Inspiration

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INSPIRATION

The strange influence that stimulates the creative or imaginative impulse, commonly believed to be prompted by divine or supernatural agency, and sometimes equated with possession. The word 'inspiration' is derived from the inhalation of trance-inducing fumes from somniferous incense that the ancient oracles used to burn to help them attain a prophetic state.

Inspiration is a condition of sublime xenophrenia which descends in a sudden flash without warning, sometimes in a vision, sometimes during work, and sometimes during some commonplace activity. At the moment of inspiration, as in ecstasy, an individual finds himself seemingly in contact with another force beyond the self. The mind is overwhelmed, feeling and understanding become intensified to an extraordinary degree, and one is able to grasp instantly and as a whole something that had so far been perceived only vaguely and in fragments.

Divine inspiration was usually associated with prophets, sages and men of exalted wisdom, but inspiration of another order is the common experience of poets, artists, authors, musicians and even scientists, some of whom have accomplished their best work under the stimulus of an external impulse that cannot be accounted for. This experience is vouched for by the inspired men themselves, as the following brief catalogue indicates. It is to be noted that in most cases some previous work or knowledge is necessary for inspiration to be useful, and any attempt to write a good poem or paint a beautiful picture is unlikely to be very successful, however grand the inspiration, if one is not basically competent to deal with the material. 'Fortune', said Louis Pasteur (d. 1895), 'favours the prepared mind.'

Socrates (d. 399 BC) ascribed all that was best in his life, to the guidance received from his 'daemon' or inner voice; and Plato in his *Ion* makes Socrates describe the sudden access of power that imbues the poet when the Muses inspire him:

> The authors of those great poems which we admire, do not attain to excellence through the rules of any art, or while reason remains with them. They utter their beautiful verses in a state of inspiration, possessed, as it were, by a spirit not their own, and in a state of divine insanity. For whilst a man retains any portion of the thing called reason he is utterly incompetent to produce poetry or to vaticinate, and every rhapsodist or poet is excellent in proportion to the extent of his partici-

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pation in the divine influence, and the degree in which the Muse itself has descended on him.

Philo Judaeus (d. AD 50), a Jewish mystic and philosopher of Alexandria, said: 'Sometimes I have come to my work empty, and have suddenly become full. Ideas were showered upon me through some invisible power and through its influence I have become inspired and have known neither where I was, nor who was present, nor what I did or wrote.' St Teresa (d. 1583), speaking of her great mystical works, said that though they were uncontrolled and inspired, and written at immense speed without stopping to correct, they were imitative, like the speech of a parrot that repeats yet cannot understand the things he says. Jacob Boehme (d. 1624) produced many of his writings not as acts of deliberate and rational composition, but in a state of illumination, 'a motion from on high' that seized him and forced him to write. 'Before God', he wrote, 'I do not know how the thing arises in me without the participation of my will. I do not even know that which I must write, and how it comes to be written.' Madame Guyon (d. 1717) says, 'I was myself surprised at the letters which Thou didst cause me to write, and in which I had no part save the actual movement of the hand.'

The Italian poet, Torquato Tasso (d. 1595), author of *Jerusalem Delivered,* never ceased to believe that he was accompanied by a familiar spirit who prompted him in all he did, and he often had visions of angels and devils from whom he received snatches of verse which he embodied in his work. John Milton in 1643 wrote of one of his odes that it was written 'without any previous deliberation, but with a certain impelling faculty for which I know not how to account'. Johann Friedrich von Schiller (d. 1805) said of his own inspired moods, 'I have frequently wondered where my thoughts come from. They flood through me independent of the action of my mind.' William Blake (d. 1827) said that he wrote certain poems 'from immediate dictation, without premeditation and even against my will'. He insisted that he was under the direction of messengers from heaven daily and nightly, and stated on his death bed that the credit for all his works belonged not to himself, but to his 'celestial friends' who dictated to him. John Keats (d. 1821) was often astonished at some of his own work which struck him as 'the production of another person rather than my own'. In the opinion of Johann Wolfgang Goethe (d. 1832), all great human achievements, including works of art and literature, are beyond anyone's control and 'are to be regarded as unexpected gifts from above'. According to Alfred de Musset (d. 1857), 'It is not work, it is listening; it is as if some unknown person were speaking in your ear.' The Indian sage and poet, Rabindranath Tagore (d. 1941), writing of one of his works explained: 'I am not the author of the book. I merely held the pen while a disembodied being wrote what he wished, using my pen and mind. There is an unseen hand that drives the spirit on, like a submerged propeller.'

