

INSPIRATION

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The Observer, March 12, 2006

If the word "inspiration" is to have any meaning,' TS Eliot wrote, 'it must mean just this, that the speaker or writer is uttering something that he does not wholly understand - or which he may even misinterpret when the inspiration has departed from him.' Eliot has a slight doubt about whether the word has any meaning, or any meaning now, because inspiration is something that only originally made sense in a religious context. If you are a religious believer of any denomination you know, or at least you have words for, where your inspiration comes from, however mysterious it may seem; and you may even have an idea about what you can do to invoke it - make sacrifices, do ritual incantations, live ascetically, take drugs, sit down at your desk at the same time every morning, and so on. But for the more secular-minded there is not much language to talk about inspiration without beginning to sound a bit mystical, reliant on some powerful source or force that can't quite be named but can't quite be ignored.

And yet inspiration is a word no one is shy of using now, even though they are not that keen to explain how it might work. It is the kind of magic that people like to believe in, perhaps especially now, in a culture where money can buy virtually everything else of value, and science and technology can create or invent the things we most need. Inspiration, in other words, is a kind of God-term; it refers to something we think of as essential but that we can't, or may not want to, understand. As Eliot suggests, it is like a visitation from something profound and incomprehensible. It reassures us, or at least reminds us, that some of the best things about us are beyond our control.

Whatever it is that feeds us our best lines - the gods or God, the unconscious or the genes, the class war - it is something we depend upon but cannot command. Like God's grace, inspiration doesn't respond to our need or our greed for it. It is not a resource we can exploit; and it doesn't look as if, at least as yet, science or technology can help us get more of it. It isn't exactly measurable.

And it may be this, perhaps more than anything else, that makes inspiration so difficult to describe in its workings, and so enraging in its elusiveness.

In our craving for something we can't count on we will often unwittingly do anything we can to destroy it. Inspiration may not belong to us, but it is only we who can be inspired. And by the same token it is only we who can spoil it.

It is not news, even though it is continually shocking to see, just how much envy insidiously corrodes our pleasure in other people's gifts and talents. What is more difficult to apprehend is just how fearful people often are of their own inspiration, of their own odd and unfounded thoughts, and therefore how prone they are to sabotage it and attack it and trivialize it. Often just by ignoring it. If to be inspired means, as Eliot said, to be even momentarily unintelligible, unrecognizable to oneself, then inspiration is akin to possession, to being taken over. And this, for some reason that is worth considering, does not come naturally to most people.

However much we want inspiration, if it disturbs our normal sense of ourselves then we are going to resist it. Most people are not seeking self-knowledge; they believe - they live as if - they already know who they are. So self-knowledge in this sense is the enemy of inspiration, our best defense against this alien invasion. As in sex, we may long to lose our composure and self-control but there is one thing we desire even more, and that is not to. Self-knowledge protects us from inspiration; inspiration, like sexual desire, undoes us. For non-believers, inspiration is more like sexual desire than anything else; a fascination, a fear, and something we think of as having a secret solitary pleasure attached to it.

So when people fear that domesticity, or a regular job or even therapy will destroy their creativity, it is usually because they have an apprehension that something about themselves is already sabotaging their inspiration, and this is then attributed, delegated to the family, or the work routine or the therapist. Of course, making anything depends on making the time and creating the best conditions for the work; indeed, actively creating the worst possible conditions for one's work is one of the commonest ways people have of sabotaging their inspiration. But it is also true, as anyone knows who has let themselves rely on their inspiration as well as their discipline, that it is willing what cannot be willed to believe that you can make an appointment with your inspiration.

Without practice no one can play a musical instrument, but practice at best creates the conditions in which inspiration can happen; no amount of practice creates or guarantees the inspiration. If a true poet, as poet Randall Jarrell once said, is someone who is struck by lightning several times, then the only thing a poet can do is make sure he keeps going out. The whole notion of inspiration, in this sense, shows us both the limits and necessities of our working practices. You can work at your poetry but you can't work at your inspiration. Self-discipline exposes what the self can't be disciplined to do.

We have glamorized inspiration, idealized the artist possessed by vision to protect ourselves from two simple and apparently contradictory acknowledgments. Firstly, as Eliot among many others attests, inspiration can be extremely disturbing; it can leave us confounded, at odds with ourselves, bemused by the kinds of things we find ourselves making. And secondly, that there is a strange and unsettling ease about inspired work because it comes unbidden; it may require disciplined attention, but not effort, concentration, not diligence. Just as you can't try and have a dream, or decide beforehand what it will be, inspired work, whatever its prehistory of crisis or trauma, can seem to just happen. When Keats wrote that poetry must come as easily as leaves to a tree, or Picasso said, 'I don't seek, I find', they were both as post-Romantic artists reminding us, and presumably themselves, that inspiration is beyond the realm of calculated intentions. It happens unannounced, more like bursting out laughing or making a Freudian slip than a quest or an ordeal. It is an affront to our guilty selves for good things to come easily; and it is an affront to our sovereign selves that good things might come in spite of us and not because of us. That what matters most to us is quite beyond us.

