

Günter Blamberger
Sudhir Kakar *Editors*

Imaginations of Death and the Beyond in India and Europe

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Editors

Günter Blumberger
University of Cologne
Cologne
Germany

Sudhir Kakar
Independent Scholar
Benaulim, Goa
India

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Two Stories About the Unimaginability of Death

“The Godfather Death” (Der Gevatter Tod) is a German fairy tale in the famous collection of the Brothers Grimm. It tells the story of a child whose godfather and career counselor is Death. When the child has grown up, his godfather advises him:

Now you should become a doctor. Only be careful when you are called by a patient. If you see me standing by his head, then there is nothing to worry. Let him smell the oil in this bottle and anoint his feet. Then he would soon recover. If I am standing by his feet, then it is over, then he belongs to me, so do not dare to start a treatment. (Brüder Grimm 1812, pp. 194–195)¹

The godson becomes a famous doctor. Later, he gets into a difficult situation when the king is lying mortally ill and Death is standing at the foot of his bed. The doctor decides to cheat Death. He simply turns the bed around so that Death now stands by the king’s head. Though the king recovers immediately, Godfather Death is annoyed with his godson’s trickery. When the godson successfully repeats the same trick again with the beautiful princess lying on her deathbed, Godfather Death grabs him by his neck and drags him into a subterranean cave lit with thousands of candles, where he shows the presumptuous doctor the limits of his power and the punishment that awaits him: “Here you see all living beings, and here is the little flickering light that will soon be extinguished. That is your life; beware!” (Brüder Grimm, 1812, pp. 194–195).

This fairy tale, which tells the story of the wishes and nightmares of a doctor, has not lost its relevance till today. In order to understand its topicality, one needs only to think of the death determination debates concerning the visibility, the recognition of the moment of death, and the power of a doctor to define the end of a life, which can also be understood as a presumptuous thanatocracy. The problem of visibility of death is in a different way also the main issue in arts and literature. How can one represent something which one has not experienced and of which no reports exist?

¹All translations by the authors. English editions of “Godfather Death” follow later versions of the Brothers Grimm’s fairy tale with another ending: the godfather, desiring revenge, kills the physician.

“As long as we exist, death is not, and when death is, we no longer exist” (Epicurus, 1949, p. 45). With this comforting formula, Epicurus sought to banish the human fear of death. With this argument, death is no longer an event in life. What one has experienced or could experience can be mimetically represented. Death, of course, cannot be represented in this manner. We can only speak allegorically of death; the notion, the idea of death must be clothed in images—in images of the flickering or extinguished light of life, for example. Perhaps we do not fear death but the unimaginability of all which may happen after death? We suffer from this deficit of imagination and therefore flee into the thanatological phantasies of literature, arts, and media. The artistic representation of death and the beyond is a paradox. The prospect of re-presentation is what is absent, for death is what cannot be presented. Thus every depiction of death and the beyond produces images which do not belong to death or life after death, but to life before death or to different worldviews.

This also holds true for the Indian civilization whose preoccupation with death and the beyond is not only ancient, but one which many believe has been central to the civilization’s highest thought. In 300 BCE, Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador to Chandragupta Maurya’s court, remarked of Indians:

Death is with them a frequent subject of discourse. They regard this life as, so to speak, the time when the child within the womb becomes mature, and death as a birth into a real and happy life for the votaries of philosophy. On this account they undergo much discipline as a preparation for death. (McCrindle 1960, p. 100)

Kathopanishad, one of the principal Upanishads (800–300 BCE), which are considered the acme of Indian philosophical and metaphysical thought, tells the story of Nachiketa (lit. “one who doesn’t know”) extracting the secrets of the afterdeath from the god of death, Yama himself. The story goes that a poor Brahmin performs a sacrifice to the gods and gives a few old and feeble cows as presents to the officiating priests. His teenage son, upset with his father’s niggardliness, asks him, “Father, to whom will you give me?” The father does not reply but the son persists with the question till the angry father bursts out, “I will give you to Yama” (*Kathopanishad*, 1994, p. 604).

As a dutiful son who cannot let his father’s words go in vain, Nachiketa journeys to the house of the god of death. Yama is away and the boy waits for his return without having eaten. On his return, Yama offers three wishes to Nachiketa as recompense for the discomfort of the three days and nights the boy had waited. The first two wishes of the boy are to let him return alive to his father, and providing him the description of the ritual that is an aid to reaching heaven. As his third wish, Nachiketa asks, “There is this doubt in regard to a man who has departed, some holding that he is and some he is not. I want you to instruct me on this issue. This is my third wish.”

