FUROR POETICUS AND MODERN POETRY*

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When we examine 20th century poetry from an international standpoint, we can see that the radical experimentation in structure and language that we find in such American poets as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings and Hart Crane, to name only a few, is part of a wide-spread effort in our time to reconstruct the foundations of the poetic art. Often this reconstruction took the form of an organized protest. Almost always, the new poets of the day, whether in France or Spain, Russia or America, thought of themselves as consciously avant-garde, committed to the rejection of outworn themes and styles, and compelled to set forth justifications of their own efforts in grandiose and magniloquent terms. The manifestoes of the revolutionary poetic movements that flourished for a short time throughout Europe during and after World War I are interesting today largely for historical reasons,1 but the mere fact that these documents exist suggests the importance of deliberate formulations of poetic theory to the young experimentalists. At over 30 years distance we can see the large gap that separates their ambitions from their accomplishments, and if we are careful, we do not read contemporary poetry as a mere exemplification of aims and doctrines. Yet sometimes, theory and practice cohere and mutually reinforce our understanding of the poet’s work, and even when no such coherence can be found, the poet’s aesthetic and critical theories can be of the highest interest as a clue to his poetic strategy and technique and to the impulses animating his work and that of his contemporaries.

The doctrine of furor poeticus is as old as the study of poetry, perhaps older, yet in recent years it has played a role of major importance in shaping the attitude of the poet toward his art. According to this view, the poet creates under the direct impulse of divine inspiration and in a momentary condition of delirium or frenzy which deprives him of his reason. The ancients described the poet’s madness as a kind of demonic possession, in which the

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1 The best over-all study of this phase of the history of modern poetry remains Guillermo de Torre, Literaturas Europeas de Vanguardia (Madrid, 1925). A continuation of this work is badly needed.
poetic utterance at once takes on the force of prophecy. We can readily understand why the earliest of western poets were regarded essentially as prophets. Poetry in pre-literary times was intimately allied, in some societies at least, with tribal ritual and with the welfare of the community. The poet’s function was not simply to glorify in song the heroic deeds of the past or to inspire those of the present; he was called upon to predict the future as well, and he was able to do so because of his divinely inspired vision, the sign of the poet’s kinship with the hidden spiritual forces held to govern nature and human destiny.²

From the beginnings of Greek literature, the nature and function of the poet were explained by the doctrine of prophetic inspiration. Well before Plato, philosophers such as Heraclitus, Empedocles and Democritus were particularly concerned with such psychological phenomena as the apparently irrational ecstasy that accompanied poetic composition. For Heraclitus, souls of the deepest intelligence possess intuitive powers of divination associated with premonitory dreams that signal supernatural revelations. For Empedocles, the condition and status of the individual depends on the daimon or genius that has entered into and possessed him; through the exaltation induced by delirium, the poet-prophet creates poetry and at the same time, purifies his soul. Democritus went even further in the fusion of madness and poetic genius, declaring, according to Cicero, that one cannot be a good poet “without an inflammation of the soul and without the presence of an overpowering impulse akin to delirium.” This poetic power is not dependent on intelligence or knowledge, for it is wholly divine in origin. Dreams and visions are signs of supernatural visitation and the immediate source of poetic inspiration; without such inspiration no poetry worthy of the name can be produced.³

We can see at once how considerable was Plato’s debt to his predecessors. Homer, Hesiod, Pindar and other ancient poets insisted on the same divine sanction of the poet’s activity, and saw no conflict between the poet’s madness and his concern with historical or even moral truth.⁴ With the aid of the Muses, knowledge as well as power was assured the poet-seer; witness Homer’s many appeals for information as well as for inspiration.⁵ But as Plato insists, without the gift of inspiration, whatever knowledge and skill a would-be poet might possess is useless.

