

[The essay comes from the book *On Inspiration* by Władysław Stróżewski published by the ICC Publishing House in 1993]

# About inspiration

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## 1

Let us start with focusing our attention on that which is obvious, but very important for our further considerations: the root-word of inspiration comes from the Latin *spiritus*, meaning spirit, breath, and also breeze. *Inspiratio*, in purely philological translation, means breathing, breath, infusing of something into something else, infusing of spirit or what is spiritual into the thing that is not spiritual in its essence; further: animation of what is inanimate (if only, after Plato, we accept the strict connection between spirit and life), and, finally, the stimulating of something to action that is in a state of expectation or passiveness, inertia or sleep. *Inspiratio* may also mean inspiration or enlightenment. And the verb *inspiro*, *inspirare* means, i. a. to blow, to breathe, to fan, to inspire. Let us remember that in the description of the famous scene of creation of man in Genesis, the Vulgate uses the verb *inspiro* to describe the animation of man and creation of his soul: *Formavit igitur Dominus Deus hominem de limo terrae, et insp iravit in faciem ejus spiraculum vitae...* [Yahweh God fashioned man of dust from the soil. Then he breathed into his nostrils a breath of life, and thus man became a living being ] (Gen. 2, 7).

In various epochs the concept of inspiration was treated in different ways: there were periods which, like Enlightenment, seemed to do well without it, and there were also times when, as in Romanticism, it was the most important, key concept. In our times it deteriorated again, sharing the fate of the words which are unbecoming to use.

Let us illustrate this with a fragment of Jan Parandowski's *Alchemia słowa* [Alchemy of the Word]: "Inspiration got out of fashion. Today if this word happens to be written, it either carries a shade of irony or is merely a reflexive repetition of an accepted term, a matter of habit like musty, outdated metaphors. The more willingly it is used by the good souls who look at a writing man with sarcasm disguising their uneasiness towards a strange creature. Certain sentiment for inspiration can still be discovered in sculptors: they cannot always overcome their desire to adorn monuments with winged genii flying over a poet or bent towards him in confidential whisper."2

## 2

The notion of inspiration acquired full rights in the domain of Theology, especially in Biblical Theology. All Christian religions agree that the Holy Bible was written on Divine inspiration, and therefore it is an inspired scripture. Here "inspiration" has very precise meaning, in many aspects different from the current understanding of this word. It was—and it is—thoroughly analyzed by theologians, described in detail by the popes' encyclicals and explained by the conciliar documents. In effect, this meaning is so important that at

no risk we may accept it as a specific "major analogue" for all other meanings of "inspiration".<sup>3</sup>

As regards the Catholic Church, the most important enunciations on inspiration are: Leo XIII's Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, Pius XII Encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu*, and The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation accepted by the Second Vatican Council. Writing about the authors of the inspired Scriptures, Leo XIII states that the Holy Spirit, through His "supernatural power inspired them and made them write, and accompanied them in such a way that they properly conceived everything that He ordered and only this, wrote it down faithfully and actually expressed it in infallible and true way. Otherwise He would not be the author of all the Scriptures."<sup>1</sup> And in the Constitution on Divine Revelation we read: "The truths revealed by God that are included and expressed in the Holy Bible were written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. ...For the creation of the Scriptures God chose men, who, using their own abilities and powers, served Him so that with Him acting in them and through them-they, as actual authors expressed in writing everything and only this that he wanted."<sup>5</sup>

One of the most important issues that we meet here is the problem of God's and the writer's roles in the creation of an inspired text. Traditional theology used to refer to the scholastic distinction of the principal cause (*causa principalis*) and instrumental cause (*causa instrumentalis*). The Word of the Bible come from God, who is the principal cause, and from a man, who acts as the instrumental cause. This distinction, however, is becoming outdated. At present it is emphasized that in transmission of the Word, man is not merely an instrument or even "God's secretary", but rather a co-author whose personality, character and literary abilities specifically mark the text written by him and at the same time inspired by God. Wilfrid J. Harrington stresses that Divine inspiration may assume different forms and the concept of inspiration itself is not unequivocal but analogical. As regards the role performed here by a man, he refers to the opinion of one of the most penetrating students of this issue,

Bruce Vawter, the author of the book *Biblical Inspiration*. God inspired the Scriptures-He filled them with His Word, not by depriving them of their human element, but rather by making use of all their significance and various human properties. He adjusted Himself to the habits of man: not ideal, ahistorical man, but a man in his unique historical condition, and strictly speaking, the man who should hear God's saving Word. It is this man whom we find in the Bible, and this Word came to him.