One of the ways we recognize what we think of as inspired works of art - as opposed to pieces of information, or propaganda or advertising - is that they seem to have an unknowable provenance; we can't imagine where Shakespeare's plays, or Mozart's music or Emily Dickinson's poems could have come from. Or how it would feel to be the kinds of people who did such things. And also, by the same token, inspired work tends to have a wildly unpredictable effect; Nazis and nice people can be lovers of Goethe, the gospels can both brutalize people and make them astoundingly loving. When we say that inspired work inspires us we mean, usually, that we are surprised by the effect it has on us.

After it we have thoughts and feelings we did not know we were capable of, and that we may not entirely understand nor be able to give a plausible account of. So to talk about inspiration now is to talk about the fact we still don't know where many of the best things about us come from, that many of them may not be teachable, and that we can't always recognize them - or rather, say what we recognize - when they turn up.

When we are inspired, rather like when we are in love, we can feel both unintelligible to ourselves and most truly ourselves (ie at our best). And inspired art isn't instrumental, isn't the means to an obvious end; it tells us neither what we should do with it nor what we should make of it. So the whole notion of inspiration, perhaps now more than ever, raises two interesting issues. Firstly, it makes us wonder why being unrecognizable to ourselves, finding ourselves surprising, or shocking or bizarre should be at once so disturbing and so attractive (and in some religions, so taboo). And secondly, why depending upon something (or someone) - realizing how little of what we need we can provide for ourselves - so often brings out the worst in us.

We need to be receptive to the unfamiliar; and we need to be able to wait, without certainty, for the thing we want. This, in a sense, is the faith of the believer in artistic inspiration. It is perhaps not surprising that the wish to fake it or the wish to dispense with it altogether is so pervasive. It is difficult to get our minds round something that is so unlike a commodity and, in actuality, so unlike a religion. There are, of course, superstitions around inspiration, and probably all artists have their own; but there are no dogmas about inspiration except that it is required for work of the highest value. And there are no laws, natural or otherwise, of inspiration, except the ironic law that it is mostly unpredictable. And there are no experts who can teach it, though there are people who can teach us how to recognize it. It is, after all, only by consensus that we agree to recognize certain artworks and certain people as inspired in the first place. If the word inspiration is to have any meaning it has to have people who will give it meaning; people who, for various reasons, want to believe in it, and want to get other people to take it seriously.

And yet, like all God-terms, it is open to interpretation, and needs to be because terrible things are also done in its name.

We may want to think well of artistic inspiration but we need to be able to consider our options. It would be possible, for example, to imagine a society that thought the whole notion of inspiration was the invention of irresponsible, decadent people who simply needed to disown what they did, people who refused to take the consequences of their actions; people who were always saying, one way or another, 'it wasn't really me'. From this point of view inspiration would just be bad faith, the alibi of the timid, of those who couldn't bear their own nature (and above all couldn't bear the fact that it was their nature not to understand themselves). These hardliners would want us to face up to what we are doing when we vote in democracies for leaders who have a 'calling', or when we exempt so-called artists from ordinary moral standards, or even admire their terrible behavior. They would tell us that when we do these things we are worshipping at the shrine of inspiration; they would tell us that heeding the call of 'higher powers' can be the most compelling cover story for the most brutal egotism. At its most minimal, they would say that to describe ourselves as living in the lap of the gods tends to be a mixed blessing. That we should see our invention of gods as our intolerance of being human: and our wish to be the chosen ones as our self-cure for our insignificance in the scheme of things. It is worth wondering, they might say, why we are learning belatedly to be wary of inspired world leaders but not of inspired artists.

Even though artists are far more harmless than politicians or businessmen, we need to be able to distinguish now between different kinds of inspiration. The version of inspiration we should trust tends to be enigmatic and disturbing to the person inspired; they don't, as Eliot said, really understand it. And it should not be an incitement, however plausibly put, to harm other people. It should not be permission or instruction to do terrible things so much as the offering up of something new for consideration. In other words, the inspired doesn't use the word inspiration to covertly legitimize his own private dogmas and interests, or to allow himself to claim that he knows what he is doing, and that what he is doing is right. Bad inspiration always wants to convert people, good inspiration merely wants to interest them.

But our inspiration can't tell us what our inspiration is worth. Only we can. When inspiration is recruited as part of our craving for authority - for the authoritative voice either inside us or outside us - we need to be suspicious. When it is used to refer to our potential for strange thoughts and feelings it reminds us of our unfathomable resources. Inspiration makes us choose, it doesn't do our choosing for us.

We still have to work out, among the many things that are written and said, which are the ones that matter to us, and which are the ones that should matter to us: which are the ones that will give us the lives that we want.

Good inspiration draws things to our attention. For believers and non-believers alike, that should be more than enough.