It is of course owing to Plato far more than to his predecessors that subsequent poets could give renewed expression to the concept of *furor poeticus* by way of explaining and justifying their art. Poetic madness is described by Plato, after Democritus, as a kind of demonic possession which in a true poet deprives him wholly of his reason. This explanation of the poet’s frenzy and his unique prophetic and oneiric power Plato sets forth most fully in an early dialogue, *Ion*, which offers the most representative illustration of the ancient point of view. Similar descriptions can be found in *Phaedrus*, in *The Laws*, and in other dialogues. For Plato, the poet is often a person of little intellectual ability, but when the god is in him, he is exalted above all other mortals. Plato goes further than his predecessors in emphasizing the distinction between inspiration and art, but in all essential respects his view of the nature of poetic activity is that which was generally held in ancient Greece before his time and which through Plato was transmitted to modern literature. Thus despite the highly imperfect knowledge of virtually all ancient literature and philosophy possessed by the middle ages, sufficient expressions of the poet’s divine madness were available in Horace, Ovid, Pliny and Claudian among others, so that the traditional view could reappear in Statius, Fulgentius, and in later anonymous compilations. From the Renaissance to our own day, the concept of *furor poeticus* has received wide and varied restatement, especially by poets and critics who responded directly to the mystical and visionary allure of Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought. In English poetry Blake and Shelley are perhaps the most characteristic champions of the view that the poet is divinely inspired; post-Romantic poets, in England and on the continent, have from time to time reasserted the demonic and hallucinatory character of poetic vision.

When we approach the history of modern poetry we find that no single writer has been more influential in the dissemination of this view of the nature and function of the poet than Arthur Rimbaud. This is not the place to assess Rimbaud’s astounding literary career, compressed between the ages of 16 and 19, and followed by the poet’s repudiation not only of literature but of modern civilization, to die at 37 after spending the latter part of his life as an African trader and gun-runner. Rimbaud’s aesthetic theory is even more fragmentary and frenetic in expression than the prose-poems of *Illuminations* and *Une Saison en Enfer* to which it is intimately related. Virtually the whole of Rimbaud’s literary theory is con-

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6 An extended discussion is provided by Craig LaDrière, “The Problem of Plato’s *Ion*,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, X (1951), 26–34.

tained in two letters of May, 1871, subsequently known as the
"lettres du Voyant," perhaps the most dynamic expression of the
interpenetration of poetry and prophecy that one can find anywhere
in recent literature.

I say it is necessary to be a seer, to make oneself a S E E R!
The poet makes himself a seer by a long, immense, and rea-
soned derangement of all the senses. All the forms of love,
suffering, folly, he searches in himself, he boils down in him-
self so as to keep nothing of them but the quintessences. Un-
speakable torture, wherein he needs all constancy, all super-
human strength, wherein he becomes among all the great
invalid, the great malefactor, the great outcast,—and the
supreme Savant!—For he reaches the unknown! Because he
has cultivated his soul, already rich, richer than any! He
reaches the unknown; and when, gone mad, he ends by losing
the comprehension of his visions, he has seen them! Let him
die in his leap among things unheard of and without names:
other horrible tollers will come; they will begin at the horizons
where he went down. ...  

We can see at once that Rimbaud here joins hands with an ancient
poetic tradition, mingling echoes of Plato, of Baudelaire, Hugo,
and also of the mystical and prophetic writings of Ballanche,
Eliphas Lévi, and other students of occult magic. For Rimbaud,
as for his precursors, the poet is essentially a medium, or must
become so through a wilful disorganization of his senses. Thus in
expressing his wild and visionary thoughts and feelings, the poet-
seer gives simultaneous expression to the unconscious spiritual
power that pervades the universe. Hence the sanctity of the poet's
mystical experience and the privacy of his inner vision, a vision
that only he can have. Yet there is this important difference be-
tween Rimbaud's poetic of "dérèglement" and the ancient notion
of furor poeticus. The bard or rhapsode of Homer's day acquired his
divine gift through the operation of mysterious and external pow-
ers mediating between the poet and the supernatural. His poetry
and the frenzy which accompanied it were wholly beyond his con-
trol. Rimbaud, on the other hand, insists on the recapture of the
primitive character of the poet-seer through conscious effort. The
poet must learn how to disorder his senses systematically, so that
he can induce hallucinations at will. Otherwise, presumably, he
will be no more able to explore the realm of the unknown than
ordinary men.

