have been undertaking here. This

paper has not drawn upon a 'Buddhist' perspective, for example, in the religious sense: it has drawn only upon the meditative tradition, which eschews dogma. A writer should be at liberty to adopt any persona, but the critic is also at liberty to comment on the result.

I have not proposed, either, that the two cultures, the literary-imaginative, and the buddhistic-meditative, are necessarily opposed or in conflict, or that the imagination and *samadhi* are thus. My claim has been that they are, in important respects, different. The particular insights into human nature which Beveridge's sequence may contain, therefore, will be valid on their own, imaginative terms, and a valuable part of the spectrum of understanding, of which meditative insight forms another part.

Notes

1 This article is based on a paper given at the conference 'Refashioning Myth. Poetic Transformations and Metamorphoses', held at the University of Melbourne, October 2–3, 2008.
2 The literature on this subject is now extensive. Two perhaps better known examples with regard to the imagination and samadhi respectively are *Philosophy in the Flesh. The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, New York: Basic Books, 1999, by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, and *Zen and the Brain: Toward an Understanding of Meditation and Consciousness*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998, by J. H. Austin.
3 Artarmon, NSW: Giramondo Publishing, 2003, p. 48.
4 The tradition lists twenty-seven other Buddhas, of which Siddhattha is the most recent.
5 Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society Pariyatti Editions, 1992.
6 'Discordant Tones: Judith Beveridge's *Wolf Notes*,' *Australian Women's Book Review* 16.1 (2004), p. 3.
7 Descriptions of the meditative process are found throughout the many texts of the Pali Canon. One *sutta*, or discourse, where the subject is substantially treated is the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta*.
8 A traditional textual reference for this process would be the descriptions of Conditioned Arising, one of which is to be found in Nanamoli (1992) p. 25.
9 Vickers, B. (ed.) 2008, *Francis Bacon. The Major Works*. London: Oxford University Press, p. 218.

10 'On Dryden and Pope' in *Lectures on the English Poets*, London: J Templeman, 1841, p. 138.
11 '3 Writers: 3 Beliefs', *Encounter*, ABC Radio National, 19th February 2006.
12 *Encounter*, 2006.
13 *Encounter*, 2006.
14 *Encounter*, 2006.
15 The *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* is the main primary reference for this distinction, but it is dealt with in numerous other parts of the *Tipitaka*. One commentarial reference among very many is *The Importance of Vedana and Sampajanna*, Igatpuri, Vipassana Research Institute, 2003.
16 'A Weighted World', *Australian Book Review*, March 2004, p. 38.
17 Paul Williams summarises this situation by noting that Siddhattha, at his birth, was 'already a supremely advanced Buddha-to-be (Sanskrit: *bodhisattva;* Pali: *bodhisatta*). The life story of the Buddha shows a quite superior (albeit still human) being…'. See Paul Williams with Anthony Tribe: *Buddhist Thought. A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*. London: Routledge, 2000, p. 27.
18 See Nanamoli (1992), p. 13.
19 See Nanamoli (1992), p. 14.
20 See Nanamoli (1992), p. 21.
21 Nanamoli (1992), p. 29.
22 *Encounter*, 2006.
23 *Encounter*, 2006.
24 See Nanamoli (1992) p. 10.
25 Wentworth Falls, N.S.W, Black Lightning Press, 1987.
26 'Intricate Knots and Vast Cosmologies: The Poetry of Judith Beveridge' in *Australian Literary Studies*, May 2000, pp. 243–53, p. 244.
27 *Symbolism*, London: Methuen, 1971, p. 6.
28 Chadwick (1971), p. 47.
29 *Kenneth Slessor* (Oxford Australian Writers) Melbourne: OUP, 1995, p. 112.
30 Stephen Mitchell (ed) *Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, New York: Random House, 1982, p. xl.
31 Duwell (2000), p. 244.
32 Volume 62, Number 3, 2002, pp. 50–61, p. 51.
33 Humour is not alien to traditional texts, but tends to occur in different forms and contexts. A very interesting discussion of this can be found in Richard F. Gombrich's *How Buddhism Began. The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*, London, Athlone Press, 1996; in particular the chapter 'Metaphor, Allegory, Satire'.