Harrington himself makes an important-also for our further considerations-distinction of three forms of Biblical inspiration:

1. inspiration to action, which he calls pastoral,
2. inspiration to speaking that is characteristic mostly to the protagonists of the Word-prophets and apostles,
3. Scriptural inspiration, which the Bible does not speak about, but for which it is the "tangible" testimony, being at the same time an extension of the two former ones.<sup>7</sup>

### 3

Biblical inspiration can be described as inspiration "from above": the inspiring factor is God Himself, transmitting certain truths to a man and stimulating him to proper actions.

Can we speak of inspiration if it does not stimulate one in a positive way but forbids something or discourages one from doing something? A situation of this kind is brought to

mind by Socrates' famous daimonion. It is him that Socrates speaks about in Apology: "The reason for this is what you have often heard me say before on many occasions-that I am subject to a divine or supernatural experience, which Meletus saw fit to travesty in his indictment. It began in my early childhood-a sort of voice which comes to me, and when it comes it always dissuades me from what I am proposing to do, and never urges me on."<sup>8</sup> Since Antiquity people wondered what is Socrates' divinity and how to understand its actions.; There is no doubt that it is a divinity: thus, the inspiration that it gives is-in its origin-of a religious character. Yet, referring to Socrates possible actions its results are of moral character. We may be sure that "imposing a very noble prohibition", it dissuades him from something wrong which might be done.

The way Socrates' "protective spirit" acts lets us distinguish two types of inspiration: positive and negative. The former stimulates one to certain behaviour or actions, the latter dissuades one from them or simply forbids them, though not suggesting something that might substitute for them. It seems that this mode of inspiration is its weakest variety; we may even ask whether it really is inspiration at all. Leaving this issue aside, let us now focus our attention on another distinction that can also be made here. The voice of Socrates' "protective spirit" is a voice "from above", a voice of a divinity. Yet, we may easily imagine a situation, which frequently occurs in the domain of morality, that this voice assumes the form of a rebuke coming from another man. Although this voice as such comes from the outside, yet, it is not characterized by any ontic "superiority", even if we assume that the rebuking person is superior to us in respect of morality. Figuratively speaking, we can describe such inspiration as inspiration "from beside".

#### 4

Let us start again with Plato's text. In the comparatively short dialogue Ion Socrates investigates not only the essence of declamatory art represented by the title-hero of this dialogue, but also of poetic art itself, whose products Ion merely transfers to other people. The conclusion of the considerations again refers to the inspiration "from above": "...the epic poets, all the good ones, have their excellence, not from art, but are inspired, possessed, and thus they utter all these admirable poems. So it is also with good lyric poets.....It seems to me...that these lovely poems are not of man or human workmanship, but are divine and from gods, and that the poets are nothing but interpreters of the gods, each one possessed by the divinity to whom he is in bondage."<sup>10</sup>

Giving up our own comments we shall again recall here Jan Parandowski's words: "Inspiration had its own golden days that lasted centuries. It expressed the conviction regarding the divine origin of the art of words, and it gathered its own mythology. As an unpredictable state of the soul, in the vocabulary of the Greeks, it bordered on the words mania, madness, it mixed with extasy, with «enthusiasm» which, in its original meaning speaks of man «full of god», it shone in the dark scarlets of Dionysiacal religion. It was there that Friedrich Nietzsche became so enchanted by it. Changing the patrons with the change of religions inspiration survived not only in the popular ideas of prophets, that is in the inspired prophetic role of poets, but it was professed both by the poets themselves and by their most sober students."<sup>11</sup>

The fact of inspiration need not be seen during the creative process: it can also be noticed ex post. I believe that in this way it was seen by the poet who cannot be denied sobriety-Cyprian Norwid. In his poem *Kolebka-pieśni* (*Do spółczesnych ludowych pieśniarzy*) [A

Cradle of a Song (To Contemporary Folk Poets)], having explained what a real rustic ballad is not, he writes:

And thus not ours are our songs But something Divine they take in themselves:  
And thus: though I sleep... my dreams arn't only mine, One half of mankind dreams with  
me;  
Supports me still and deeply,  
And solemnly, and dimly,  
Like omni-eye L.

