‘Words Formed’

It’s a strange feeling to have someone talking inside your head apart from your own chattering thoughts. Or rather, that you know it’s not someone talking per se, but that language is arising which is clearly not your own – it does not speak or formulate ideas the way you do, and its various pronunciations are generally completely unrelated to whatever you are focussed on at the time. I call it a ‘voice’ but this description itself is problematic if seen from a reductive perspective – there could be explicit sound, or pitch, tonality etc could be implicit in the way the words manifest. Whatever content is articulated, though, you sense the otherness in the voice. It has a far-off quality – a distance and depth extending past temporal and spatial dimensions. It makes sense, of course, this ancientness, this beyondness that infuses the mode of delivery, the way information is imparted as much what is actually said. It is the sheer fact of the territory from which the voice arises – a rhizome unbound by time. Knowing this, however, makes it no less difficult to cope with the phenomenon. Taken on its own, such language is challenging to decipher on first hearing, as well as on most hearings thereafter. It is the task of a translator.

Jung called it ‘clumsy’, ‘high-flown’: ‘Archetypes speak the language of high rhetoric, even of bombast. It is a style I find embarrassing; it grates on my nerves, as when someone draws his nails down a plaster wall, or scrapes his knife against a plate’ (Jung 1995, p.202). Yet if I find the contrariness of an Otherworld voice more intriguing than off-putting. The very fact of its difference to how I think and speak instantly alerts me – a trigger, a signal, as it were – to tune in, to listen. Finding myself ‘tripped up’ mid-sentence, I have the opportunity to return to the beginning of the ‘words formed’, to put its entire ‘construction’ into a sense-making sequence for my linearly-structured brain. Unlike Jung, then, I would not call the voice clumsy. Its difference is its charm, poetic in its own way, quirky in its expressive range compared to contemporary ‘non-clumsy’ speech patterns. Formal and direct, unusual syntax constructions and turns of phrase are par for the course. Think Yoda’s contemplative back-to-frontisms coupled with a matter-of-factness totally at odds with the more usually encountered cultural style of drenching pronouncements with emotion to reinforce their content. An Otherworld voice would merely observe that ‘oh woe, the world is going under’ in the same laconic manner as ‘life is so brilliant, let us jump for joy’.

Where Jung spoke of a ‘confrontation’ with the unconscious based on his experiences, I was more open to considering it ‘communion’. Perhaps this reflects our respective modes of being. Guided by Irigaray’s way of love, I naturally incline toward ‘welcoming the speech of the other in oneself and … accepting that this speech questions us’ (Irigaray 2002, p.115). Like nested fishes, the spot of the other’s colour within each facilitates their communion. A connection founded on love, it encompasses la voix de l’amour as well. Hence when ‘words form’, I sense the love that underlies the text for I feel it in my heart, the organ of love.

I have taken the title of this reflection from Julian of Norwich’s attempt to explain the other voice inside her own head: ‘words formed in my understanding’ (Watson & Jenkins 2006, p.78). Julian was a 14th century mystic who received revelations in a mode that was ‘evidently not heard physically but in some sense’ (ibid.). In this context, her editors cite St Gregory’s 6th century assertion that ‘the heart (is) informed … the speech … rather made or performed than heard’ (ibid.). Couple Watson & Jenkin’s comment re sense and St Gregory’s re heart and you will have the common mystics’ understanding across faith traditions that the heart operates as a trans-sensory organ of perception and knowledge, acting as both border and mediator between sensual and spiritual knowing (Underhill 1995, p.71). In other essays I have alluded to Conquergood’s embodied researcher as the instrument of an ethnography of both the ear and the heart (Conquergood 2002, p.149). In Kish’s first intermezzo, the chorus of dead implore the story’s readers to ‘listen closely, with a different ear, not the ear of the senses but the ear of the heart’ (p.319). We listen for the voices of the Otherworld ‘through an awakened and purified heart’ (Helmski 2000, p.29), yet as the words themselves ‘form’, they manifest via the language centre in our brain. In most cases, these words are felt (or made as St Gregory described the phenomenon), but I have had occasion when the voice is also clearly heard by the ear. Nevertheless, the locus for such ‘hearing’ is the heart.
There have been numerous occasions during my life when ‘words formed in my understanding’ but I never felt the need to drill deeply into the whys and wherefores of such utterances until propelled by my vision in the halls of the Alhambra. Researching Laleima’s story and her specific ‘words formed’ fuelled my desire to understand more about and connect more actively with the source of same. This essay documents the various means of connection I investigated as part of my PhD research – ‘words formed’ most regularly in dreamwork or meditative AI, with occasional spontaneous arisings catalysed by character-immersive practices. However, since completing my thesis and the work of prose fiction it accompanied (The Taste of Translation), the phenomenon of ‘words formed’ did not dissipate. Instead, it overspilled the boundaries of a becoming landscape I knew now like the back of my hand, charting new territories and encounters beyond my (originally) agreed contract to return Laleima’s treasure to the land of time.

