



## Inspiration

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Lawrence Sail

**Y**OU CAN'T HUNT IT DOWN, but you can hardly be unaware of the possibility of inspiration. It's perceived as a trigger, one perhaps powerful enough to have you leaping out of the bath and running down the street shouting 'Eureka!' Or it is thought of as being of divine origin: as the Prayer Book has it, 'Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire.' Then there are those traditional portraits of the artist gazing skywards, evidently waiting for the Muse to alight. In any case, it seems an outside agency is involved — the writer is inspired by something: inspiration is a prompting. Even in the physiological sense of drawing air into the lungs, it is something *other* that is taken on board.

As well as implying agency or intervention, the notion of inspiration has produced some exotic fruit — from the shamanistic, to Automatic Writing and the idea of the writer as a mere conduit for utterance. Its counterpoint is surely the long haul, the kind of dogged persistence playfully summoned by the American inventor Thomas Edison, with his contention that 'genius is one per cent inspiration and ninety-nine per cent perspiration.'

The writer does not, however, have to depend on such assertions, or even to settle for Edison's downplaying of the whole idea. In fact, I'd like to suggest that inspiration, when it occurs, is more often a reward of close focus and intense working than of visitation: a bonus rather than a living wage. It can be the work of memory and association as well as of the imagination. It's a matter of attentiveness to possibility, even if it may appear to have



more to do with dream than history. In this respect it connects with what Keats called ‘negative capability’ — the entertaining of doubt and uncertainty rather than a wilful rational striving. As he described it in a letter of February 1818, the making of poems involves ‘a prizing of instinct and uncertainty above reason and knowledge’. A more recent take is offered by Seamus Heaney, in a lecture on Gerard Manley Hopkins at the British Academy in December 1974. In what seems a Jungian distinction, he rounds to a comparison of two modes for a writer’s creative activity, designating one as ‘masculine’, the other as ‘feminine’: ‘In the masculine mode’, he suggests, ‘the poetic effort has to do with conscious quelling and control of the materials, a labour of shaping’, while he sees ‘the feminine mode’ as ‘not so much a labour of design as it is an act of divination and revelation’. Considering Hopkins, he contrasts the poet’s ‘masculine forging’ to a principle of ‘feminine incubation’.

Forging and hatching, especially hatching – maybe this is as close as we can get to any threshold to inspiration – a readiness on the part of the writer to attend properly, to allow the work its chance to sing: a waiting on possibilities beyond simply knocking the words into shape.