There is where The country-song began, like from the bottom  
Of the absolutely quiet depth  
Driving its phrase and dovelike groan,  
- And God Himself it knows!...12

"The depth" of great poetry is an issue of divine inspiration which, however, in the poem quoted above is first presented not from the position of the giver, but of the receiving one: "something Divine they take in themselves". God's action is suggested by the final verse: "And God Himself it knows!". We must also remember (what Norwid knew perfectly well) that for God "to know" means the same as "to create".

Norwid's poem does not allow one to depreciate the role of a poet. Being the subject of inspiration he does not lose his autonomy-he is not only a transmitter, an instrument. His song is not of God Himself, but it takes "something Divine" in itself. Neither is it merely an expression of the "dreams of half of mankind", though, in a mysterious, or even Jungian way, this half of mankind helps the poet. This, in turn, allows us to consider the very phenomenon of inspiration: does it manifest itself more fully and properly there, where-like in Plato-we have to do with "divine frenzy" repressing the author's consciousness and reducing him to the role of a passive instrument, or rather where this consciousness acts in its full autonomy, though it clearly is stimulated, inspired by something that is experienced as a power surpassing its natural abilities?

## 5

I believe that the testimonies which have been quoted so far will allow us to present a few propositions, being an attempt to understand and, possibly, define the concept of inspiration better.

It seems that the most important moment in the experience of inspiration is the special dialectics of "the external" and "the internal". This, what inspires, either as the content or as a kind of "call", is experienced as coming, or "pervading" us, independent of us and not belonging to us. Sometimes it appears as, in a sense, expected, as it were, prepared by the state of spiritual passiveness or-just the contrary-emotional anxiety. Therefore, allegorical presentations of inspiration as incarnated Muse or Genius are not unfounded: the inspiring content frequently reveals itself just as coming from "elsewhere" and not belonging to the world presently experienced in our everyday attitude. We shall consider neither the comparatively obvious possibility of its being rooted in the subconsciousness-either individual or group-nor the factors promoting its manifestation at this and not another moment: we only wish to focus for a while on the phenomenon of this "externality" present here.

This phenomenon can be experienced, and, further, also interpreted, in various ways. The strongest interpretation is achieved in the case of Biblical inspiration. God Himself (the Holy Spirit) is accepted as the inspiring factor, the content of inspiration is a definite message concerning the mysteries of faith, the truths regarding Salvation or morality. Thus, the inspiring factor appears here as the definite real being, transcendent and infinitely surpassing both being and consciousness of the inspired person. It seems that the selection of these very factors that altogether allow us to speak of inspiration "from above", also constitutes the proper contents of the concept of inspiration. So, I would like to limit them to this instance, and the most appropriate designate of this concept would be the inspiration spoken of by the Church in regard to the Holy Bible.

The "levels" of inspiration would still depend of a definite modification, or even presence or absence of the factors mentioned above. If we accept the existence of an angel or daimonion, the inspiration coming from him will not have the "power" possessed by the inspiration coming from God Himself. Still another kind of inspiration is this that comes from another man, from another person's thought, scientific work or work of art. In each of these instances the concept of inspiration itself is by all means justified. Without any reserve we may say that Kant's new philosophy was inspired by Hume's Treatise of Human Nature, and the inspiration for Moussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition were the pictures by his friend Victor Hartmann, which he saw at the posthumous exhibition of this painter's works. It is said that the inspiration for the amazingly beautiful Sea by Debussy was not the view of a "real" sea, but Turner's seascapes and Japanese graphics.

When we speak of inspiration by art, we should-to be consistent-distinguish the inspiration coming from its other domains and inspiration within one domain. The instances given above illustrate the former case. The latter case can be illustrated by countless examples: all variations on foreign themes in music, paraphrases or pastiches in literature, different elaboration of the same subject in painting.

On the other hand, however, this which "comes", either as fully realized or unrealized by the artist, is "admitted" by him and, as it were, accepted as his own. This "being his own" does not invalidate the moment of being given, and, what is more-as we have already said-given "from the outside". Otherwise, we would rather speak of invention than inspiration. The concept of invention denotes something genetically one's own, born inside the author as if having its source in him.

Nevertheless, the phenomenon of "giving so that it becomes my own" that accompanies inspiration is something constitutive for it: it is I who became, as it were, a "chosen" subject of inspiration, and it is I who is subsequently responsible for its further fate.

