

self-naughting

One birthday, years ago, I received a card inscribed with a quote of Emerson's – that the soul already contains in itself the event that befalls it 'for the event is only the actualizing of its thoughts' (Emerson 2003, p.21). At the time I was contemplating my journey toward the eventual writing of *The Taste of Translation* and saw his words as an affirmation to engage the task. But returning to his observation in the years since, more facets to the jewel have been revealed, such that it has now extrapolated to an extent where each moment is a soul-worthy event, an opportunity to actualise its thoughts and manifest its knowing here in the world of time.

I say 'opportunity' because a choice is always involved unless one follows the Taoist principle of *wu wei*. This bodily incarnation is the vehicle for our engagement with the world – the only one we have! – but its actions are often in thrall to the ego's social adaptation to and self-absorption with outer measures of achievement. Yet through this 'medium' the deepest part of our being, needs be, must speak. At the intersect of head-knowing and heart-knowing lies the opportunity to honestly appraise the choices we make – in this reflective space is a potential opening to inflection. The soul may knock, and knock again at the door of the heart, but if its Socratic chariot fails to listen, most times it retreats from the (cutting) edge, returns to the depths, there to grumble and lick wounds rubbed raw by the ego's conceit to know best the road to take. If too long ignored though, its calls falling on continuously deaf ears, the road of consciousness may lead to direct 'confrontation', as Jung experienced, with the terminally unconscious and unheeded.

Over and over

The blackbird attacks

Its reflection in the glass

Over and over

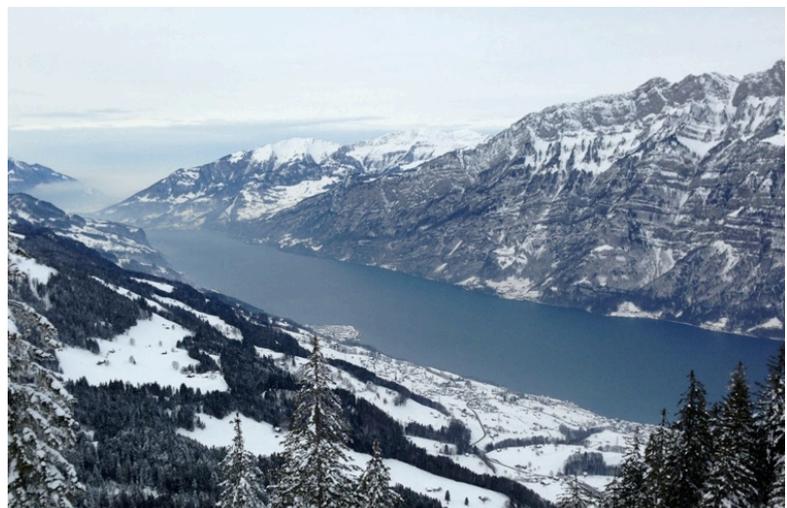
The blackbird attacks

Its dark shadow self

Layers of meaning contained in the antics of a crazy blackbird I observed last spring on the windowsill – fearing the foreign 'other', ignorant of the mirror's purpose, attacking rather than embracing this unknown dimension of being. But how crazy are we? To similarly ignore the shadow, attack or banish its knowing from our bodily 'sight'? Often 'truer and wiser ... the shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself and yet is always thrusting itself upon him directly or indirectly': so wrote Jung (in Hauke 2006, p.66). For my part, I have literally felt the leap of soul through skin to grab hold of life lessons it deemed worthy of experience – Jung's concepts of synchronicity and psychoid unity refer. Many such events, to actualise this particular soul's thoughts, have been unpleasant, some shocking, a few downright dangerous and a couple potentially life-threatening. Suffice it to say that I have learned to listen and respect, to understand and finally love the one who connects the very ground of my being to the sacred. From 'confrontation', I was drawn up, by grace, to 'communion' – an act as holy as any to bear the name, consecrated in the temple of my own self.

Seven years in the Otherworld

I don't know whether there is any coincidence between Heinrich Harrer's *Seven Years in Tibet* and the like length or extraordinary otherness of my experiences traipsing the unwieldy terrain of the Otherworld. At times I've felt



the landscapes explored have been as harrowing, the situations encountered likewise, yet the goodwill of locals to share sustenance and teachings ever an opportunity to express heartfelt gratitude. For seven years I found myself consciously a-wander in the wilderness of the Otherworld, the map of its becoming landscape made as I walked, a ribbon of road unfurling before dirt-heavy boots.

