# Terpsichore - The Muse of Dance (Sitting Down!)

This is the story behind the story, the facts behind the fiction, showing how the real life of the writer translates into the fantasy world of the narrator. I now invoke the muse whose name means Whirler to introduce the autobiographical bit of my website. In revealing material from behind the scenes of my creative writing process, I plan to give a further answer to the critical question, 'where do writers get their ideas from?'

Let's pick up where Polyhymnia left off, at a working definition of divine inspiration, and stitch in my own empirical evidence, gathered while writing *Translating the Muse's Tale* and other novels.

I never felt that my hands were moving automatically, or being controlled by another power; no famous spirit guide, no dead writer made booming announcements in my mind. I never lost consciousness or entered a trance-like state; and always remembered what I'd written, when coming back to it later. I never spoke in tongues, save the odd 'hmm' and 'hah!' of a novelist at work. Those features of channelled writing, though, are distinct from the common experience of creativity.

Few poets or novelists on the literary timeline claim to have written 'automatically'; but many hint at something similar. Seamus Heaney sums it up; '…the best moments are those when your mind seems to implode and words and images rush of their own accord into the vortex' (2002 p. 21). Where does it pour from, this 'influence' that I've experienced too?

The words that seem to come from nowhere, quicker than thought, when I wasn't even trying them. Characters that didn't exist one minute, and a page or so later are saying things I could never have imagined. Loose ends tied up in exquisite narrative solutions, overnight. Miraculous rhymes found. Mysterious dialogues with some inner editor or agent. These voices in the writer's head; to what extent are they heavenly?

In the first stages of my writing process, when I was whittling that new novel out of thin air, I regularly practiced a spinning meditation, as seen in the 'whirling dervishes' of Eastern spiritual tradition. Taught to me by a yoga teacher in suburbia, this exercise involved a long warm-up of centring moves, before starting to spin on the spot, faster and faster to a twenty-minute ecstatic soundtrack, without getting dizzy. I learnt how to whirl until the room was a blur; feeling as relaxed and peaceful as a stroll down a country lane. In the right meditative state, I could then slow down gradually and stop completely; no stumbling, no falling over or feeling sick. The room may have been moving, but I was still. Like the well-known dervishes, I was

trained to raise one arm skyward and point the other at the floor as I spun, purposely conducting an esoteric power. This is the condition in which I conceived the novel; the position in which I received my story about channelling between human and divine. (I practiced this for a year or so before writing Translating The Muse's Tale but couldn't do it now without total retraining: so probably don't try it at home!)

In the other Muse essays (click on Calliope or Clio), I have described an ontology of inspiration. So many creative and critical writers refer and cross-refer to it that there is a web of concurrence with my thesis. This question remains; is the phenomenon we're calling 'divine inspiration' a subconscious or a supernatural process? By referring in detail to the production of my own novel and essays, I propose to discover more about where ideas come from. My plot, characterization, dialogue, imagery; recycled from real life material, hidden and forgotten; or generated by some other force, some higher form, equally unseen?

My novel is almost an autobiography. The language is stylised, the imagery surreal, the plotting psychedelic; but all the characters are driven by an autobiographical impulse. It's a story about me and people I know, set in places frequented at the time I started writing (a long PhD sentence ago); so everything I say in the book is 'true', but none of it actually happened like that. The scenery, the characters, the dialogue have been translated from the real to the imaginary.

Some of this is literal, some is twisted; but it shows how tight the story is intertwined with my life. In the introduction:

> 'My mother is called Juno, after the queen of heaven; and my sister is called Hazel, after the twigs you use for divining. My name is Angela. Actually, that's just a loose translation; but if I said it my own tongue, you'd probably cry.
>
> 'My mother is a teacher, my sister is an artist and I am a priestess. They had vocational training, but anyone can do what I do. It's a no-brainer. I simply sit in the big black hole where my head would be if I were human. I just watch the darkness and listen to the silence inside me. This sounds like nothing, but it's really something; because in that empty space the Gods are found.' [Habens 2009, p.6]

My mother is actually June, and my sister is Heather; though she might have been called Hazel. And I might have been Angela instead of Alison; on the list of baby names my parents compiled in 1967. It fitted the narrator of *Translating the Muse's Tale*; for its etymological link to angel, a 'messenger of god'. Angela would be speaking from behind the

scenes of divine inspiration, her hand on the automatic pen of the writing process; my alter ego in higher realm (though she thinks hers is the real world).