Many musicians have confirmed the same inexplicable power that

overtakes them. The life of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (d. 1791) is filled with instances of a sudden access of inspiration that seized him, often at the most unlikely times. The idea for the whole of the *Magic Flute* quintet came to him while playing billiards. Ludwig van Beethoven (d. 1827) said, 'Inspiration is for me that mysterious state when all the forces of nature become instruments, and the entire world seems to form one vast harmony.' Hector Berlioz (d. 1869) for long tried to complete a musical passage in vain, until one day as he rose from a dive while swimming in the Tiber the whole passage occurred to him ready formed. Richard Wagner (d. 1883), sick with dysentery and almost in a trance, suddenly felt he was sinking in a mighty flood of water, and from the surge and roar emerged the musical shape which became the orchestral prelude to *Rheingold.* Johannes Brahms (d. 1897) when gripped by the power of inspiration was in a veritable fit of trembling. He wrote, 'Vibrations thrill my whole being; ideas flow instantaneously upon me with such power and speed that I can grasp only a few. They quickly fade unless I get them on paper.' Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (d. 1893) said, 'The germ of a composition comes suddenly and unexpectedly. It would be futile to try and put into words the immeasurable sense of bliss I feel. Everything in me quivers and pulsates. If that condition of soul and mind we call inspiration lasted long without intermission, no artist would survive the ordeal.' Sergei Rachmaninoff (d. 1943), another famous Russian composer, told a friend that during inspiration it would seem as if the music swirled around him, not bit by bit, but the total composition. Everything all at once. 'Whence it comes, how it begins, how can I say? It comes up within me and I write it down.'

Emily Brontë (d. 1848) expressed the view, 'The writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always the master, something that at times strangely wills and works for itself.' William Makepeace Thackeray (d. 1863) once admitted that he had been surprised at the observations made by some of his characters. 'It seems as if an occult power were working my pen. The personage does or says something and I ask, How did he come to think of that?' Charles Dickens (d. 1870) declared that the words uttered by his characters were distinctly heard by him, and that when he sat down to write, 'some beneficent power showed it all to me'. George Eliot (d. 1880) felt that in her best works there was a 'not myself' which took hold of her and used her personality as an instrument through which the work was done.

Fyodor Dostoevsky (d. 1881), speaking of the rapture of inspired moments, wrote: 'If this state were to last more than five seconds, the soul could not endure it and would have to disappear. During these five seconds I live a whole human existence, and for that I would give my whole life and not think I was paying too dearly.' Benjamin Disraeli (d. 1881) wrote his novels sometimes as if in trance and often felt keenly the overwhelming power of inspiration. 'I often feel', he said, 'that there is only a step from intense mental concentration to madness.' Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) was, in part, 'written as though blown through the mind as with the rushing of a mighty wind'.

Great painters, working under the surge of inspiration, have often been unaware of how their work came to be done. 'My whole work', said Raphael (d. 1520), 'has been accomplished as it were, in a dream.' The pictures of Vincent van Gogh (d. 1890) came to him 'with a terrible dream-like lucidity' when he was hardly conscious of himself.

Scientists, although living in a more precise and intellectual world, have not been immune to this baffling influence. Speaking of his own subject, astronomy, Johann Kepler (d. 1630) declared: 'The roads by which men arrive at their insights into celestial matters seem to be almost as worthy of wonder as those matters themselves.' Sir Isaac Newton (d. 1727) received by direct intuitive grasp many notions that he found he could not prove. Indeed, one of his discoveries, on the roots of equations, was only proved two centuries after his death. James Watt (d. 1819) saw how the waste of heat in a steam engine could be avoided by condensing steam, in a flash in inspiration during a walk to the golf house. Sir William Hamilton (d. 1865), mathematical physicist, thought of quaternions (a new mathematical method) while strolling with his wife in the streets of Dublin. The German mathematician, Karl Friedrich Gauss (d. 1855), said that he received the solution to one of his mathematical discoveries, 'not by painstaking research but as it were by the grace of God, and as a sudden flash of truth. The riddle solved itself, as lightning strikes.' He confessed that he would not have been able to show the steps by which he arrived at it. Hermann von Helmholtz (d. 1894), German physicist and philosopher, declared that his best ideas had come to him while climbing hills on a sunny day. Henri Poincaré (d. 1912), French mathematician and physicist, told how the solution of a problem struck him suddenly as he stepped into a bus, when he was not even conscious of thinking about it at all.

The philosopher, G. W. F. Hegel (d. 1831), was convinced that he was possessed by a divine spirit that inspired his works and sometimes even dictated what he wrote. Arthur Schopenhauer (d. 1860) believed all his life that he was impelled by some spirit, so much so that he would often stop on the road and argue with it, gesticulating wildly.

Modern psychologists account for all types in inspiration as a welling-up of images and ideas from the individual's own unconscious.

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