It may be true that Rimbaud’s early poetry fails to support the cosmic aspirations of the letters of May, 1871, but it is difficult to separate his last work, *Une Saison en Enfer*, from the poetic of hallucination. This collection is made up of prose-poems which are at once autobiographical reminiscences and restatements of poetic theory. As is true in Rimbaud’s earlier poems, the poet’s representation of his distorted visionary experiences is logical and lucid, yet the poetic process which he describes in *Une Saison en Enfer* is at the same time a celebration of the disorder he invokes and which he ends by finding sacred. As the poet exclaims in “Délires II”:

I became an adept at simple hallucinations: in place of a factory I really saw a mosque, a school of drummers composed of angels, carriages on the highways of the sky, a drawing-room at the bottom of a lake; monsters, mysteries; the title of a melodrama would raise horrors before me.

Then I would explain my magic sophisms with the hallucination of words!

Finally I came to regard as sacred the disorder of my mind.

In a sense, “Alchimie du Verbe” is the poet’s testament, a recipe for the conscious destruction of rational consciousness, a direct appeal to the cultivation of fantasy and nightmare expressed in a poetry of personal and private association, of metaphorical dislocation and cosmic disorder. It is easy to see why so many 20th century poets have claimed Rimbaud as their spiritual godfather and pr’imal source of inspiration, for his theory as well as for his technique.

The emergence of Rimbaud as a major force in 20th century poetic thought and expression coincided with the rapid development of non-objective art in the years immediately preceding the first wor’d war. The war itself, with its violent transformation of lived reality into chaos, also helped to encourage a poetry of fragmentation and disintegration, a deliberate rejection of the traditional sanctions of so-called civilized life and a reversion to primitive and instinctive roots of artistic expression. The surrealist poets in France, led by André Breton, did little more than codify a poetic that had developed at least a decade before the surrealist manifestoes of 1924, in the poetry of Apollinaire, Jacob, Cendrars, Reverdy, and other so-called cubist poets. In their poetic theory the surrealists insisted even more boldly than did Rimbaud on the necessary dislocation of objective reality, the explosive power of metaphor, the exploration of the total unconscious mind through free and violent association. Here too, however, we must be on guard against equating theory and practice. Automatic writing or
the complete suppression of logical control and the abandonment of any process of revision is far more important in the manifestoes of 1924 than it is in the poetry which even the most extreme surrealist poets of the Paris school composed. In poetry written outside of France in response to the surrealist experiment, the role of automatic writing is reduced even more. Yet the emphasis on fluid associations and fragmentary, disjunct metaphors undoubtedly plays an important part in subsequent poetry wherever the surrealist influence was felt. With this influence there came a revival of the doctrine of *furor poeticus*.

When we examine the course of avant-garde poetry in Spain in the 1920's we can see that here the surrealist theories and techniques came to be assimilated to native and somewhat more moderate experimental tendencies. No better illustration of this development in its relation to the concept of *furor poeticus* can be found than the writings of Federico García Lorca.

Students of the poet-playwright, García Lorca, have emphasized both the traditional and the experimental character of his poetic expression. Certainly the political significance of the poet's tragic end—at the hands of a Franco firing squad in the terrible summer of 1936—has been thrust into the background. It is right that the poetry receive precedence, for García Lorca was one of the most unpolitical of writers, a poet consciously dedicated to his art rather than to social or political propaganda.

