

1

*Sturm und Drang**

The Scene: A dusty highway near the free city of Erfurt in high summer. Peasants work in the ripening grain fields stretching to the forest fringe. The air is heavy with sullen afternoon heat and to the distant south the sky above the Thuringian mountains is black with an approaching storm.

A solitary figure comes into view striding purposefully towards the city. He is a thickset young man, recognisable from his cap and the satchel of books on his back as a student from Erfurt university. He is deep in thought and not until the first heavy drops of rain come thudding into the dry ruts at his feet does he realise that he is in danger of a soaking. He casts around for shelter and begins to run towards a clump of trees. All around him the landscape is suddenly alive with livid lightning flashes. The ground trembles with the crashing timpani of thunder. He stumbles forward, terrified and alone under the fury of the heavens which, as he well knows, is nothing less than the wrath of God. Then a light, brighter and more lurid than any of the others flashing among the swirling clouds, explodes around him. With an earth-splitting crack a thunderbolt strikes the ground a mere matter of metres away. The force of it throws him off his feet. Petrified, he lies in the mud able to do no more than gabble frightened prayers. 'Holy St Anne, holy St Anne, save me! Let me live! Please, let me live! Mercifully hear me and I will become a monk.'

That is a fanciful reconstruction of the dramatic event which happened to Martin Luther on 2 July 1505 but the actual circumstances must have

* 'Storm and Stress'

been just as momentous for he looked back on it as the major turning point in his life. He was true to his panicking vow. He dared not be otherwise; to play fast and loose with the awesome God of the storm would be to put at risk his eternal soul. Fifteen days later he presented himself at the Augustinian house in Erfurt as a novice monk. From that moment his life took a new direction. So did the life of Europe – and the world.

There is always more behind such Damascus Road experiences than the simple events themselves reveal. Young Martin's inner turmoil was greater than the electric ferocity of the tumbling clouds. Spiritual forces were already propelling him towards the cloister and he was doing his best to avoid them. Like St Paul, he had been 'kicking against the goads' until God was obliged to employ drastic means to bend the disobedient young man to his will. So, at least, it seemed to the logic Martin derived from his religious upbringing.

The troubled student had been born twenty-two years before, in November 1483, and baptised on St Martin's Day (11 November). His parents, Hans and Margareta (known in the family as Hanna) Luther (or Lüder), belonged to that group of struggling but upwardly mobile 'working-class' people who are the backbone of any stable nation. It was their outlook on life and Martin's ambivalent attitude towards it that formed the bedrock of his later development. Gross Hans (so called to distinguish him from a younger brother, Klein Hans) came from moderately prosperous farming stock in the small Thuringian town of Möhra but, as a younger son, he had had to make his own way in the world. Being a canny and thrusting young man he did that rather well. First of all he married into the professional classes. His bride was a Lindemann. Her family was well established in the nearby, prosperous city of Eisenach, where for generations they had been doctors, lawyers, teachers and civic dignitaries. The couple moved far away from home and family to settle in Eisleben. Hans had resolved to find work in the recently opened copper mines, but was there more to this decision to strike out on their own? This was an age in which society was fairly static and to put a hundred kilometres of rough, hilly terrain between themselves and their own people must have been an upheaval. Can it be that the Lindemanns disapproved of their Hanna throwing herself away on one of those rough Luthers? Hans' family had a far from savoury reputation. One of his brothers made frequent court appearances charged with acts of violence. It is useless to speculate on the reasons why Martin's parents decided to

make a fresh start but the fact that they did so is evidence of a determined and courageous spirit which they certainly passed on to their son. Gross Hans was not the sort of man to be deflected from a chosen course of action by the disapproval of his 'betters'. Nor was Martin.