Like Dante, I too was guided, however not by the famous Virgil. Nevertheless, it was his words which inspired me to set out in the first place, a journey which saw *The Taste of Translation* as a treasure restored from the depths: ‘The dead may guard the treasure, but it is useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more (Atwood 2002, p.178). Specifically, I would meditate on his plea in the *Aeneid* before ‘dropping’ (as Jung described his AI technique); indeed it mirrored mine: *You gods who rule the kingdom of souls! You soundless shades! ... Grant me to tell what I have heard! With your assent may I reveal!*

The Taste of Translation, a trptych, tells of three pilgrims on their way to the centre of being – a Muslim princess, a Christian translator, and a secular exile from the Bosnian War. Three very different lives and worldviews set across a shifting landscape of Europe and North Africa, bridging more than six centuries; yet their shared story immemorial – of what it means to love. For each, this involved dying-to-self and for me, as witness to such acts of selflessness, it led to growing awareness of the fullness to be experienced in dying.

Laleima’s was the first, the most powerful – to witness in the Otherworld, to write into existence here. In a retreat of forty days and forty nights, she plotted the course of Attar’s *Conference of the Birds* against her own life, crossed the seven valleys on her way to the *Simorgh* (pp.156-7): “What more do You want from me?” she asked the voice inside, the voice at once herself and not herself, and received this response: “The self is like a veil ... To reach the Beloved you must surrender your veil.” Reminded of Rumi: *What is unification?/It is to burn one’s self before the One*, she holds her precious lemon veil up to the candle, there to enter the dance of moth with flame, watches it melt till no more than ashen cinders are left to crest the horizon and float away.

Kisha’s journey also involved seven valleys or, rather, seven waves – the last in the set always the biggest, the one with the potential to bring an exile adrift on a merciless sea to shore. Her breakthrough came when she saw dust bobbing nonchalantly about in space, caught by a shaft of light, so wondering (p.436): “What’s the difference between me and a speck of dust?” to which this response came from her inner voice: “Is that a trick question?” Still, their conversation put her on the path to trust in love to light her way, love the spark to illuminate her humble speck-of-dust self, to open her heart to surfing the next wave – the seventh – in to shore.



Meanwhile El Crucio was tugged by an unseen hand toward his fate, as the Brother relates (p.195): “As dust rose in our wake over all the long years, I pondered the strange journey his inner guide led. And yes, at times thought to see the tug of an unseen hand at his breast, at times thought to witness with my waking eye the line it held, and his wince each time the hand tugged, pulled taut on a string hooked into his heart.”

Once surrendered to inner guidance, though, perfect peace was his reward – he the iconographer whose task to write a single image, over and over, this time as the Monk relates (p.245): “While he wrote, something shimmered, hovered at his elbow ... At his elbow was a misted presence of golden

light. Either connecting with his body from without, or seeping from the very core of his self within, I could see no sharp edge or outline to his form. All a-shimmer, aglow, at his right side, melting, merging with the deft strokes of his hand. Perhaps it was only the fluidity of movement which I smudged into unknowing by my witness. My eyes were not a youth's, after all. But perhaps, just perhaps, my vision was clear, and I saw straight through from the heart's inner eye – that an angel had entered the room.”

Thus, for more than three years I wandered these wilderness paths, exploring others' lives, documenting their experiences, learning much through my witness of and encounters with soul-level events awe-inspiring and humbling in equal measure. On return, thinking my task done, I unpacked a heavy rucksack, washed an endless pile of dirty clothes, published the results of my investigations in a work of prose fiction dedicated to the Ground of Being, and a doctoral thesis which offered thanks to the Academy for their patience with an unusual data-gathering methodology.

Ah, but three years was not enough. I had only completed half my course of (soul-expected) learning. Once engaged, God's university bespeaks a longer-than proposition, it seems. Jaffé, following Jung, expresses it well: ‘Any content that emerges from the unconscious into consciousness involves a spiritual or moral task’ (Jaffé 1983, p.72). Now fully-established, the connection between the worlds could not be ignored. Thus was I called back into the wilderness to receive an important teaching. Laleima's revelations lay in the past, Kisha's translation of same likewise, even El Crucio had achieved spiritual union with his Beloved. The only one left was me.