Perhaps no Spanish poet of his time was more eclectic than Lorca and more readily able to assimilate even the most contradictory attitudes and techniques. His early poetry, as we can see in the *Romancero Gitano*, is poetry close to the tradition of the popular *jugar*; it is poetry to be recited far more than to be read. Its themes of violence and sensuous brutality, mystery and death, derive from the passionate world of the gypsies of Andalusia, made vivid and intense by the poet's involvement in the wonder and suffering he recreates. Such poems as the "Romance Sonambulo" or the "Romance de la Guardia Civil Española" testify to the poet's fluidity of metaphor and free juxtaposition of the planes of fantasy and external reality. It is clear that from the time of Lorca's study at the Residencia de Estudiantes in Madrid and increasingly during the 1920's, he became familiar with the doctrines and techniques of contemporary experimental poetry, with its emphasis on fragmentation, speed, violence, syntactical distortion, the rejection of logical structure and linear description, and the exploration of the hidden recesses of the mind. The appearance in 1925 of Guillermo de Torre's critique, *Literaturas Europeas de Vanguardia*, undoubtedly played an important part in the diffusion of the new poetic
techniques among Spaniards of Lorca’s generation. Such poets as Rafael Alberti, Vicente Aleixandre, Gerardo Diego, Luis Cernuda, all responded warmly to the appeal of French surrealism, assimilating its revolutionary doctrines and modifying them within the framework of traditional Spanish poetry. No doubt the visit of the French poet, Louis Aragon, to the Residencia de Estudiantes in 1925 also served to direct the attention of young Spanish writers of the day to the efforts of André Breton and his confreres in Paris. In the case of Lorca, some importance must also be placed on his close friendship with the painter, Salvador Dalí. Lorca’s own attempts at painting were conspicuously in the manner of Spanish non-objective artists such as Juan Gris, Picasso, and Dalí. In the decade following 1925, Lorca’s poetry was frequently marked by the same privacy of imagery and inwardness of vision which the surrealists in France claimed to derive from pure psychic automatism. This tendency reaches its climax in Lorca’s development in the volume, Poeta en Nueva York, composed during the unhappy visit to the United States in 1929–30. Some readers have refused to see in this collection anything but a temporary aberration of the poet’s faculties. However, if we examine this phase of the poet’s career in relation to changes in his poetic theory occurring in the years immediately preceding his American journey, we can see that this surrealist phase of Lorca’s development is deliberate and in no way accidental.

The poet’s first important critical pronouncement is his lecture delivered on the occasion of the tercentenary of the death of the Spanish poet, Góngora. In the course of his speculations on the way in which poetry comes about, Lorca states expressly his view that the poet is divinely inspired, but almost in the same breath, emphasizes his belief that this supernatural inspiration precedes but does not accompany the act of poetic creation: “Conceptual vision must be calmed before it can be clarified.” This view of furor poeticus is on the whole the traditional view of poets since classical antiquity. It is important to add, however, that it was a view which Lorca came to revise radically as his technique came to reflect the poet’s obsession with the compelling power of demonic and primitive sources of inspiration and the consequent irrationality of poetic vision.

By 1928 we can see that the poet has advanced a considerable distance from the traditional view of divine inspiration of the Góngora.

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12 The text is reprinted in García Lorca’s Obras Completas (Madrid, 1954), pp. 67–90. Subsequent references are to this edition.
13 Ibid., p. 80.
gora essay. In an interview with a journalist in June of that year, Lorca asserted that his present position in poetry was marked by a return to inspiration: “Inspiration, pure instinct, the poet’s only reason. I find logical poetry intolerable. Here truly is the lesson of Góngora. For the present, I am instinctively impassioned.” We should view these remarks primarily as a justification of the poetry Lorca was then writing or contemplating, and not as a systematic aesthetic formulation. Yet in the same year, in a lecture entitled “Imagination, Inspiration, Evasion,” he attempted to clarify his poetic theory and to set forth the foundations of a new and dynamic poetic freedom. In this lecture Lorca makes a sharp distinction between the provinces of the poet’s faculties. Imagination, he asserts, “always operates on data of the clearest and most precise reality. It is within the realm of our human logic, controlled by reason, from which it can not disconnect itself. Its special manner of creating requires order and limits.” Inspiration, on the other hand, rises not from human logic but from a poetic logic. It imposes no order, no limits to the poet’s activities. While imagination is a discovery that invokes the aid of acquired technique, inspiration is a gift which technique is incapable of bringing forth. Lorca places himself in a direct relationship with the poetics of Rimbaud and his successors when he declares: “The poetic act that inspiration discovers is an act with a life of its own, governed by unpublished laws, and which breaks with any sort of logical control.” The result is what he defines as poetry of evasion, an escape from the confines of objective reality “by way of the dream, by way of the subconscious, by way of the dictation of an unusual fact that delights the inspiration.”

