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Inspiration

BEING A HARD-BITTEN (yet now vacillating?) materialist, the concept of inspiration can fill me with sullen resentment. The word seems to insinuate reliance on invisible support or imaginary friends. As though one might wait for the next page to be beamed down (or, more plausibly, up).

However, while employing only the humble tool of methodical imagination to breathe life into my characters, when they do at last stagger in their permutations blinking into the glare of a final draft, I sometimes suffer the writer's trite delusion that, through some dark art, the characters have taken over.

If alchemy, magic or inspiration are entailed in creating something life-like from slues of graphemes, the only basis in my fiction for the metamorphosis from dry stick to breathing flesh is painstaking preparation. The magic, such as it is, flows from no ethereal fount, but from the material itself, the place, the time, the events and, above all, the people whose voices grow louder precisely as my memory of them recedes.

Before I began drafting *November*, before I had a plan of how to reunite the men on the shop-floor of a fictional text, I interrogated each figment about where they lived, whom they loved or feared, what they liked or required, the quality of their inclinations, crimes, schemes, dreads, dreams, their opinions of every other workmate, what possessed their minds, the losses they had suffered, the joys anticipated, their manner of eventual death.



This imaginative raiding expedition applied a principle of equality among the fourteen main characters: if I could conjure one man's wardrobe, another's sweetheart, another's speech, another's schooling, I must picture every man's wardrobe, sweetheart, speech, and schooling, where necessary by souping up my imagination with bookish research into the country or circumstances in which the otherwise intractable person dressed, loved, spoke or was schooled.

Everything hinged on the ability to reach back to those I once knew and to question them as if they were close. By dint of constant re-evocation, the year I spent in the company of the characters' original models long remained as vivid to me as my earliest experiences. I could close my eyes and see the cement floor, hear the crashing machines, smell the scorched plastic, witness my workmates talk.

Insensibly, however, the characters in *November* (Marcel, Rachid, Fernando, Salvatore, Alphonse, etc.) have come to bulk larger in my imagination than do their originals in my black-and-white (though not yet sepia) recollection. As I work on *November's* sequels, whenever I need to refresh my memory it is now easier, more convenient, to refer to the fictional world I have created in that novel than to summon up my real-life memories. Much of what remains to inspire me lives in what I've already given the reader. As you'll have noticed, I've come full circle: the characters into whom I laboriously breathe life return to inspire me.

Who'd have thought it? My hard-bitten materialism, which I feared was vacillating, turns out 490 words later to be merely dialectical.