The reformer's later recollection of his parents' life in the early years of their marriage was one of hardship. 'My father was a poor miner,' he said. 'My mother carried all her wood home on her back. It was in this way that they brought me up.'¹ Like many people who have risen from humble origins, Luther was ambivalent about his working-class background. He could be proud of the honest toil by which his parents had improved their lot while disdaining the vulgarity and herd instincts of ignorant 'peasants'. It was soon after the birth of Martin, their second son, that Hans and Hanna moved to nearby Mansfeld. Mining was back-breaking and dangerous but it was better paid than work on the land and less dependent on the changing seasons. Hans was able to save enough to buy into a mine-owning syndicate. Later, he enjoyed sufficient standing in the community to borrow capital for the development of his business. Steadily his affairs improved but so did Gross Hans' expenses and the size of his family. By 1505 Hanna had borne him four sons and four daughters. Life was always a struggle for the ambitious entrepreneur and Hans could never count himself a rich man. What he could do, however, was give his children a better start in life than he had had. It was a matter of pride for him to do so and he may well have felt himself to be under the watchful eye of his socially superior in-laws. Some sons could follow him in the business but others would not be pitched out, as he had been, to fend for themselves in a harsh world. Young Martin showed promise from an early age and his parents decided to invest sacrificially in his education.

Apart from this significant fact there seems to have been nothing remarkable about his upbringing. He always remembered his parents with affection, while acknowledging that they were strict. His father could be jovial good company, especially when he had a few beers inside him, and his mother was both pious and loving. But neither of them hesitated to wield the stick and Martin recollected that it had been Hanna who, on one occasion, thrashed him till the blood flowed.

As to his religious training, it undoubtedly followed the pattern of conventional piety and routine rituals that were the norm amongst the lower orders in northern Germany. Men and women of every degree were acutely aware of living at the interface of two worlds – the physical and

the spiritual. To vary the metaphor, they occupied a no-man's-land fought over by angelic and demonic hosts. Here signs and wonders were part of everyday experience and miracles were eagerly looked for. Special places – churches, shrines, holy wells – were foci of heavenly power. Others – forest depths, mountaintops, river banks – might be the very thresholds of hell, where devils, elves and hobgoblins lurked. No one doubted the power of magic or the authority of particular individuals to exercise it.

It was inevitable that the priests, set apart from the rest of the community by their celibacy and ritual consecration, should have derived an extra *cachet* from their position as mediators between man and God. It was also inevitable that around the Church, the clergy and their holy apparatus there clustered a horde of popular superstitions, which endowed religious objects with a magical power to which theologians themselves had never laid claim.²

Theologians might not claim it but few priests, monks or friars were inclined to disavow the supernatural gifts upon which their hold over simple folk depended. The social framework of every European state was hierarchically structured and the authority of the clergy depended ultimately on the spiritual sanctions they possessed. Priests alone could 'make Christ' on the altar. They alone could absolve sins. Their prayers were efficacious for the repose of departed loved ones. And one way to achieve heaven was to be buried in a monastic habit. Preaching underlined this salvation magic but was far from being the only medium employed to maintain the influence of ecclesiastical professionals over the laity. Medieval Christianity was essentially a visual religion of garish colours and dramatic shapes, a chaotic jumble of images in stone, paint, stained glass and, increasingly, cheap propaganda prints. Illiterate parishioners gazed on a bewildering array of dramatically illustrated scenes – biblical episodes, saintly miracles, moral tales, apocalyptic visions – with no means of relating them to each other or to their own lives.

The ubiquitous representation which made the greatest impact was the 'doom' traditionally set up over church entrances or on chancel arches. This showed Christ the judge separating humanity into sheep, chosen to enjoy the eternal blessedness of heaven, and goats being dragged by demons into the grisly maw of hell. It was by playing on the fear of the unknown that the priestly hierarchy kept their talons on the minds of the people. They taught that only within the ship of the Church and its sacramental



Sinners consigned to hell for failing to keep the divine law

system could the devout soul journey safely through the perilous seas of this world and come safe to haven.

But the clergy were not alone in holding sway over the imaginations of ordinary folk. Other supernatural forces were at work, or were believed to be at work. When one of her infant children died, Hanna Luther did not attribute the tragedy to the inscrutable will of God or seek within herself the reason for divine judgement. She accused one of her neighbours of *maleficium*, witchcraft. Young Martin was brought up on numerous stories of occult visitations. He accepted as self-evident that such evil-inspired people existed and that one should wear charms, recite incantations, sprinkle the hearth with holy water and employ such other resources as the Church provided to ward off their attacks. The Stygian unknown is the breeding ground of fantasy and just as outer space today provides unlimited scope for imagining worlds peopled by superior beings, some of whom have visited Earth in flying saucers, so, in the sixteenth century, the mysterious origins of illness, animal diseases, bad weather and undeserved misfortune were readily attributed to ill-disposed