In real life, my mother was a primary school teacher, an expert in music and special needs. My sister was a dancer, touring with a famous contemporary company. When I was younger, I wished I was my sister. Jealous of her talent, I would order her to dance; then sit and watch, pretending it was me. The fact that I always had ‘a way with words’ and was aware, as soon as I could write, how to make them do anything I wanted in the world, didn’t yet lure me like the thrill of performance art. Later, I was happy to make the letter Ps pirouette, do arabesques with my Ts and shimmy the Rs; so Terpsichore, the Muse of Dance, Seated, has a special significance for me.

In my novel the dancing had to translate into a more sedate art, because the inhabitants of my ‘Real World’, a planet analogous with ours, have a surprising physical feature:

> ‘Proper people never cut their umbilical cords. We don't sever the bond that binds us together, we don't snip it with the ceremonial scissors at birth. We can't. It's a lifeline between mother and child, grandchild and great-grandchild. If we cut it, we die. Not just one of us, all of us; and if it is split accidentally, we cannot stem the flow of opalescent blood; the spill never heals. Mother and child both die, and mother's mother and child's child.’ [Habens, 2009, p. 4]

Luckily, this hardly ever happens! My own close-knit family is personified in this imagery, with an extra touch, consciously added, from theories I’d read about how glowing cords link our astral bodies. Squinting in a certain light at my family and friends, I could almost see these connections, so embodied them in my alien characters.

The first-person narrator as a priestess reflected a growing confidence in myself; as both a literary adept (I had three books published before writing this) and as an esoteric practitioner. Ahead of each day’s sitting at the computer, my favourite meditation focussed on each ‘chakra’ in turn, breathing in and out a different colour. Red for the base of the spine, as I sat cross-legged on the floor; orange and yellow, for the reproductive and digestive centres of the body; green for the heart; blue for the throat. I visualised a colourful washing of the glandular body, purifying each node with a higher vibration, ending on indigo for the ‘third eye’ or hypothalamus, with violet for the crown of the head. It’s easy to see traces of this rainbow spirit in my cast-list:

> ‘Hazel is a visual artist. With a single colour she can flex a whole area of our lives. Great strength of beauty-muscle is required. Purple is her speciality; not many people can clench that colour. It's considered very daring.

> Yellow and orange are easy choices, natural extensions of our seasons. Just breathing in and out is yellow; sighing and sweating is orange; the stuff than happens every day, at the obvious end of the spectrum.
>
> Red is harder to do, but it's very popular. We go red all the time. Anger, embarrassment, passionate love: it's the stuff that most of our art is made of. But purple moves beyond this, into a place of sensual touch, something we tend to be strangers to, being essentially intangible.' [Habens, 2009, p.18]

Thus far, my ideas were consciously chosen to create a parallel setting, the place where my story is channelled from. The novel starts with a girl in front of a blank screen, an empty page, wondering what to write. Called Alison, she's the human version of me. In order to invent her alter-ego in the spirit world, I 'translated' a year of my real life into that other realm; so I could track the development of a parallel personality, who would send the story through.

First drafted before I had children, the novel is set against the backdrop of my two (part-time) jobs; sci-fi pastiches of the real workplaces, where my opposite number Alleysun could be seen. The first job was at a day centre for people with learning difficulties. No one there could read or write, many could not walk or talk. I learned more from them than from anyone I met at my other job, which was at the university.

It was usual to be hugged or kissed or greeted in a surreal way on arrival at work in the day centre. People with profound disabilities showed me the bottom line, with dignity; what it meant to be human, to have a self and survive in society. A man who could only repeat what he'd heard on last night's TV quiz shows waited each morning with the welcome; 'and the mystery voice is….' A woman who had to be fed and have her 'nappies' changed would go about the routine of each hour with whoops of non-verbal joy that put my little problems into perspective; and seemed to tell of a bigger picture just behind the walls of the institutional bathroom. A girl who most people had no more communication with than a goldfish would hum three notes after me, repeating the pattern just clearly enough to imply that there was someone inside the severely brain damaged body, with its bright ginger hair and eyes that would never make contact. A man my age, who looked like a goblin in a wheelchair, his deformed body half my size, with no recognisable English, knew every note of every opera by Mozart or Wagner by heart, and had a twinkle in his eye that hinted at the soul of as great a composer.