## 6

The inspiring factor is never experienced as axiologically neutral. Just the contrary: its essence includes that it is a carrier or "a herald" of values. In case of religious inspiration it is obvious. Yet, it is also distinct in moral inspiration, when it frequently manifests itself in the form of conscience. The voice of conscience" always regards some good, usually warning us that it can be lost. This fact may also explain the negative character of "inspiration" in the case of Socrates' daimonion: dissuading one

from doing evil is a fully sufficient action, for it protects him from losing of a definite good.

There is no doubt that as a carrier of values inspiration is also experienced in the domain of art. If the artist did not see in it a prognostic or even a promise of creating something valuable, he would obviously not take the possibility of "submitting" to its influence into consideration. Whereas inspiration, as it were, gives the artist access to the sphere of the values unattained yet, it is a link between this sphere and the domain of art, which it serves. The artist accepts it as obvious that the source of inspiration, whatever it is in its ontic character, is either a value itself or saturated with values. What is more, it may be that they are the inspiring power that stimulates to action and demands realization of axiological qualities with which it is connected.

## 7

An especially important, constitutive factor of inspiration is the moment of *s t i m u l a t i o n*. Without it inspiration would remain something dead. Still, it seems that when in everyday language we use the word "to inspire", we primarily have in mind stimulation to do something, the starting of some work or—in the weakest instance—encouraging to undertake it. This stimulation, however, must be accompanied by some definite message: inspiration must be inspiration of *s o m e t h i n g*.

These two factors—stimulation and message—are equally essential. Stimulation without a message will not be called inspiration even if it starts a creative process. One can be stimulated to action by an event, even if it does not carry a message though is able to evoke certain creative behaviour. Ursula's death undoubtedly stimulated Jan Kochanowski to write his Lamentations, but will we accept it as inspiration?

On the other hand, a message that is not accompanied by the moment of stimulation, which is not transformed in any way but merely received, would be equally difficult to accept as something inspiring. It seems that we also cannot speak of inspiration when this message is passed on without any contribution from the subject, i. e. when this subject treats himself as a passive transmitter of the message received.

A particular gap between stimulation and message can be seen in the situation of poetic "frenzy" described by Plato. It sometimes happens that a poet does not know what he says, neither is he aware of any rules governing his art. Better still—for in the case of a poet we shall soon have to make important reservations—is the behaviour of prophets, various kinds of "media", priests and priestesses getting themselves into a prophetic trance. This is why it is difficult to speak here of inspiration. The condition of starting something new that would deserve the name "the product of inspiration", i. e. that came into being thanks to it, is lacking.

## 8

And so we come to the next question: what can, and what cannot be a source of inspiration? Can—according to our intuitions—this source be just anything: a mountain landscape and the song of a bird, the noise of a city and the ruins of a castle, thought enclosed in a lyrical poem and a musical theme, a painting and a sculpture? Thus the range of sources of inspiration would extend to all possible

objects: real and intentional ones-and to all possible processes and events. Is it so, however, that thinking of sources of inspiration we treat them so broadly?

The answer is by no means simple. In the authors' confessions we hear about the inspiring role of sounds, colours or even fragrances. On the other hand, as proper sources of inspiration they mention rather intentional (or, as they are sometimes called: "spiritual") objects: works of art, myths, beliefs, archetypes, legends. Can these two kinds of elementary sources of inspiration-objects of nature and products of human spirit-be put at the same level? And-going further-shouldn't we rather limit the sources of inspiration only to the latter? Then, inspiration would be a special kind of motivation, influence executed in the spiritual sphere. Thus we would have to admit that not every stimulation (or impulse) deserves the name of inspiration, and that we have to do with it only when, sooner or later, we recognize in it a certain sense-mental contents that we accept.

So, if we wanted to broaden the concept of the sources of inspiration, we could probably do it only on the condition that it would be treated as a source of sense, either objectively included in it, or invested in it by our previous hermeneutic activity.

Moving still further, we must also distinguish inspiration from influence. The latter can act without our being aware of it, while the contents of inspiration will sooner or later be recognized and consciously accepted. To put it another way: acceptance of inspiration is a conscious act of the will, while influence usually acts instinctively, without conscious acceptance on the part of the subject that submits to it.