The *Schutzmantelbild*. The Virgin Mary, representing the Church, extends her protective cloak around the faithful

persons who possessed secret powers and might well be in league with the devil. Statistics compiled in West Germany in 1986 suggested that a third of the population still believed in the existence of witches. If that is the case in our own sophisticated, materialistic and rational age it is not difficult to understand how such beliefs could be universal in the sixteenth century. Popular religion among the illiterate masses in Europe was, thus, a hotch-potch of Christian dogma, Christian myth and pagan survivals. There were numerous other forces active within the Church – revivalist preachers, publishers of vernacular devotional treatises, humanist scholars and members of lay communities following a regimen of personal holiness and public service. We shall have to explore these later. For the moment we must content ourselves with the common religious experience with which Luther grew up. He tells us very little about the personal beliefs of his parents so we must assume that they shared the observances common to their class. That would have involved weekly attendance at mass but reception of communion probably no more than twice a year, devotion to the miners' patron saint, Anne (supposed maternal grandmother of Jesus), keeping of the numerous holy days and festivals prescribed by ecclesiastical authority, occasional confession

and possibly rare excursions to some not-too-distant shrine to gaze on saintly relics and offer prayers for particular needs. As was not (and is not) uncommon, it was the woman of the household who was more devout than her husband. A colleague of the reformer, who met Frau Luther in later years, recorded that she possessed all the 'virtues which are fitting in an honourable woman [and] shone especially in modesty, fear of God and prayer, and other upright women used to take her as an example of virtue'.

The precocious child was sent to school probably at the age of five. In the Mansfeld *Grundschule* the elements of reading, writing and Latin grammar were instilled in him by the crude but effective methods of rote learning and the application of the birch when he failed in his lessons. Only by such mechanistic and harsh methods could the teacher (who will have had at most one assistant) have kept control of his lively charges. Within one room he had to instruct three classes – beginners, intermediates and seniors. For all but the most gifted pedagogues the work came down to either dominating the pupils or being dominated by them. Not surprisingly, Luther spoke scornfully of primary education in later years. However, what he resented most was not the beatings (and he tells us that on one occasion he was thrashed fifteen times in a single day) so much as the poor Latin that he was taught. The language of the Church and scholarship had become corrupted over the millennium since the silver age of Tacitus, Juvenal and Pliny and it would be many years before the Renaissance rediscovery of pure classical style reached Saxony.

Martin's next educational move, at the age of thirteen, was of short duration but may well have had a profound influence on the impressionable adolescent. A friend of his was being sent to a famous school at Magdeburg, some seventy kilometres from Mansfeld, and it was decided that Martin should accompany him. The institution was run by the Brethren of the Common Life, a revivalist order which had swept like a breath of fresh air through the conventional monastic spirituality of northern Europe. Their movement, which had begun over a century earlier in the Netherlands, was summed up in the title they gave it – the *Devotio Moderna*, the 'New Devotional System'. Like traditional religious orders the followers of this way gathered together in single sex communities to follow a life of prayer, meditation and service. But that was where the similarity ended. The brothers and sisters of the Common Life followed a more open, more fluid rule than their cowed colleagues. Though many clergy belonged to the order, it was essentially a lay movement and there was even room within it

for families. Preachers of the order held out to their hearers a pathway to holiness which did not, of necessity, take the monastic life as its point of departure. To men and women who were looking for something more than the passive role allotted to the laity in church life it offered a quality and intensity of religious experience hitherto only available within the cloister. Followers of the New Devotional System were urged, by ascetic practices, to turn away from the world and model their lives on that of Jesus, and the most popular devotional book produced by the order took as its title, *The Imitation of Christ*. The instant popularity of this manual by Thomas à Kempis indicates that there were thousands of ardent souls looking for something more than formal religion. First printed in Augsburg in 1486, it went through more than twenty imprints in Germany alone before the end of the century. Readers identified with the anguish of the writer, who felt his heavenly longings chained to his worldly nature:

Here a man is defiled with many sins, ensnared with many passions, held fast by many fears, racked with many cares, distracted with many curiosities, entangled with many vanities, compassed about with many errors, worn away with many labours, burdened with temptations, enervated by pleasures, tormented with want. O, when shall these evils be at an end? . . . O merciful Jesu, when shall I stand to behold Thee? When shall I contemplate the glory of Thy kingdom? When wilt Thou be unto me all in all?³