The day centre where I worked three times a week translated almost brick-for-brick into the Home for Distressed Singalos; and some of the people I met there turned almost word-for-word into characters in my novel:

> 'In the entrance hall a distressed Singalo is spinning. Her name is Dot. She is small, with raw, unfinished features. Her voice is loud but lacks resonance; it's scratchy, like the rough edges of sound.

"They didn't even bother to say hello," she is shouting.
"Hello Dot," we say.
"Do you want to hear me swearing?" she demands.
"No thanks Dot," we reply.
"They didn't even bother to hear me swearing," she screams in her tortured monotone, spinning more vehemently as we pass her by.
She says the same thing every day. Last time we came, dazed from flying with the eyes open, I said yes, we would like to hear her swearing. She changed the subject then. Secretly, I think she doesn't know how to swear.' [Habens, 2009, p. 20]

Working with Dorothy was also a type of training for writing this novel; it introduced me to some background reading from the 'new age' bookshelf on matters of mental and physical disability, and whether being 'differently abled' could bring about accelerated spiritual development. I immersed myself in texts on how autism, in particular, can manifest various psychic phenomena; and in theories of Karma that try to explain the mysterious allocation of genes, with plots involving past lives.

Serious stuff, but my approach is a punning one in places, the translation superficial. I call one 'distressed singalo' Surely Valiumtime; and give another one 'Up Syndrome', a silly play on 'Down's'. One family are named after the members of a whole body (The Head, Necky, Kneena) to show their contiguity; and though shallow-seeming, it is worth noting the autobiographical point here, too; those characters are based on Nicky and Nina, my best friends at school.

I wanted to show a situation in which the muse works 'both ways', so that it's hard to tell whether Alison is telling Angela's story, or Angela is telling Alison's. Mishearing the heavenly voice, misconstruing the human doings; the mistakes are important for the tone of the tale. And autobiography provided the source material for anthropomorphising the alien.

So another new-age hobby of mine featured in the routine of my fictional trio of females. I sang with a small group of women friends; *a capello* and occasionally *al fresco*, we tried everything from Negro spirituals to Gregorian chants. I use the experience undiluted, below. Though the imagery is fantasy, the words were how I felt in real life.

'My church is built by chanting. The song is just surrender; it starts when I stop fighting the urge to be singing. Columns of white noise reach the ceiling, the high point when we are no longer singing it, it is singing us. We don't make up the words, the words make up us. We don't choose the tune, the tune chooses us. And of the three voices we can hear, we can no longer tell which of them is our own.' [Habens, 2009, p.38]

In the real world of my invention, there is no time as such; yet the structure of the novel follows the pattern of my working week. When I wasn't with the wise folk of the day centre, I

would be with the clever ones, at university. Teaching Creative Writing meant I should know where ideas came from. Training students to track the development of their drafts, from first to finished; to log the decisions of their craft, from conception to completion; meant I could work like that too. Technique, consciously used, dictated the form of my novel, as I practiced the ballad and epic poetry preached that day in class; experimenting with a haiku here, a villanelle there, as I strove for virtuosity; very different to the 'genius' of the blind, the deaf, the dumb poets and monks met on the webpages of Calliope and Polyhymnia.