In a suitably portentous vision, I stood before a pantry cupboard full of foodstuffs, the cupboard door slightly ajar, a thin seam of ruddy-pink light visible. I thought: Oh, someone’s left the light on in there. I should turn it off and save energy. But as I opened the cupboard door wide to search for the switch, white light flooded the space and these ‘words formed’: It works like a fridge. When the door is closed, the light automatically extinguishes. Keep your door open so you always have the light. In that moment I understood that by keeping the door of my heart fully open, and by walking each and every path beyond its threshold as a way of love, I would remain connected to the source. With the door of my heart only slightly ajar, the transmission would be ‘muddy’, my hearing not so keen compared with the clarity-drenched radiance before me. Reinforcing this on another occasion, ‘words formed’ that: There will be other texts to write. At that moment I was reminded of Jaffé, who, following Jung, holds: ‘Any content that emerges from the unconscious into consciousness involves a spiritual or moral task’ (Jaffé 1983, p.72). Once established, the connection between the worlds cannot be ignored. Indeed, it is single world and this life, one life.

Who speaks?

It was several years before I met the owner of the voice. I had taken to calling it HMV, after the logo on an old radiogram I remembered from childhood in which a dog listens intently, expectantly, to his master’s ‘voice’ therein. HMV always presented as male, his ‘words formed’ instantly recognisable compared to my female speech patterns and pitch. There was depth, resonance, longevity to his presence – not only in the words he used, but in the manner of their delivery. Seemingly based on his own (personal) experiences yet timeless, I learned to live with the paradox that the knowledge he imparted was aeons-old, while remaining as fresh as today; as if always known, but only just now, in the moment, made manifest. Quiet, steady, low, his was the voice of authority, and our relationship clear before we ever met – he the elder statesman, and I the humble scribe.

The first time I was conscious of having met HMV, it was in an Otherworld landscape of high mountain meadows stretching away into the distance. I had come across a traditional guesthouse, only reachable by dirt track, and decided to ‘check in’ for the weekend. The hotelier greeted me. An incredibly tall man with very dark eyes and a full black beard, he wore a great coat made of patchworked animal skins, a bearskin hat, and heavy riding boots. An insanely warm outfit for what was a bright summer’s day. I sensed he was an exile from a distant land and asked about his long journey through what I understood to be the 20th century in order to reach this peaceful alpine valley. His reply stunned me: Oh, that journey wasn’t so difficult. I’ve been wandering since 1300BC. He
then proceeded to describe his life at that time: *I delivered burning embers to people’s hearths for them to use as fire-starters.* An image appeared as he told me this – of a small tray-backed wagon being pulled along deep-rutted paths, his embers encased in a heavy leaden box. At each farmer’s door he would open the box, extract several coals with a small shovel, and place them into the hearth to help the wood, dung or peat therein to catch alight.

His message – and task – may have been very simple, but the scope of my understanding from our brief exchange was as deep as it was broad. In that moment, I saw how each lifetime is relatively ‘short’ and each journey ‘not so dramatic’ in the fullness of a soul’s longevity. And I knew that I had known him before – a felt-sense that I had followed him and his ‘wagon’, learning like an apprentice as he shared wisdoms over a longer time. Now, in this particular time-space encounter, we had effected reciprocal recognition relevant to my current task. Placing fire embers in people’s hearths remained his symbolic work from his Malakut home 3300 years after his actual task on Earth. Perhaps he had already been a prophet at that time, perhaps just a wandering tinker sharing his truth. Yet I felt it as one-and-the-same: life is spiritual practice, after all. No longer did I need to call a disembodied voice HMV. Now, each time we meet or each time ‘words form’, I know they are teachings brought to life by Mr1300BC. And I am blessed that he is my guide.