The Brethren of the Common Life had always taken a keen interest in education, knowing how vital it was to turn young minds towards the heavenlies before the distractions of the world took tenacious hold. They founded schools and ran hostels for students and their school at Magdeburg was famed for its high standards. It was only natural that the Luthers should jump at the chance to have their son enrolled there. Yet, within a year they had changed their minds and removed him. We are left wondering about the reason for their abrupt decision. Can it be that they were worried by the holy regimen of the brothers and the effect it was having on Martin? As well as the regular worship the boys had to attend there were talks and discussion groups aimed at explaining the mysteries of the faith and making it attractive to young minds. Through such instruction many adolescents came to offer themselves as trainee monks. One such was a young Dutchman by the name of Desiderius Erasmus, who we shall meet again. Aggravatingly, Luther's later, selective reflections had nothing to say about his response

to this programme of instruction. However, one event did occur at Magdeburg which made an indelible mark on his embryonic self-concept. Someone pointed out to him a particularly emaciated mendicant friar. There were many such to be seen in the streets of the city, men who had espoused poverty and begged their bread from passers-by, but there was something particularly haunting about this stumbling Franciscan, who

carried a sack like a donkey, so heavy that he bent under it but his companion walked beside him without a burden . . . He had so fasted, watched and mortified his flesh that he looked like a death's head, mere skin and bones; indeed he soon after died, for he could not long bear such a severe life.

But it was the identity of the ascetic, pointed out with whispered awe to the young student, that was especially poignant. He was Prince Wilhelm of Anhalt-Zerbst, a scion of the local ruling house. Whoever looked on this example of broken humility, Luther concluded, 'must needs be ashamed of his own worldly position'.⁴ What did the thirteen-year-old boy and his classmates make of this spectacle as they discussed it among themselves and how did it relate to the instruction they were receiving from their earnest tutors? Dramatic sights stick in the mind while the daily routines of early life become blurred in recollection but it is the latter that, cumulatively, have the greater formative effect. Surely, it was at Magdeburg that Luther's thoughts began to turn towards the cloister.

That would explain his speedy withdrawal, for the possibility of their son becoming a monk or friar did not feature at all in his parents' plans. They wanted Martin to enter the wealthy, respected, professional class and had already decided that he was to be a lawyer. With this in view they removed him from the influence of religious enthusiasts and sent him to Hanna's home town of Eisenach, where he studied at the school of St George's parish. We might have expected that the Lindemanns would take their young relative under their wing but, for whatever reason, this was not the case. Instead, he was boarded with well-to-do merchant friends of the family, the Schalbes. In the 1560s, by which time Luther had become the subject of hagiographical writings and reminiscences, a story was told about how the boy came by his lodgings. It was said that Frau Schalbe had encountered Martin in church and, impressed by his singing and devotion, had decided to take personal care of him in return for his becoming the friend and protector of her own, much younger, son. If true, this would

confirm that the essential change, for which the word 'conversion' is not too strong, had already come over the adolescent. He was seeking a spiritual destiny and one that would increasingly come into conflict with the career choice that had been made for him.

Whatever his psychological state, two facts are clear: the son of Hans Luther was still being held at arms length by his mother's people and he was now drawn into the circle of the pious Schalbes. If the boy's parents had hoped to wean him away from the spiritual pressures applied by the Brethren their tactics failed. Martin had exchanged the frying pan of the *Devotio Moderna* for the fire of Franciscan asceticism. His Eisenach hosts were enthusiastic and generous patrons of the Observant Friars, so called because they rejected any modification of their founder's rules of absolute poverty, chastity and obedience. Like the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, they, too, were reformists but they directed their zeal to following and encouraging others to follow an extremely austere pattern of life. They had separated from the more moderate wing (the Conventuals) of the Franciscan order (a separation formalised in 1517) and, because of their obvious personal privations (the example of Prince Wilhelm is a case in point) and commitment to preaching, they made a considerable impact. Heinrich Schalbe had endowed the Observant house, which was situated close to the nearby hilltop fortress of the Wartburg, and, with his family and friends, hung on the words of the holy friars. In later years Luther regarded the Schalbes' devotion with contempt. They had, he suggested, become mere grovelling servants to men who prided themselves on their own humility. Young Martin, therefore, during his most impressionable years came under the influence of two kinds of intense spirituality, one concentrating on internal devotion, the other on external privations. What they had in common was the pursuit of personal holiness as a means of commending the individual to God and, thus, deserving salvation.