The word-processing package I used on my first computer, 'Wordperfect 5.1', featured white letters against a sky blue background; and this figured in the story, too, as my fictional characters strove to 'do blue'. Hours spent staring at a screen the colour of heaven, attempting to put the perfect words in the perfect order and make the ultimate statement, translated into my heroine's quest to go where art has never gone before:

> 'The Singalos from our colour therapy session are getting less distressed.
> "We want to do blue," Surely says. "Next time, let's go all the way."
> "Dare we?" Hazel whispers. "The old lapis lazuli?"
> "The air-force thing, the royal navy what-not, the Oxford and Cambridge hue?" says Juno. "Rather!"' [Habens, 2009, p.196]

With a wave of this wand, the separate souls, the singalos, are able to bond. Like in fairy tale and myth, the mother and father of fantasy, the idea of transformation is key. Something must change at the heart of the narrative so that the problem it begins with, once upon a time, can be solved by the happy ending. Evil stepmother? Ugly sisters? Hungry wolf? It often needs a magical solution, to resolve the problems we put up with in real life. When the characters in *Translating the Muse's Tale* reach blue, it is the story's point of no return; the start of the denouement.

As if this wacky mechanism of change were not enough, my novel has another transformation image more intoxicating still. I've shown, in the essay to Calliope, a tradition of drunk or drugged poets and philosophers; in the essay to Clio, muses and sibyls spun out on mystical herbs or mythical fumes. Maybe it was all an elaborate excuse for the dirty habit I had when I started writing this (now 'kicked'); tobacco. At least a cigarette per page, sometimes several for a paragraph; the clouds of smoke signifying inspiration for me, as the chemicals cast their illusory spell. But I transformed this unhealthy addiction into a heavenly dictat using 'defamiliarisation' and other muse's tricks:

> ‘Despite our fascination with physics, we are not physical beings like you. We don't eat or drink. We do smoke, though not in the sense that you mean it, and it is one of our greatest pleasures.
>
> We call it the Holy Smoke, and it comes over us once in a hundred lifetimes, but a bit like your climactic conditions. Normally we don't have weather; we never feel hot or cold or get wet, except in dreams. Nothing changes, nothing physically affects us, like the Smoke.
>
> Imagine your most Botticelli-beautiful sunset. Picture the breathtaking blues and golds; the candy-floss pink clouds. But don't put them on a distant horizon: let them surround you. Imagine a sunset with yourself as the sun.
>
> In our language the words for both Force and Source translate into yours as Holy Smoke.’ [Habens, 2009, p.16]

This is my Aristotelian moment of ‘reversal and recognition’; the plot turns as the smoke alters perception. When it clears, the autobiographical version shows yet another author using drugs to stimulate creativity, to induce the visions, to delight in their vivid description; to stay seated for hours and hours, peering through the hazy atmosphere at the hallucinated storyline slowly getting longer. Following the damsel with a dulcimer becomes a writer’s religion.

The plain and painful truth is this: my inspiration seems both completely conscious and controlled, yet still has something of prophesy or prediction about it that defies all commonsense explanation.

For example, my father left home when I was sixteen, but had always been to a large extent absent. My growing-up was circumscribed by the ‘threesome’ of females, and the separate man. As a classical musician, he provided a helpful soundtrack to my creative growth; and as a classic eccentric, gave me much to muse on. But if I had to critique his paternity, it would be that his mode of politely baffled rejection made me permanently melancholy, and in need of approval from male figures of authority.

For *The Muse’s Tale*, I translated him. In this book, nobody really has a father on the scene; they can’t, because men are physically attached to their maternal family lines. ‘Otherness’ is normal for dads in the Real World. Underpinning the plot, this trope was, perhaps, slightly therapeutic; but still the ideas come consciously, and even when they seem crazy, the origins are probably autobiographical.

For example, my father died when I was twenty-one. A keen cyclist, I’d seen him free-wheeling into the sunset many times; but then he was actually killed in a road accident, and the sun didn’t rise for a long time. The impact of this collision has found its way into several novels, including the current one; and may ripple in every book I ever write. A longer quote is needed,