The world is full of sceptics, however, who believe that a teacher or guru or guide must take physical form, be in the here-and-now for students or disciples to sit in his or her literal presence in order to be able to learn. Indeed for many years I wrestled with my supposed ambivalence to a particular path or following a set of teachings exclusively. Yet each time I was on the verge of making a commitment – to one tradition or another, at the very least desirous of membership in a community of like-minds – words would form and visions present to confirm that my path was necessarily, in this lifetime, to walk alone with the Alone. The mediating influence of a particular set of rituals or spiritual practices would muddy the transmission in my case, a narrow opening to the source rendering the light ruddy-pink and not fully radiant. I had been told, and shown, that my door needed to be fully open between the worlds; my facilitator, my doorway Mr 1300BC, and the practices evolving out of our direct relation, our dialogic engagement, ensuring the embers in my hearth would never go cold.

Nevertheless it was with a modicum of relief that I learned that a non-physical guide was not as unusual or dubious a proposition as the sceptics would have it. Jung’s guide, whom he named Philemon, led him on many journeys through the collective unconscious, teaching him about the inner worlds of the psyche: ‘Philemon … brought home to me the crucial insight that there are things in the psyche which I do not produce, but which produce themselves and have their own life. Philemon represented a force which was not myself. … I held conversations with him, and he said things which I had not consciously thought … He said I treated thoughts as if I generated them myself, but in his view thoughts were like animals in the forest, or people in a room, or birds in the air. … It was he who taught me psychic objectivity, the reality of the psyche. … Psychologically, Philemon represented superior insight. He was a mysterious figure to me. At times he seemed to me quite real, as if he were a living personality. I went walking up and down the garden with him, and to me he was what the Indians call a guru’ (*Jung* 1995, pp.207-8).

Interestingly, Jung also enjoyed hearing that, while different to the norm, his experience was not completely unknown. He relates meeting a ‘highly cultivated elderly Indian … a friend of Ghandi’s’ with whom he spoke generally about the relationship between guru and chela (disciple) and about the gentleman’s own experience of same, ‘whereupon he replied in a matter-of-fact tone, “Oh, yes, (mine) was Shankaracharya.” “You don’t mean the commentator on the Vedas, who died centuries ago?” I asked. “Yes, I mean him,” he said to my amazement. “Then you are referring to a spirit?” I asked. “Of course it was his spirit,” he agreed. At that moment I thought of Philemon. “There are ghostly gurus too,” he added. “Most people have living gurus. But there are always some who have a spirit for teacher” (*Jung* 1995, p.209).

In the Islamic Sufi tradition, there are also those who have no visible teacher. According to Rumi translator, Coleman Barks, Kharraqani (d.1034) commented: “I am amazed at those who declare that they require this or that master. You are well aware that I have never been taught by any man. God
was my guide, though I have the greatest respect for all the masters.” Others in this line are Attar of Nishapur, who was guided by the being of light of Hallaj Mansar, and Ibn Arabi, who was a disciple of Khidr, the invisible master of those who are masterless. Khidr’s guidance does not consist in leading all uniformly to the same goal. Khidr helps one attain to the Khidr of one’s individual being, the spring of life, the esoteric truth’ (Barks 2003, p.191). In this essay, I delve into Ibn Arabi’s experience of walking alone with the Alone in greater depth, and how it led to my own realisation of the truth via some very treasured ‘words formed’.

**The reality-behind-appearances**

While Jung claimed his relationship with Philemon was later ‘relativised’ by the emergence of other figures, my experience has been that – irrespective of the guise in which the guide appears or ‘words form’ – I can trust my felt-sense to discern the reality-behind-appearances. If it is one-and-the-same presence, I *sense* it. The spiritual philosopher, David Spangler, describes a being with whom he has frequent contact generally appearing as a brown bear but at times adopting different forms. Nevertheless Spangler *senses* his core presence regardless of ‘dress’: ‘He has never explained why he changes from time to time, but I get the impression it’s just for fun, like we might dress in a different style now and again for the novelty of it’ (Spangler 2010, p.148). Once, however, he asked Bear to show himself as he really was – the result was a complex pattern of energy which led Spangler to report: ‘This form is awesome and beautiful, but I have to admit, I find it easier to relate to him as a bear!’ (ibid.).

For me, this is a central tenet of the relation we establish with the *ganz andere*, the profoundly other. Reciprocal recognition, founded on a *way of love*, guides such relations but they are certainly simpler to negotiate if there is something in the other to which we can relate as a natural matter-of-course. Otherwise the experience can be so overwhelming it shuts down all cognition like a computer freezing from information-overload. Like Spangler I have had experiences where complex patterns of energy sought to engage, but in the moment I am so overcome by awe and wonderment at the sheer reality of the reality-behind-appearances that it’s as if I’ve been hit by a stun-gun. My mode of being is such that I learn better, more fully, when the task of my translator is not so intensely challenged by alterity. Mimicking physical life-forms to varying degrees, just as Otherworld landscapes mimic our physical world to a more or less extent, helps the brain’s sense-making.