Yama is reluctant. “Even the gods have doubt on this point. The truth about after death is so subtle that it is not easy to understand. Do not press me for granting this wish” (*Kathopanishad*, 1994, p. 604).

Nachiketa insists on knowing, and, although Yama offers him all the riches of the world and a long life, Nachiketa would only have this knowledge, since the fulfillment of desires and life are transient whereas the boy seeks immortality.

In enlightening Nachiketa, the god of death is certainly more audacious than the Buddha, who was often asked whether he would survive after death or whether he would not. The Buddha had refused to answer this question, responding that to say that he continued to exist would give rise to one kind of misunderstanding while to deny it would lead to others.

* * *

Any assignment of meaning to earthly existence and to notions of worldly and otherworldly salvation rests on that deepest and most fundamental uncertainty of our human existence: the awareness of our mortality. How can stories like those of Godfather Death or Nachiketa, how can literature and the arts in general help us cope with this knowledge of death? An international conference was held in New Delhi, India, in February 2014, to give answers to these questions. The concept of the conference was drawn up by Günter Blamberger and Sudhir Kakar at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Cologne, Germany. The telling name of this center is “Morphomata,” an ancient Greek word for forming aesthetic ideas in works of arts, literature, and media. To explore aesthetic ideas in all their national and cultural diversity is the main focus of inquiry at the Morphomata Center. The present volume reflects upon the core concerns of Morphomata as a place of global reflexivity and cultural comparison, gathering international scholars from different disciplines in the humanities, organizing conferences on aesthetic ideas or cultural figurations and their impact at the University of Cologne and at research centers all over the world. This volume explores images of afterlife/afterdeath and the presence of the dead in the imaginations of the living in Indian and Western traditions. It does so by concentrating on case studies in contemporary literature and arts which have tended not only to expand but also to transcend the realm of experience, to represent the unrepresentable, to advance into areas beyond all rational analysis, beyond the borderline at which philosophical or scientific explanations may fail, the borderline of death and the beyond.

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Günter Blamberger
Sudhir Kakar

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Editors and Contributors

About the Editors

Günter Blumberger holds a Chair in German Philology at the University of Cologne, and is Director of the Center for Advanced Study in the Humanities (Internationales Kolleg Morphomata), Cologne. Since 1996 he has been President of the International Kleist Society, and editor of the *Kleist Yearbook*. He was responsible for the Kleist Bicentenary in 2011. His biography *Heinrich von Kleist* (Fischer, 2011) received an award as Germany's best non-fiction book in 2011 and will be published in English in 2018. He is a member of the German Academy of Language and Literature. His main areas of research include German and European literature of the 19th and 20th centuries, moralistic philosophy, interdisciplinary and cross-cultural studies on creativity, contemporary German literature and film, figurations of melancholy, figurations of death. His recently published books are *On Creativity* (edited) (Penguin Press, 2015), *Sind alle Denker traurig?* (edited) (Fink, 2015), *Venus as Muse* (edited) (Brill/Rodopi, 2015), *Auf schwankendem Grund: Dekadenz und Tod im Venedig der Moderne* (edited) (Fink, 2014), *Figuring Death, Figuring Creativity: On the Power of Aesthetic Ideas* (Fink, 2013), *Peter Esterházy* (edited) (Fink, 2013), *Möglichkeitsdenken* (edited) (Fink, 2013), *Ökonomie des Opfers. Literatur im Zeichen des Suizids* (edited) (Fink, 2013), *Daniel Kehlmann* (edited) (Fink, 2012).

Sudhir Kakar psychoanalyst and writer, has been Lecturer at Harvard University, Research Fellow at Harvard Business School, Professor at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, and Head of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi. He has been a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Study of World Religions at Harvard, as also Visiting Professor at the Universities of Chicago, Harvard, McGill, Melbourne, Hawai'i, Vienna; Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton, Wissenschaftskolleg Berlin, and Morphomata Center for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, Cologne. Kakar's many honors include the Kardiner Award of Columbia University, Boyer Prize for

Psychological Anthropology of the American Anthropological Association, Germany's Goethe Medal, Rockefeller Residency, MacArthur Fellowship, Distinguished Service Award of the Indo-American Psychiatric Association, Fellow of the National Academy of Psychology, Merck Tagore Award, the Bhabha, Nehru and Indian Council of Social Science Research National Fellowships in India, and Germany's Order of Merit. His latest books are *Young Tagore: The Makings of a Genius* and the novel *The Devil Take Love*.