However, we must be careful not to read back the man into the boy. The adolescent Martin was a lively, relaxed young man who was happy in his new school and who was becoming an accomplished scholar. The years away from home had given him a new confidence and helped him to overcome the natural shyness he had felt as a child. In Eisenach, a city for which he developed and maintained a warm affection, there was much to see and do. He and his friends must have made forays into the forest and gone fishing in the Hörsel or the Nesse. More solemn activities would have been centred on the splendid Gothic church of St George or, sometimes, on Romanesque St Nicholas' church. Excitement was always caused

when the Elector of Saxony arrived with his colourful and exotic entourage to stay in the massive Wartburg Castle which brooded over the town from its hilltop position. Luther had many friends and the school regime was a distinct improvement on that of Mansfeld. Johann Trebonius, the master, was a gifted scholar and a teacher who managed to impart to his charges an enthusiasm for learning. Under his tutelage Martin's facility with Latin improved greatly and it was in the St George's school that he laid the foundation for that robust and fluent style that would give his writings their persuasive force. Yet, with the coming of the new century, came also the recognition that there was little more to be learned in Eisenach. The time had come to consider the next stage of his education. Hans Luther, who had already sacrificed much in equipping his son to join the social elite, decided to send him to university. And not just any university: Erfurt, where Martin went in 1501, could boast one of the best and most ancient seats of learning in Germany. Moreover its law school was second to none.

Twice the size of Eisenach, Erfurt was a thriving commercial and administrative centre as well as a university city. From the summit of Domburg hill the many spires of the cathedral and the church of St Severus watched over the sixth most populous city in the German lands, a city where traders from Poland, Venice, the Baltic states, France and the Netherlands rubbed shoulders in its bustling markets. Mercantile activity centred on the shop-lined bridge over the Gera, the Krämerbrücke, and a stone's throw away were the dye works from whose steaming vats came the woad which was Erfurt's primary export. In such a cosmopolitan entrepôt a young student could find many attractions and distractions. As in any university town, there were occasional fracas caused by the 'young gentlemen' and in 1509, which went down in the city annals as 'mad year', serious riots broke out entailing much bloodshed and property damage. There is no evidence of Luther taking part in such lawless behaviour but he later recalled that he carefully studied the 'courses' offered in the city's inns and whorehouses. Students were no less boisterous, energetic, arrogant and demonstrative than they are now and Martin, like his friends, needed frequent breaks from the head-splitting concentration on the *quadrivium*.

This was the time-honoured programme of higher education by which the student ascended through the disciplines of arithmetic, astronomy, geometry and music to the philosophy of Aristotle and thence, for those bent on a clerical career, to theology, the queen of the sciences. Martin proved himself to be a gifted scholar, that is to say he jumped through the prescribed academic

hoops without difficulty. He took his bachelor's degree in 1502 and his master's in 1505. He proved himself particularly adept at disputations, those regular confrontations at which students were required to argue propositions and counter-propositions according to strict rules of dialectic. Not for nothing did his fellows nickname him 'the philosopher'. Yet the mastering of logic produced by the *quadrivium* made him question its very basis.

The framework of all theological and philosophical teaching was 'scholasticism', which had started out as an intricate system of reasoning designed to make the Christian faith intellectually respectable and had developed over five centuries into a kind of academic scaffolding which served to prop up the dogmas of the Church. The arguments of the schoolmen were based on Aristotle and the early Church Fathers or, in practice, on official commentaries on these ancient authorities. Luther was very far from being the first scholar to feel disquiet about what had become an arid, second-hand way of handling divine truth. Almost a hundred years before, Nicolas of Clémanges, a Parisian theologian, had compared scholastic teachers to physicians who, having learned their craft, were content to discuss it among themselves while all around them people were dying of plague. Renaissance scholars in Italy had begun that 'back to the sources' movement which would spread across Europe under the name of humanism or the New Learning but this revolutionary tide had scarcely begun to lap at the walls of Erfurt while Luther was studying there. In 1505 he had only reached the stage of having doubts about the Church's handling of those deep truths entrusted to it – doubts by no means strong enough to act on. And why should he challenge the system? As long as he stayed within it the future looked bright. He felt justifiable satisfaction when he qualified for his master's degree, coming second out of a class of seventeen, and it gave him immense pleasure to witness his parents' pride when they came to Erfurt to watch him go in torchlight procession to receive his new honour. 'Oh, what a majestic and glorious thing it was,' he later wrote. 'I hold there is no temporal, worldly joy equal to it.' All that remained was to complete his study of law and to embark on a lucrative career.