Knowing this, Mr1300BC appears in different ‘dress’ depending on the insight being communicated; or his ‘words form’ relevant to the message being imparted. He is never too ‘out there’ that I don’t have the opportunity to at least make a ham-fisted attempt at translation, at integrating the meaning of his teaching. I have found, therefore, that a semblance of appearances tends to *facilitate* my understanding more than the direct energetic reality underlying same. Respectful of my alterity, and supremely patient with *my* learning challenges once beyond the threshold, he is abundantly aware that direct apprehension of the infinite can only be embraced in the context of humankind’s limited capacity to comprehend infinitude. We each carry the *spark of love* that is our connective thread to the *Ground of Being*, but to *animate* this link and light the way, a living presence is needed, the living presence of an inner guide so our way is not lost on the way to the source …
An open letter to sceptics

What, of course, I have been reflecting on for the duration of this essay is the way in which mystical experience constellates for me – principally as ‘words formed’ but also as visionary meetings with and teachings facilitated by an inner guide to the rhizomatic wonder of a never-ending becoming landscape. It goes by the name of the collective unconscious in Jung-speak, the Malakut in Ibn Arabi-speak, the subtle worlds in Spangler-speak, the Otherworld in mine. It is the rich compost, the secund swamp, the humus-laden fertile soil of the Ground of Being from which all life, all creation springs. And, with my door fully open, it is a space accessible by dream, meditation, and spontaneous waking vision as much as by the primal fact of being the spark of love, living the spark of love in each in-breath, each out-breath. It is communion, pure and simple, between my soul and the integrating principle of the universe, the ultimate spiritual reality which, as Huxley writes, is ‘perceived as simultaneously beyond the self and in some way within it’ (Huxley 2009a, p.15).

And yet. And yet. How to share this wonder, this joy, beyond the circle-of-self which inherently trusts to the validity of these direct perceptions of the numinous? Sceptics have long denied the existence of mystical experience. In frustration, Lorca writes of his hecho poética (poetic fact): ‘If you ask me why I wrote a thousand glass tambourines were wounding the dawn, I will tell you that I saw them, in the hands of angels and trees, but I will not be able to say more’ (Hirsch 2002, p.5). Likewise, Rilke experienced how lines burst out of him, ‘came to him unbidden, and in the strongest possible contrast to the preceding ones’ as if he had ‘permeated the membrane between the inner and outer worlds, mystically touched a greater unity’ (Hirsch 2002, p.43). Hirsch also cites the Nobel Prize-winning Polish writer Czeslaw Milosz who ‘always insisted that his poems come to him as dictations, that he is seized by trances: “I am no more than a secretary of the invisible thing”’ (Hirsch 2002, p.72).

Still the sceptics rail. Huxley’s wry response? ‘It should be remembered that to those who have never actually had it, any direct intuition must seem subjective and illusory. It is impossible for the deaf to form any idea of the nature or significance of music’ (Huxley, ibid).

In the same spirit, Jung concluded his Terry Lectures at Yale in 1937 with this open letter to sceptics: ‘There is no question of belief, but of experience. (Mystical) experience is absolute. It is indisputable. You can only say that you have never had such an experience, and your opponent will say: “Sorry, I have.” And there your discussion will come to an end. No matter what the world thinks about (mystical) experience, the one who has it possesses (a) great treasure ... He has pistis and peace. Where is the criterion by which you could say that such a life is not legitimate, that such experience is not valid and that such pistis is mere illusion? Is there, as a matter of fact, any better truth about ultimate things than the one that helps you to live? ... Nobody can know what the ultimate things are. We must, therefore, take them as we experience them. And if such experience helps to make your life healthier, more beautiful, more complete and more satisfactory to yourself and to those you love, you may safely say: “This was the grace of God”’ (Jung 1938, p.113-4).

Suffice it to say that conducting my PhD research with the support of such conversation partners as Huxley, Jung, Lorca and Rilke helped me to learn to trust in myself, and my experiences. It is thanks to them as well as a wonderful teacher in the form of Mr1300BC that I share now what I have learnt, as they themselves shared.

Yet my especial thanks goes to Laleima who pried the door of my heart wide open in the first place. It was she who empowered me to translate her life into the imperfect and faulty afterlife known as The Taste of Translation. And, so-empowered, I have the blessed good fortune to stay tuned to the voices of the Otherworld like a pearl diver in the spirit of Benjamin – uplifting teachings to help restore balance to a world where perhaps, finally, there will be enough love.