Contributors

Naman P. Ahuja is Professor of Indian Art and Architecture at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi and Co-editor of *Marg*, India's leading quarterly magazine and journal of the arts, published from Mumbai. His studies on privately owned objects—terracottas, ivories, and small finds—have drawn attention to a wide range of rituals and transcultural exchanges at an everyday, quotidian level. This has been published as scholarly articles in various journals and remains an ongoing subject of research. Previously, as Fellow at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, he authored a comprehensive catalogue of their ancient Indian collections. His book, *The Making of the Modern Indian Artist-Craftsman: Devi Prasad* (Routledge, 2011), provided a case study of the impact of the arts and crafts movement on India. Most recently, *The Body in Indian Art and Thought* (Ludion, Antwerp, 2013, also in French and Dutch) explores a variety of fundamental approaches to the aesthetics of anthropomorphic representation in India, and the larger ideas that drive people to make images. Naman received his doctorate in art and archaeology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, in 2001. Since then he has held curatorial charges at the British Museum apart from curating several exhibitions independently, and Visiting Professorships at the University of Zurich, the Kunsthistorisches Institute in Florence, the University of Alberta in Edmonton, and at SOAS, his alma mater. His research and graduate teaching cover a diverse range of subjects including periods of artistic/visual exchange in premodern societies like ancient Gandhara, ancient temple statuary and iconography, and in the manuscripts painted in the Sultanate period in India.

Georg Braungart studied German language and literature, history and philosophy in Göttingen and Tübingen. He received his doctorate degree in 1986, and completed his Habilitation in 1993 in Tübingen. Between 1994 and 2003, he served as Chair of Modern German Literature in Regensburg, and has been in Tübingen since 2003. His areas of research include aesthetics, rhetoric, history of the body, and literary history of geology. He is a Member of the Scientific Advisory Council of the Fritz-Thyssen Foundation Cologne. Since 2015, he has served as Vice-President of the Görres Society. Since 2011, he has been Director of the German Episcopal Academic Scholarship Organization Cusanuswerk. His publications (selected) include: *Hofberedsamkeit: Studien zur Praxis höfisch-politischer*

Rede im deutschen Territorialabsolutismus (Tübingen, 1988); *Leibhafter Sinn: Der andere Diskurs der Moderne* (Tübingen, 1995); *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft*, Bd. II: H–O (co-edited) (Berlin, 2000); Bd. III: P–Z (co-edited) (Berlin, 2003); “Der Tod des Körpers des Herrschers: Begräbnisrituale als Zeichenprozesse,” in: *Theatralität und die Krisen der Repräsentation*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte (Stuttgart, 2001); “Poetik der Natur: Literatur und Geologie,” Plenarvortrag beim deutschen Germanistentag Marburg 2007, in: *Natur–Kultur: Zur Anthropologie von Sprache und Literatur*, ed. Thomas Anz (Paderborn, 2009); “Die Geologie und das Erhabene,” in: *Schillers Natur: Leben–Denken–Literarisches Schaffen*, eds Georg Braungart and Bernhard Greiner (Hamburg, 2005); “The Poetics of Nature: Literature and Constructive Imagination in the History of Geology,” in: *Inventions of the Imagination: Romanticism and Beyond*, ed. Richard T. Gray et al. (Seattle, 2011).

Arindam Chakrabarti (DPhil from Oxford University) has been teaching Western and Indian philosophy for the last 30 years in Kolkata, London, Seattle, Delhi, and Honolulu. He has published books and papers in English, Bengali, and Sanskrit and has co-edited anthologies on epistemology, metaphysics, Buddhist philosophy, and the *Mahabharata*. He is currently working on three books on analytical Indian philosophies, moral psychology of emotions, and on comparative philosophy of objects, subjects, and other subjects. Chakrabarti directs the Eastern Philosophy of Consciousness and the Humanities program at the Department of Philosophy in Hawai’i. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Indian Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* was edited by him (2016).