However, there were fears and anxieties welling up inside him and try as he might to keep the lid fast shut upon them they kept escaping. It was the teaching of the Church that kept applying the crowbar to that casket of accusations and self-doubt. Martin was now of an age to pay close attention to sermons. In a city the size and importance of Erfurt there was much more preaching than in a backwater such as Mansfeld or even in Eisenach.

The parish clergy were better educated and the preaching orders of friars were more active. Moreover, thanks to the 'modern marvel' of printing, the serious, educated Christian could buy books of sermons to meditate on at leisure. Martin appreciated pulpit oratory and his trained mind was now equipped to entertain the written arguments set forth by the fashionable preachers of the age. What he learned from these sources about the way of salvation was scarcely encouraging.

The base line was that man was a sinner and could only set out on the road to God in sincere repentance. But there was the rub, for how could the anxious seeker know how genuine his own repentance really was? Did he really desire to make reparation to a loving God whom he had offended or was he more concerned about his own eternal welfare? One preacher estimated that the number of people capable of true contrition was, perhaps, one in thirty thousand.⁵ It was the Church which came to the aid of the despairing sinner with its standard sacramental means of grace – masses, baptism, penance, unction – and such occasional aids as sermons, pilgrimages, indulgences and (for the wealthy) the purchase of holy relics. When Augustine wrote, *salus extra ecclesiam non est* ('there is no salvation outside the Church') he had specifically in mind these ritual observances by which the priestly profession helped to steer the human soul through this veil of tears towards heaven. However, it was for the individual, not only to live in obedience to mother Church and to avail himself of the benefits she offered, but to live righteously, which involved self-denial, works of charity and avoiding the snares of the world, the flesh and the devil. All this was extremely difficult in a secular environment, so that the surest way to inherit eternal life was to enter the cloister. Yet, even monks and nuns were not immune to temptation, as ribald stories and printed lampoons delighted to point out. What all this amounted to was that while salvation depended on the attainment of personal holiness no one could be certain of it. In 1431, for example, Joan of Arc outraged the examiners at her heresy trial because she claimed to know that she would be received into paradise, whereas they took it as axiomatic that 'on this earthly journey no pilgrim knows if he is worthy of glory or of punishment, which the sovereign judge alone can tell'.⁶

In moments of honest self-examination Martin certainly could not see a pious soul deserving of eternal bliss. He was a young man with a lust for life. He entered with enthusiasm into everything he undertook. He loved books and read widely outside his subject, delighting in such Latin authors as Cicero, Virgil and Livy. His study of the Bible probably began at this time for he later recalled that he *discovered* a copy in the university library.

It is difficult to believe that he had never before made the acquaintance of holy writ; there were many copies around, both in Latin and German. But laymen were not encouraged to study it for themselves; its complexities were best left for experts to unravel. When Luther began to turn the pages for himself, therefore, the contents may well have come as a revelation. The assiduous student also applied himself to his devotional exercises. But then he entered with equal enthusiasm into student pranks and the camaraderie of the beerkeller and the brothel. He was a highly successful young man with many friends and the world before him but in the darkness of lonely nights a much-favoured preachers' text may well have echoed in his brain: 'How shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his soul?'. Could it be that he was not destined by God for the legal profession? He may already have developed that profound contempt for the law that he often expressed in later years. 'Every lawyer is either a good-for-nothing or know-nothing' he asserted and he once told his own young son, 'If you should become a lawyer, I'd hang you on the gallows.'⁷ Perhaps, the attraction of the cloistered life presented to him by the Brothers at Magdeburg continued to haunt him. There may also have been a spirit of youthful rebellion strewing rocks on his career path. That path had been chosen for him by his father and it would only be natural for Martin to believe that he deserved some say in his own destiny. We search the reformer's extensive writings and the biographical snippets provided by his friends in vain for any expression of deep affection for old Hans at this time. Father and son became estranged over Martin's decision to become a monk and the rift would not be healed for many years but it is more than likely that mutual ill-feeling had a longer history. All these impulses were in conflict. The twenty-one-year-old who, at the beginning of 1505, embarked on his studies of law was a man not at ease in himself. A modern psychiatrist would have identified him as someone heading for a breakdown. Of course, much of this is speculation. It is impossible for us to *know* what problems troubled his waking mind and what were those simmering in his unconscious.