## 9

The differentiation between inspiration and influence makes it necessary to pose the question of the awareness of inspiration. It has been mentioned before that one of the sources of inspiration may be subconsciousness, i. e. the contents that are accumulated in it in some mysterious way, which suddenly, having crossed the boundary of consciousness, find their expression. It need not be done in a sudden act of "revelation"; it may equally well be a slow process of discovery of a hidden sense gradually revealing itself to the subject. Nevertheless, this crossing of the boundary of consciousness seen is essential here. For we shall be able to speak of inspiration in the full meaning of this word only when we leave the sphere of suppositions or inexpressible intuitions and find a clearly drawn sense which not only moves us, but which we consciously accept as the starting point for a definite creative process.

It is done even more distinctly when the source of inspiration is not subconsciousness but a definite message (no matter what the form) that clearly comes to us from the outside: a poem or piece of music that is heard, or a painting, a sculpture or a work of architecture that is just noticed. Though even here the beginning of the experience may be more unconscious than conscious:

admiration or astonishment undoubtedly is loaded with emotion, which will become an object of rational reflection only in subsequent phases of the experience. However, if this admiration is to become an object (a motive) of inspiration, it must go through a specific filter of intellectual recognition: hermeneutics, which will not only discover its proper object and the sense

connected with it, but also, like "reverberation", will accompany all the creative process that it started.

## 10

Thus, the last essential element that requires our attention is the creative character of inspiration. It assumes an active response on the part of the inspired subject, his readiness to take up the challenge and transform the contents included in the inspiration in his own way. It is characteristic that at present the fact of the subject's original contribution is much emphasized in the discussions concerning the role of an inspired writer—co-author of the Books of the Holy Bible. Thus, inspiration is always inspiration to something, to a certain action, particularly to creative activity undertaken and continued on responsibility of the subject inspired in one or another way. In other words: inspiration should meet the subject's creative inventiveness. Coming back to Ion, let us add that Plato also speaks of the active attitude of a poet, despite his submission to the "divine frenzy": after all he is to be (or, anyway, he may be) Gods' interpreter -hermeneus ton Theon. Though Plato says that the poets are "nothing more" than interpreters, yet, it does not seem that-no matter what his intention was-this role is of little importance. Anyway, he undoubtedly assumes the creative initiative of a hermeneutic-interpreter.

The act of inspiration itself is usually just a starting point for an action. To be more precise: it is a condition for the possibility of starting and it does not always develop further to accompany the creative process that it evoked. Yet, even in this respect we could probably distinguish types of inspiration: from the purely occasional inspiration that passes away leaving its subject to Iris own fate, to the constant inspiration that operates as long as the "order" which it caused is being executed. The latter holds, as it seems, in the case of the writing of Biblical texts.

This occasion brings back the question whether the act of dissuading from something-like, for instance the operation of Socrates' daimonion-can be recognized as inspiration. The answer will probably depend on the accepted theory of renouncement: whether we shall see it as mere negation of something intended before, or undertaking of another activity that, to some extent, takes the place of the rejected one. At the limit it need not even be an activity but, for instance, the case of pure passiveness, which, as a state is also positively defined.

True inspiration evokes authentic, original activity. It inspires to something new, and its value is the greater, the more original is the product conceived by it. For stimulation of the subject's creative powers is as important as transmission of certain definite messages.

## 11

In conclusion let us try to collect in a few points, the results of our considerations.

1. Let us start with an attempt at definition. I understand inspiration as a particular stimulation of our cognitive powers and creative dispositions by something contentually definite, which is experienced as external, not coming from ourselves, but which induces or even forces us to a creative response to it.

2. We must distinguish the following elements co-constituting the situation of inspiration:

- a. the source of inspiration,
- b. the inspiring factor,
- c. the contents of inspiration,
- d. its mode of being given (inducing, dissuading, ordering, forcing),
- e. the mode of responding (positive, negative, active, passive),
- f. the inspired subject,
- g. the (creative) process being the result of "stimulation",
- h. the product of this process.

3. We also distinguish different kinds and types of inspiration,

a. Depending on the experience of "place" and "origin" of the

inspiring factor: "vertical" inspiration (authoritative), and "horizontal" inspiration when the inspiring factor is, as it were, on the same level as the inspired subject and does not surpass it optically or axiologically (as in the former case).

b. Depending on the mode of stimulating: "weak" and "strong" inspiration, and "positive" and "negative" inspiration.

c. Depending on the mode of duration: "momentary" inspiration starting the process, and continuous inspiration unfailingly accompanying the process that it caused.

d. From the point of view of the goal-uncreative and creative-limited to a passive transmission or provoking to the creation of something original and new.

e. From the point of view of the domains in which it occurs: religious, moral, scientific, artistic.