Jonardon Ganeri is Global Professor of Philosophy at New York University (Abu Dhabi), Visiting Professor of Philosophy, King’s College London, and Professorial Research Associate, School of Oriental and African Studies, London. He was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sussex, Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at Monash University, and Visiting Professor at Kyunghee University, Seoul, and at the Universities of Chicago, Pennsylvania, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, and L’École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris. He works on the philosophy of self, consciousness, and self-knowledge, on conceptions of rationality, on epistemology, metaphysics, and the philosophy of language and logic. The author of seven books and editor/co-editor of seven more, he has published in *Mind*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *Synthese*, *New Literary History*, *Philosophy & Literature*, and other leading peer-reviewed philosophy journals. He is a subject-editor for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and a member of the editorial boards of *History and Philosophy of Logic*, *Philosophy East & West*, and other journals. He is a life member of Clare Hall Cambridge and a member of the common room at Wolfson College Oxford, University College Oxford, and Churchill College

Cambridge. His most recent books include *The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India 1450–1700* (Oxford, 2011), and *The Self: Naturalism, Consciousness, and the First-Person Stance* (Oxford, 2012).

Katharina Kakar studied comparative religion, Indian art history, and anthropology at the Free University of Berlin. She has taught at the Free University and the College of Protestant Theology in Berlin, and was a fellow at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University and at the Center for Advanced Studies Morphomata in Cologne. She has written several books and has published articles and chapters in books on Indian women, society, and religion. Her latest publication is a book on Indian women, *Frauen in Indien: Leben zwischen Unterdrückung und Widerstand* (Beck Verlag, 2015). She is also the founder of the non-profit organization Tara Trust, which works with deprived children and women in India. Currently, she devotes most of her time to art.

Anja Kirsch is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Basel. Following her studies of religion, history, and German studies at the University of Hannover, Germany, she worked at the Universities of Jena, Germany, Basel, Switzerland, and University of Dublin, Trinity College. In 2013, she completed her Ph.D. in the study of religion with a thesis on the transmission of secular worldviews in socialist textbooks. Currently, her teaching and research interests include the history of religious studies, secular movements in the 19th and 20th century, and narrative theory.

Oliver Krüger is Professor for the Study of Religion in the Department of Social Sciences at Fribourg University (Switzerland). He studied sociology, comparative study of religion, and classical archeology at the University of Bonn from 1994 to 1999. His Ph.D. thesis in the study of religion deals with the idea of immortality in posthumanism. From 2002 to 2005, Krüger was part of the special research center Ritualdynamik at the University of Heidelberg and studied the dynamics of neo-pagan rituals and their communication on the internet. At the Center for the Study of Religion, Princeton University, he focused on the alternative funeral culture in the United States from 2005 to 2007. He was subsequently Professor for the Study of Religion at Fribourg University. In 2012–13, he was Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies Morphomata.

Thomas Macho has served as Director of the International Research Center for Cultural Studies in Vienna since March 1, 2016. From 1993 to 2016, he was Professor of Cultural History at the Humboldt University of Berlin. In 1976, he earned his Ph.D. from the University of Vienna with a dissertation on the philosophy of music. He earned his qualification as a Professor of Philosophy from the University of Klagenfurt with his postdoctoral thesis on metaphors of death in 1983. In 1999, Macho co-founded the Hermann von Helmholtz Centre for Cultural

Techniques at the Humboldt University of Berlin, where he also served as the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy III from 2006 to 2008. From 2008 to 2009, he was a Fellow at the International Research Institute for Cultural Techniques and Media Philosophy at the Bauhaus University, Weimar. From 2009 to 2011, he was Director of the Department of Cultural Studies at the Humboldt University of Berlin. During the winter term 2013–2014, he was a Fellow at the Morphomata International Center for Advanced Studies at the University of Cologne. Among his most recent publications are: *Das Leben ist ungerecht* (Salzburg/Vienna, 2010); *Vorbilder* (Munich, 2011); *Das Leben nehmen: Suizid in der Moderne* (Berlin, 2017).