What we can identify is the sequence of acts which brought on the eventual crisis. All of them had to do with death or the threat of death. His first close call was an accident with the sword which he carried when travelling as a precaution against brigands. Somehow it slipped from his belt, cutting into the flesh of his leg so deeply that it severed an artery. Only in the nick of time did companions manage to get him to a doctor who applied a tourniquet and dressed the wound. That night in bed the

cut opened again and he lost more blood. Fortunately, someone else was on hand to save his life. The transitory nature of human existence came home to him once more soon after he gained his master's degree when a very close friend died suddenly. After that Martin tried to settle to his studies but found the law an uncongenial subject. His inclination was increasingly towards the theology faculty perhaps with the possibility of an academic career in mind. But that would be sure to provoke an argument with his parents. His proud father had just presented him with an expensive copy of the *Corpus Juris*, the lawyer's Bible. It was the most recent example of Hans Luther's personal sacrifice and his ambition for his son. The chances of continued parental support if he switched to theology would be nil. Of course, if he were to take the cowl and pursue the monastic route to higher education finance would cease to be a problem. But Martin knew full well that nothing would be more calculated to outrage old Hans. His father's outspoken opinions about 'lazy, good-for-nothing monks' were well known. Like many Germans of peasant extraction he regarded the religious life as a cop-out from the 'real' world of honest toil. Monks and nuns were the stock-in-trade of ale-house bawdy humour, habitually portrayed as gluttonous, drunken and libidinous.

Then came the news that his father had done something that would preempt further discussion. He had begun negotiations for the marriage of his upwardly mobile son into a local family of standing. For Martin the moment of painful choice had come. Marriage would disbar him from proceeding to a theology degree. He knew that if he rejected both a legal profession and the proposed bride his parents would be mortified. They would regard it as an act of gross ingratitude. They would lose face among the friends and neighbours to whom they had always boasted of their son's progress. But that had to be weighed against the risk of making a wrong and irreversible career move. The confrontation could no longer be avoided. It seems more than likely that Martin discussed with his father the possibility of a change of direction on the visit to his home in June 1505. Whatever the outcome of such a discussion, it is clear that the unwilling law student had a great deal on his mind as he made his way back to Erfurt.

God sends storms so that he may smite sinners with terror, and thus at last they may be converted . . . Why are the church bells rung against the tempestuousness of the air? . . . so that men, hearing their peals, may be aroused to call upon God lest he drown us on account

of our sins as he drowned the whole world when the flood came. So when men hear the pealing of the bells against the storms of the sky, whether by day or night, they must fear for themselves, and humbly call on God to deal mercifully with us.⁸

So preachers exhorted their congregations and it was not merely superstitious countrymen who believed in divine intervention in daily life. After all, why should the Creator not make himself known through all his works? If he declared his beauty in the wayside flower why should he not proclaim his wrath in the tempest? Luther may have encountered rationalism in his readings of Cicero who, in the *De divinatione*, asserted that every natural phenomenon has a natural cause, whether or not we can discern it, but he would certainly have dismissed such statements as pagan unbelief. So, when the sky blackened on that sultry July day and thunder rumbled overhead and jagged lightnings stabbed the earth within metres of his stumbling footsteps, Martin was terrified. This was nothing but the judgement of God on a disobedient sinner who was resisting the divine will. He fell to the ground babbling out a prayer to his father's patron saint, St Anne. If his life was spared, he promised, he would not be disobedient to the heavenly vision; he *would* become a monk. On 17 July 1505, after a solemn leave-taking of his friends, he presented himself at the cloister of the Observant Augustinian friars.

The world would never be the same again.