here, to show how literal the translation from reality to fantasy is*:*

> ‘My father was one of a family of scientists, who were attempting to reproduce a horse mechanically. It might be hard for you to picture their invention, but hopefully it will help if I say bicycle... They weren't much to look at; as inferior in beauty to our real horses, as your wheeled steeds are to real stallions. However, our bikes would pip your horses to the post.
>
> Imagine an equestrian skeleton fashioned from crystal, each bone and vertebrae flawlessly transparent and sparking with an individual fire. And imagine each vein, each artery, each nerve and sinew a skein of different coloured silk, for the rider to hold like reins; looped at the horse's neck, where all the threads come together in a glossy mane…
>
> The legs that had been pistoning across the prairie were cold to the touch, though their diamond-hard bones glistened, giving the illusion of perspiration. The flanks quivered, though it was the soulless reflex of a machine. I remember being dazzled by it, though we knew it wasn't alive.
>
> "It's blind," little Hazel said, as she poked its glass eye-sockets.
>
> "But I can see where we're going," laughed Dad. That was the last time we saw him. We watched him pedal away on the horse's back. He turned around and waved goodbye.
>
> No one witnessed the accident. Some people reported a flash of light in the sky, thundering hooves. There was a storm, a rainfall of crystal shards, and corpses crisp as autumn leaves, but they never found my father's body in the debris. I think he pedalled himself off the wheel of reincarnation.’ [Habens, 2009, p.74]

On the day my father left home he did turn around and wave goodbye as he cycled away. This snapshot moment works, in my personal shorthand, as the moment of his death in a road traffic accident too. They’re both prototypes for the image I created, above, of an archetypal father/daughter separation. The fantasy estrangement is as real for me; and this is why. The place my father died was the exact point I’d pictured him, in a school assembly more than a decade before, when the hymn words ‘for our fathers in distress’ triggered a spontaneous image of him wheeling a broken bicycle along the roadside in the rain. I could site my role as ‘priestess’, my way with words as shamanic, from this vivid experience; something like the ‘proleptic trance’ that Robert Graves cites as part of his writing process, perhaps (1997, p.334).

It was only self-fulfilling prophecy; but from very young I realised that words could make things happen. In the corridor outside that school hall, where I silently cried in a fateful assembly, there was a notice about me pinned to the board. ‘Alison Proves the Pen is Mightier than the Sword’; I’d won first prize in a local newspaper’s writing competition, a junior typewriter. The cutting was mounted on card and annotated by a kindly librarian; ‘Well Done Alison; A Budding Charlotte Bronte.’ A hundred times that term, I walked past my name in the same sentence as Bronte’s; making me a writer, somehow, before I really was one.

But it feels like I was destined to be. And the novel provides some evidence, if it can be seen as part of a living script, as a draft that seems to predict and predate the live action

unfolding. In a writing process of seven years, there was plenty of time for fiction to become fact; and for fantasy to synchronise with reality.

The uncut umbilical cords, the colour therapy, the karmic shuttlecocks: all this was just setting the scene behind the real object of my desire. The family, the friends, the work, the play: all this was just the backdrop to my main agenda: the romance and the reproduction.

I'd heard of the man who would be my husband before I met him; the famous 'friend of a friend', there were many stories told about him in the oral tradition and in the pub. This chap had the looks of Adonis, the mind of Mr Spock and the soul of Mary Poppins; and somehow, before I met him, I had the feeling that he would be the father of my children. Such 'psychic' phenomena are not completely uncommon; but they become ordinary, everyday experiences in my story, translated into the 'Maternity Message';

> 'One of the best I've ever heard of was at a party, where a pretty flamingo suddenly flew in through the patio doors. To a disco beat the pink bird did a dance of fertility, scattering rose petals everywhere. On each petal was painted the faces of the man and woman, complete strangers before that evening, who were destined to mate; celestial business cards, edged with gold sweat'. [Habens, 2009, p.25]

As the plot of our real-life relationship unfolded it soon transpired that we were two different species. Science versus Art, the number or the letter, atheist against all-theist; our contrasts knew no limit. And so, in the story, Angela gets a sign to mate not with another proper person, but with a singalo. Sighman is modelled on my Richard, with exaggerated features such as scientific detachment and the inability to make appropriate small talk with women. It was going to be tough to persuade him to have a baby.

The original 'Mating Game' was more like the Olympics and lasted much longer than the customised draughts that Angela and Sighman play. Only the strength of my 'Urge to Reproduce' helped me to win the 'Lucky Man'. The snapshot moments of a courtship, the scenes glimpsed every time his objective ball enters her instinctive cup on the mating game board, are a mini homage to the full-length version.