Jens Schlieter is Professor for Theory of Religion and Managing Director of the Institute for Science of Religion, University of Bern (Switzerland). He studied philosophy, Tibetology/Buddhist studies, and comparative religion in Bonn and Vienna, and has a Ph.D. in philosophy (1999), and Habilitation in science of religion (2006). His work focuses on methodological and theoretical questions concerning the study of religion, on Buddhist ethics and bioethics, and comparative philosophy. His latest publications include: “Checking the Heavenly ‘Bank Account of Karma’: Cognitive Metaphors for Karma in Western Scholarship and Early Theravāda Buddhism,” *Religion*, 13(4), 2013; “Did the Buddha Emerge from a Brahmanic Environment? The Early Buddhist Evaluation of ‘Noble Brahmins’ and the ‘Ideological System’ of Brahmanism,” in Volkhard Krech and Marion Steinicke (eds), *Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe: Encounters, Notions, and Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden, 2012); *Die zweite Generation der Tibeter in der Schweiz: Identitätsaushandlungen und Formen buddhistischer Religiosität* (together with Marietta Kind and Tina Lauer) (Zürich, 2014).

Friedrich Vollhardt is Professor of Modern German Literature Studies at the Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich, and focuses on the literature of the early modern period. He was chairman of the collaborative research project “Pluralization and Authority in the Early Modern Era” (2006–2011) and speaker of the international doctorate program “Textuality in Premodernity” (Elite Network of Bavaria) from 2009 to 2012. Since 2013 he has been co-leader of the sub-project “Nature as Argument in Juridical Discourses and Literary Imaginations in the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era” (part of the research group on “The Role of Nature in Conceptualising Political Order: Ancient–Medieval–Early Modern”). In addition, Vollhardt is co-editor of the six-volume encyclopedia *Frühe Neuzeit in Deutschland 1520–1620: Literaturwissenschaftliches Verfasserlexikon* (vol. 16). During the academic year 2012–2013, he held a fellowship as Senior Researcher in Residence at the Center for Advanced Studies of the Ludwig Maximilian University; from 2013 to 2014 he was fellow at Morphomata.

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Part I
Initial Questions

Chapter 1

Moksha: On the Hindu Quest for Immortality

Sudhir Kakar

Traditionally, Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists have viewed *moksha*, *mukti*, *nirvana*, as the highest aim of human life. Mahatma Gandhi, modern India's greatest icon, elevated his search for *moksha* above any of his social or political goals, including India's freedom from colonial rule. In the Introduction to his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth*, he writes:

I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal [*moksha*]. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field are directed to this end. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. (Gandhi 1927, p. 14)

Moksha, most Hindus aver, is release from the cycles of birth and death that afflict all living beings. A preoccupation with *moksha* has been seen as one of the characteristics of Indian civilization. Thus in 300 BCE, Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador to Chandragupta Maurya's court, remarked:

Death is with them a frequent subject of discourse. They regard this life as, so to speak, the time when the child within the womb becomes mature, and death as a birth into a real and happy life for the votaries of philosophy. On this account they undergo much discipline as a preparation for death. They consider nothing that befalls men as either good or bad, to suppose otherwise being a dream-like illusion, else how could some be affected with sorrow and others with pleasure, by the very same things, and how could the same things affect the same individuals at different times with these opposite emotions? (McCrinkle 1960, p. 100)

I can imagine the following conversation between two well-educated, modern Hindus. Both are in the evening of their lives, acutely aware of the abbreviation of time, one a skeptic struggling with the failure of hope, while the other is a believer in what his religious tradition holds is the supreme goal of existence.

"We cannot talk about *moksha* without talking of rebirth first," the skeptic begins. "After all, that is what *moksha* is all about—getting off the wheel of *samsara*, the cycles of birth, death, rebirth, redeath ad infinitum. *Moksha* is no more and no less than the yearning for survival after death. It is the Hindu and Buddhist

S. Kakar (✉)
Pulwado Pequeno, Benaolim 403716, Goa, India
e-mail: sudhirkakar33@gmail.com

version of the wish for immortality that is as old as human awareness of death, and the impossibility of its acceptance.”

“I would agree with you on the last part of your assertion on the impossibility of accepting that I will die,” the believer says. “It is incomprehensible to fathom that my unique consciousness, with its myriad memories, thoughts and imaginings will be snuffed out like a candle flame, leaving not even a palpable darkness behind. It is unendurable to contemplate that the many ties of love and affection, to a partner, children, relatives, friends, which have sustained me all through my life, will be irrevocably snapped.