***Noli timere* – a parable of self-knowing**

The teaching took the form of a parable – not as detailed as Dante's *La Divina Commedia* with a hundred cantos documenting his passage to self-knowing; I had to be content with five. However the kindly Mr1300BC was as eminent a guide as ever was Virgil, his means of instruction well-suited to my mode of being, and the journey we took completely fit to purpose.

Firstly, I participated in a game being played on a soccer table. The little keyhole-shaped figures looked similar but each was independent of the other. No long stick joined them; no one ‘external’ manipulated their play. I was a forward, and the game involved solely ‘heading’ the ball – my task, as assigned, to shoot at the ‘devil’ in goal. I felt too weak though, even as I perceived the devil as neither strong nor frightening, as neither indestructible nor undefeatable – the little devil-figure was just another player in the game, as focused on his ‘job description’ as any other. He was not responsible for my weakness – this was a statement about me. In my present condition, I felt incapable of what was expected.

At this point Mr1300BC communicated that heading the ball between players represented the sharing of ‘thought poems’ between conversation partners. Once the ball came to me, I absorbed the poems to help my process of ‘self-naughting’. He said this would make me strong enough to head the ball on toward goal and ‘score’ on behalf of the team. In neither the material or Otherworld had I previously heard the expression ‘self-naughting’, but he intimated I already knew about the need to overcome the ego's *nafs* (the clinging to or focus on solely sensory or self-absorbed considerations) at an abstract or intellectual level. My weakness, however, stemmed from insufficiently applying the practice to my own life.

I came back from this place and was immediately called to another – I stood in a dark hallway and could see a figure called ‘You’ (ie not ‘me’, yet felt-sensed as intimately related to ‘me’) in front of a closed door at the far end. I saw clearly that ‘You’ waited at the door for ‘me’ to arrive. ‘You’ could easily have opened the door and gone on, but decided to come back and help ‘me’ because I was so far behind. A very special moment, I literally felt the waves of love ‘You’ emitted while returning to where I stood.

Suddenly the scene shifted to a metro. Here I stood amongst a group of people holding onto toggles as the train sped along. Several times it stopped at different stations – the doors opened and closed,

people got out; there were less in the carriage each time. Now ‘You’ were inside my head, saying none of these places was our destination. I needed to stay on the metro; ‘we’ were going the whole way.

I returned from this encounter for no more than an instant before the next landscape presented. Mr1300BC was there to say that as part of my instruction, I needed to climb a mountain. Yet when the mountain appeared, it constellated as exactly my size – no need to ‘climb’ at all. I stood before the mountain and immediately felt such love, that the only thing I wanted to do was embrace it. My arms encircled its vast girth; I kissed and set my cheek to its solidity and strength. I felt very calm, perfectly natural, locked in embrace with stone sentience, and knew, *deep-knew*, that we were one-together.

All of a sudden, I was forcibly thrust from this precious space into the final part of the teaching. In a winter-dark landscape replete with swirling mists, ‘You’ walked ahead, and I followed several paces behind. I could clearly see your shadow some metres distant and knew my purpose was to dissolve ‘You’; this would be my gift to ‘You’ now that ‘we’ had passed through the closed door at the end of the dark hallway, now that ‘we’ had completed the metro journey. Somehow it was communicated that here was a point of penetration, a place where the act of dissolution could occur. If ‘we’ were to remain together in the ‘beyond’ – wherever, whatever this ‘beyond’ was – I needed to perform this task now. In the context of the moment, no thought presented; no choice needed to be made. As perfectly natural and instantaneous as my embrace of the mountain, I ‘magicked’ your dissolution into the ‘beyond’ – such was the love I felt for ‘You’.

Immediately ‘You’ had gone, a crocodile appeared in this dark space, thrashing through the mists toward ‘me’. Terrified, I literally sweat cold prickling fear and spun around in horror, trying to think how to escape. Now Mr1300BC returned, and words formed: *Noli timere. Do you not understand? You separated from the ‘body’; it can be surrendered to the crocodile. You dissolved your spirit self so it could pass through. You did all this yourself; there is nothing to fear.* The crocodile faded, the mists disappeared; I stood alone as if in the full light of day.