However, they're completely made up. Cosy scenarios of hill-walking and hot-chocolate drinking, the dirty weekend in Venice, the greasy mending of the car; none of these are autobiographical exactly; they're all designed as standard relationship clips to convey in

the blink of an eye the way things are going. With us, at first, it was more IT than Italy (ie. he fixed my computer); driven entirely by my own imagination.

So, the bedroom door as hard to go through as a whirling vortex; the person pogoing solo to music that sticks two fingers up at definition; the untidy apparatus of an alien physics; this is the imagery that came from real life. Ours was a relationship with odds stacked against it:

> '"Do you know what would happen if you and I touched each other like that?" Sighman says.
> "Surprise me," I reply.
> "I'd be smashed to smithereens and you wouldn't feel a thing."
> I don't fancy that much. It doesn't sound very sexy, for either of us. But I'm impressed by my special man's knowledge of the ins and outs of mixed-species mating." [Habens, 2009, p.95]

Sighman eventually saves the day. He accesses their seemingly inaccessible child, and turns out to have been telepathic all along, before saving Angela's life with his technological know-how: metaphors for the true romance, with its constant surprises. Fact meets fiction in a full embrace, in the long writing process of this novel: on the second draft, I put in a poem, 'On The Marriage of Art and Science', that I had written for our real life wedding.

Yes; by the time of re-writing, by divine intervention, the 'single green-eyed man' and I were married with two children. What was less expected; we lived in a church. Those columns and cornices that I had conjured up in story terms came into physical being. Living behind the arch-shaped door, between the stone buttresses, looking through stained glass windows to an area of outstanding natural beauty; my creativity soared under our vaulted ceiling.

The theory behind the practice was taking on a cathedral outline, too. I wished to write the whole literary history of inspiration; a time-line starting from where the Muses sang, at the opening of Hesiod. Keen to leave nothing out of their biography, I traced their appearances in the pages – from papyrus to web - of the chronology. A live encounter with them was now at the centre of the novel; and it was exciting to squeeze a growing body of research into that mythical mountain point:

> '"Welcome to the Hippocrene spring," says our tour guide, "home of inspiration, seat of genius. This water is the traditional source of brilliant ideas, artistic masterpieces, virtuoso performances. You don't have to be a superstar to drink here, though. Art teachers and therapists are equally filled with the divine gift

> of creativity; even the critic may sip from the same cup as the artiste he reviews."'
> [Habens, 2009, p.159]

A key creative writing lesson, 'show, don't tell' (loosely based on an essay of D.H. Lawrence's) has no tougher application than in the PhD novel. When I started *Translating the Muse's Tale* I knew less than ten percent of the theories of inspiration that I knew by the end. But the rule is; let only the tip of your information iceberg, just a secret gleam of everything you know, break the surface of your story. As Chekhov puts it, "Don't tell me the moon is shining, show me the glint of light on broken glass" (The Quote Garden, 2009).

In my book, theory and practice enmesh completely in the image of the web (see Clio's page for the full gleaming). The critical and creative chapters were crafted side-by-side, using the same list of web-related words, spun from the thesaurus. Only one of them, gridiron, didn't fit into the essay as well as the novel's denouement:

> 'Staring between the muscular metal branches of the machine, Sighman reads the cobweb message; a latticework of laser-fine lines, where pregnant dewdrops hang for a pendulous moment, making the mesh gleam at that point, then shimmy off the gridiron maze.
>
> That's all the computer is, in close up. Back a step or two, where we're standing, there is the appearance of moving pictures. Figures, faces, landscapes; animated by droplets of radiant water on a silk screen. A plot is woven in glistening images on the web; characters are coming to life in the warp and weft of the narrative loom.' [Habens, 2009, p.215]

How to keep them all out of the story; Spiderwoman, Arachne, Philomela, Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty? Novel-writing generally spins straw into gold; but the PhD novelist, working with gold as a given, is in danger of turning the learning of the literary canon back to straw, by over-padding the fiction with fact; or over-blowing its critical importance.

That 'boast' is commemorated in my work. The arrogant spinners and weavers of fairytale and myth who believe their skill matches that of the ultimate creator are echoed in my Angela, who thinks she's better than everyone else, the special child of god, chosen over the other proper people.