Fortunately, our awareness of our own death is at the level of thought, not emotional conviction. We are capable of thinking of our death but incapable of imagining it. In the Vana Parva of the epic *Mahabharata* (c. ninth century BCE–fourth century CE), there is the story of a series of questions the god of justice and morality, Dharma, disguised as a *yaksha*, a nature spirit, asks the eldest of the five Pandava brothers, Yudhishtira, who has come to an enchanted lake in which his four brothers have found a watery grave. Impelled by a raging thirst, the brothers did not heed the *yaksha*’s warning not to drink the water before answering his questions. Yudhishtira is more patient and agrees to the *yaksha*’s stipulation. His answer to one of the *yaksha*’s last questions, on what is the most amazing thing in the world, an answer that remains true for all times and cultures is ‘that day after day, countless creatures are going to the abode of Yama [the god of death], yet those that remain behind believe themselves to be immortal. What can be more amazing than this?’” (*Mahabharata*, vol. 1, loc. 24516).

“I am glad that we can begin with an agreement,” replies the skeptic. “As far as the unimaginability of death is concerned, Yudhishtira has company in other religious traditions. The Sufi saint Uwais was once asked,

‘What has Grace brought you?’

‘When I wake up in the morning I feel like a man who is not sure he will live till evening,’ Uwais replied.

‘But doesn’t everyone know this?’

‘They certainly do,’ Uwais said. ‘But not all of them feel it.’ (Cited in Osho 2004, p. 22)

And it is not only religious traditions. There is little difference between Yudhishtira’s north India of 600 BCE, the time of the *Mahabharata*, and central Europe of early twentieth century where the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, wrote,

It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death: and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. Hence the psycho-analytic school could venture on the assertion that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing in another way, that in his unconscious, every one of us is convinced of his own immortality. (Freud 1915/2001, p. 289)

It is indeed poignant to observe how a person, as he gets older, becomes more and more concerned with how his loved ones will recollect him in their memories after he is dead. As if he will be hovering around somewhere in a disembodied

state, registering their thoughts and feelings. The belief that psychic life persists after death is the life-blood of all religions, not just the ones that have their origin in India. Walk through a Christian cemetery and you will see the letters ‘RIP,’ or the full phrase ‘Rest in Peace,’ inscribed on the gravestones. The inscription indicates a belief that the dead person can still feel after death—‘rest (=be dead)—in a peaceful state of mind’ (Martindale 1998, p. 269).”

“Since you like to quote Freud, the patron saint of modern skeptics, I am sure you are aware that Freud himself is not impervious to the siren song of immortality,” says the believer. “Three years before his own death at the age of 80 from cancer of the mouth, he writes to Marie Bonaparte, a friend and disciple, of his recognition of a ‘limited immortality.’

My dear Marie

I can answer you without delay, for I have little to do. Two days ago ‘Moses II’ was finished and laid aside, and the best way to forget one’s minor ailments is by exchanging thoughts with friends. To the writer immortality evidently means being loved by any number of anonymous people. Well, I know I won’t mourn your death, for you will survive me by years, and over mine I hope you will quickly console yourself and let me live in your friendly memory—the only form of limited immortality I recognize.

The moment a man questions the meaning and value of life, he is sick, since objectively neither has any existence; by asking this question one is merely admitting to a store of unsatisfied libido to which something else must have happened, a kind of fermentation leading to sadness and depression. I am afraid these explanations of mine are not very wonderful. I have an advertisement floating about in my head which I consider the boldest and most successful piece of American publicity: Why live, if you can be buried for ten dollars. (Freud 1937/1961, pp. 437–438)

Quite apart from Freud’s contention that thinking about the meaning of life is a sign of unsatisfied sexuality, which will be dismissed by many, philosophers and lay persons alike, you would agree that Freud, too, in his inimitable ironic fashion, is showing a concern for his own immortality.”

“What Freud is talking about is what I would call ‘secular immortality’ that is actually available to most human beings,” says the skeptic. “It is very different from the speculative, I would even say the imaginary immortality of religious traditions. Freud, of course, is too modest in professing to a life after death only in the memory of his friends, a form of immortality available to everyone.

Another form of secular immortality has to do with one’s legacy, that is, what one leaves behind through one’s contribution to the vast edifice of human achievement that is remembered by at least some others who will follow in the chain of generations. The contribution may be small, symbolized in a plaque commemorating the establishment of a clinic or a business, or great, as symbolized in the complete works of a Freud or Shakespeare in volumes lined up on library shelves. Indeed, leaving behind works that will endure and make the artist, the writer or scientist immortal is a strong but rarely acknowledged motivation among creative people. In their almost exclusive focus on the creative person’s emotional conflicts, psychoanalysts have tended to neglect this particular motivation. The creative person, they maintain, expresses and transforms these conflicts, which have