The teaching ended, my consciousness by then at such a height I had a million things to ask my guide – all the various facets of recognising ‘You’ as a dimension of my higher soul or spiritual self whereas ‘me’ represented body/ego/materiality. From his point of view, though, the parable was complete, sufficient unto itself. I would have to answer my own questions, and could almost see his amused expression that I didn’t ‘get it’ as soon as I embraced the mountain.

Of course this was not the first nor, I doubt, the last example of my ‘slow-learner’ status in matters otherworldly. And, needless to say, it is most likely the reason why I needed to continue wandering its rhizome of perpetual becoming during the years which followed till my full allocation of seven-in-the-wilderness was done. Treasures revealed, and wisdoms shared, by Virgil’s shades over that time would gestate on a plane of intimate exteriority within my circle-of-self before their gradual uplift to the nestedfishes library of texts; my hope ever the same – that by returning a personal myth to the collective, it may contribute to the conversation on peace.

Lessons for and from charioteers

The wisdom of the soul lies deep, ‘in the cave of our heart’ as various faith traditions hold. If the door of our heart stays fully open (Mr1300BC’s counsel on another occasion), we will always have access to the light of soul wisdom. Bound together in this life, for this time in this skin, are body, mind and soul; body and mind tasked with actualising soul in the here and now, to help ‘re-grow its wings’ as Socrates explains in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Mystics of the Abrahamic traditions call it the ‘divine marriage’ with the Beloved or Christ within. Jung’s expression is ‘individuation’: ‘The goal ... is the inner union of pieces of the psyche that were divided and split off by earlier (ego-driven) developmental demands and processes. In this stage of integration, a strong need arises to join the opposites of persona and shadow, of masculine and feminine, of child and adult, of right brain and left brain, of thinking and feeling, of introversion and extroversion’ (Stein 2006, p.212).

In the Upanishads, Yama, the King of Death, describes to Nachiketa the ‘spiritual osmosis’ which binds the Self to one’s own self, also teaching by way of parable: *‘Know the Self as lord of the chariot/The body as the chariot itself/The discriminating intellect as/The charioteer and the mind as the reins/The senses, say the wise, are the horses/Selfish desires are the roads they travel ... With a discriminating intellect/As charioteer, a well-trained mind as reins/(You) attain the supreme goal of life/To be united with the Lord of Love ...’* (Katha Upanishad, verses 1.3.3-4).

Our bodily incarnation – a chariot in service to the Self. By keeping the door of our heart fully open (‘unshuttered’ in Ulanov’s words), *‘one rises above I, me, and mine, (and) the Atman is revealed as one’s real Self’* – so says Yama. The goal, then, is for inner to merge and commingle with outer at will, for the soul’s thoughts to be actualised as they arise, for intuitions to be heeded as they tug. Thus can the light of divine being flow out into the world.



Nelson Mandela used his 1994 inaugural speech to call on citizens to actualise their divinity in the here and now: ‘Our worst fear is not that we are inadequate, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us ... You are a child of God; your playing small doesn’t serve the world ... We are born to make manifest the glory of God within us. It is not just some of us, it is everyone and as we let our own light shine we unconsciously give other people permission to do so’ (quoted by Ulanov 2007, pp.75-6).

It is the crystal clarity of love which gives us the strength to cast aside such fears, to overcome our ‘weakness’ in face of the devil in goal, to truly accomplish our birthright. For when we love, completely, unconditionally, with a purity of intent to ‘serve the world’ as Mandela challenges, we are no longer afraid. *Noli timere* – perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). When we love our soul, our Self, we cannot help but trust in a power that cannot rationally be explained, the power of the light of sacred wisdom within each one of us, connected, as it is, to the source – the very Ground of Being.

I have a vivid memory of the summer’s evening I took my then-nine-year-old into the intensive care unit of the hospital downtown to farewell his beloved grandmother. In a coma from which she would not wake, he stood beside her bed, took up her limp hand, read to her his message of love. I felt she had already left her body, nevertheless sensed her presence still close – she could hear him, see him, and was comforted in her passing by his care.