Starting *The Muses Tale*, I had hardly known literary rejection; having my first two novels accepted for publication with unnatural ease. Though a third eventually followed, it was not without a normal pile of rejection letters received; and it's possible that I won't ever write publishable commercial fiction again. The pride and the fall have both produced my academic narrative, with Angela's coming down to earth, being made flesh, as penance for her flashy ideas, for hogging the Hippocrene spring.

Terpsichore, as a creative writer, whether whirling or seated, should kneel at the source of inspiration. This sub-plot has gestated long and hard.

The novel itself is a fertility object. It was originally motivated by broodiness; the whole thing a meditation on my 'UTR' (the urge to reproduce). If there was musing, it sang of the man, the matrimony, the maternity. (Repeating the letter M is a sign of pregnancy, in the 'real world'.) Still, it was a big surprise to find myself expecting a child, literally days after drafting what was then the end of the story. The surprise could not have been bigger when, writing the definitive version seven years later, the same thing happened again. Much less planned than the novel, was my third baby, willed into physical fact by the fecundity of the fiction. For the third draft, I consciously use a spread of sub- and super-conscious material to cover the 'real world' equivalent of childbirth;

> 'The guests are wearing masks: surgical, rather than social, the translator says. They are made of white; pure light that takes a lot of energy to summon up, so is saved for special occasions like a Coming-Out Ball.
>
> People walk through each other like doorways to get into the world, make dramatic entrances through their mother's delicate frames; and my portal, I think, will splinter before this baby crashes through.
>
> The cord finally slips out, with a flash of white light that starts to yellow as soon as the eyes of spectators are on it and a squelching sound. Then there is silence. Silence except for the red sweat of my labour dripping onto their surgical ball gowns. Everyone is looking at the baby on the end of my cord; and I follow their gazes down the quivering umbilicus to see it too.
>
> But it is not a baby.' [Habens, 2009, p.187]

Books can have a moment of conception too. There's a point at the beginning of this, a totally unremarkable instant that I can virtually date and place under the sloping ceiling of an attic flat in Southsea, when the idea for *Translating the Muse's Tale* came into my head. There's a sense in which the whole story came at once; but so much of what was going to be in it I didn't yet know, so how could that be the case? That would make it a premonition, not just of itself, but of the real life facts that produce its fiction. And that would make the writer a prophet; or at least, a 'high' priestess.

Working on the same novel, with several years in between, I experienced something very subtle and difficult to explain; but which confirms for me the validity of my thesis. I have to call it synchronicity. Returning to a page written 'many moons ago', I would find a resonance so particular it was as if I or the writing somehow knew the exact day I'd come back to it; some reference or other, probably recognisable only to me, gave the feeling that the book was a prediction of the future. Not of the big things that would happen, necessarily;

but of small, sometimes insignificant details, that seemed even harder to ignore for their coded truths. The long time between first and second drafts, and less time between second and third, disappeared as I came back to each page in the permanent present tense of the inspired author.

My husband was my muse, long before I knew about The Muses. He appears as the male lead in most of my novels; normally as a handsome enigma to crack. Sphinx-like too, then; with a siren saxophone. He has joined me at the chasm where Python's corpse makes intoxicating fumes; and at the mountain spring. We have danced in horse-shoe formation and chanted in harmony. I can't make the same claim for the nine named goddesses of inspiration, personified in mythology; so this time must concede to Richard, representing Science, that what I can't see doesn't exist. Hopefully for me, the link between blind and visionary will hold.

Like dreams, the daily pages are made up of the sights, sounds, smells of an author's existence. The words chosen, the images used, might date from significant events in the past, random moments from the present; or even, it seems, the stuff of the future. If so both facts and fictions might be pre-ordained, as Edward Fitzgerald suggests in his translation of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1972, p.50).

> 'The Moving Finger writes; and having writ,
> Moves on; nor all your piety not wit
> Shall lure it back to cancel half a line
> Nor all yours Tears wash out a word of it.'

Even with copious redrafting, if there is any sense in which my book is already written then my life must also already be lived. The muses that sung this to me may have been a subconscious process or may be supernatural; but either way are no less mysterious. For if I have got my ideas from the nine whispering voices in my ears; then where did they get their ideas from?

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