After he had kissed her goodbye, we left the room. Dazed by the depth of our experience, neither of us concentrated on where we were going, and we wandered corridors at random till I cried halt. Pure and simple, we were lost in the maze. I said we needed to think clearly, and look for an ‘exit’ sign – which drew this immediate observation in response: “It’s like the whole time in this life your soul is trying to find the exit sign.” In my dear child’s innocence he had uplifted something truly profound, a statement I have contemplated again and again in the years since.

Yes – the soul ‘sheds its wings’, as Socrates describes, to come to Earth; to take on the density of material existence, initially it sits snug in the cave of the heart, its light the spark of love ever-connected to the source. It knows it must search for the exit sign, for the way out of this dark cave, to manifest a light which grows ever more bright as it is drawn to service in the world. Indeed, why else would a soul come? Ah, but the way is like a maze, the layers of conditioning between inner light and

outer actualisation must be burnt away, the chariot's horses tamed, the circuitous routes of selfish desires trammelled to a straight path in order to 'unshutter' the door to the heart, to open body and mind fully to the wisdom within. Like Shakespeare's rose, the process of self-naughting by any other name would smell as sweet.

Yet my experience of its sweetness – the dissolution of 'You' effected by 'me', the path to a unified 'we' now cleared – is certainly less than literary in its expression. The eloquence of Henri Corbin, in his reading of Ibn Arabi's Creative Prayer, is therefore offered as consolation to the weary: 'As such, it opens up a new dimension in (us), the dimension of (our) invisible selves; perhaps, indeed, it is the only means by which we may know, or gain an intimation of, this invisible self, just as a fragment of an arch arouses a mental image of the missing part of the arch' (Corbin 1998a, p.107).

The union of Self (lord – *rabb*) and self (servant – *abd*) 'compose the totality of a divine Name'; it is the means by which 'this Name *becomes visible*' (his emphasis, Corbin 1998a, p.120), and something I contemplate at length in [this essay](#). It is the 'individualised and undivided relation ... (which) is the foundation of the mystical and chivalric ethic of the *fedele d'amore*' (Corbin 1998a, p.94). By way of the Katha Upanishad's 'spiritual osmosis', we have come full circle to Dante – who no longer needs Virgil as guide, for he has united with his shining Beatrice in heaven.



Soul hugs

Meditation – the empty space which facilitates connectivity, the inner ten-foot-square hut to engage Creative Prayer pure. Time and again 'You' trips me up in what, I think, is a 'me'-mantra. Our conversation is one where each can take the other's part, as Ibn Arabi describes, where reciprocity is experienced 'simultaneously' (Corbin 1998a, p.95). However another dimension of our 'undivided relation' opened a year or two past, when I began to chant: *I feel You in me* (as indeed I did and always have since the constancy of the resonant hum entered my daily life).

Suddenly, the coin flipped and the words bounced back from the mirror as: *I feel you in Me!* My shock in the moment was palpable. Could this be so? That a soul can *feel*? As the sensory vehicle of our union, I literally experience the waves of love coming from 'You' as an all-over-within-and-without tingling pressure-padded warmth, backdropped, as ever, by the resonant hum – the generative soul-breath of 'You'. Such a feeling I can only describe as being *essence-loved*, or *soul-hugged*, so complete is its manifestation. Is it possible that my reciprocal love can likewise be *felt* by 'You'? That 'You' experience my fulsome embrace of your mountain, my soft kiss to the cheek of your sentience?

No doubt I demonstrated the limitations of undergraduate head-knowing by my response. Suffice it to say I believed 'You'. And, overwhelmed by grace in the moment of your actualisation of this soul-thought, I continued – laughing, crying, simultaneously with joy – our together-mantra, now conjoined with the sharing of soul hugs back-and-forth, a Creative Prayer translated from language to sensory expression in a whirling dervish dance of love.

Such is the constancy of an Emerson-worthy string of events to affirm soul-knowing. When the door of our heart is fully open, indeed when the door has been removed from its hinges altogether and burnt on the pyre of love, our blessed inner life is free to overspill, like water from a baptismal font, into the world of time. May it ever be so. Amen.