We can see at once how the wild and hallucinatory imagery of “El Rey de Harlem” or the “Oda a Walt Whitman” of Poeta en Nueva York is an expression of this new aesthetic formulation. There is no doubt that the disordered and at times seemingly chaotic vision of the poems of 1929–30 coincided fully with the poet’s view of the way his art comes into being. The most extreme assertion of the doctrine of furor poeticus in the critical writings of the Spanish poet comes in 1930, in a lecture presented at Havana shortly after his departure from New York, entitled characteristically, “Theory and Play of the Demon.” Here Lorca boldly proclaims that “tener duende”—“to have the demon”—is the sign of

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17 “Imaginación, Inspiración, Evasión” was first presented in Granada in 1928 and then in Madrid in 1929. Newspaper accounts of the lecture, including substantial quotations from Lorca’s text, may be found in Federico García Lorca: Textes en prose tirés de l’oubli,” edited by M. Lafrenque, Bulletin Hispanique, LV (1953), 332–338.
18 The text may be found in Obras Completas, pp. 36–48.
the greatest artists. What is unique and significant in art comes to us not from the poet, but from the demon through the poet. In figurative language appropriate to the nature of his subject, Lorca invokes not only Socrates, from whose “joyous demon” that of the poet is descended, but also Nietzsche, Rimbaud, Apollinaire, the Arabic bards of the Moors, the dancers of Cadiz, and the great bullfighters of contemporary Spain. Without the presence of demonic possession, no artist can achieve energy or passion and infuse vitality into his art. The demon is “a power and not an act, a struggle and not an idea.” It has no relation whatsoever to scientific knowledge or to logical reason, but exists as the spiritual force of creation, residing both within and outside of the artist, in the world about him and in his blood. Its impact on the poet is revealed in “an almost religious enthusiasm” that gives rise to radical changes in the poet’s sensations and his forms of expression. Through the struggle it arouses and the inward agitation of the poet within its sway, the demon inspires a creation that is at once magical and intense, and as the forms of demonic possession are endless, so the expression of the poet’s inner conflict never takes the same form twice. Inspired poetry is endlessly unique. Each great artist, Lorca declares, is possessed by his own peculiar spirit, and in the act of creation, is overwhelmed by it, transported out of himself and impelled to seek out “new scenes and unknown accents” in the quest of an ineffable vision. The furor poeticus is thus the sign and cause of the poet’s initiation into the secrets of his art and the mysteries of the universe he inhabits.

In many ways Lorca’s poetic theory and practice offer one of the most extreme statements of the doctrine of furor poeticus that we may find in the work of a 20th century poet. Yet it is important to recognize that this attitude belongs primarily to a single phase of Lorca’s career, frenzied in its intensity and necessarily brief in its duration. We know that by 1932 Lorca had veered sharply away from the poetic theory of demonic inspiration. By that time, indeed, he had become skeptical of any attempt to define poetry, but he insists as forcefully as in the early essay on Góngora on the consciousness of his effort: “If it is true that I am a poet by the grace of God—or of the demon—I am also so by the grace of technique and effort and of my absolute realization of what is a poem.”

Perhaps this fusion of inspiration and effort represents the poet’s final view, but we cannot be sure. By 1932 Lorca was immersed in the composition of plays that were to lead him more and more away from the bold metaphorical and personal style of his poetry toward a more chastened and subdued idiom closer to the language

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and experience of every-day reality. How long he would have persisted along this line of development, no one can say. This much, however, is clear: the doctrine of furor poeticus played a major role in the poet's assertion of his freedom to give full expression to an inner vision superior to the life of conscious and purposive acts, and in so doing, to explore the depths of his being with an intensity and passion shared by few poets of our time. There can be no doubt that some of the poems of García Lorca written in accordance with the ancient view of how poetry comes about are among the most significant compositions of an age of avant-garde experimentation in European poetry.

When we turn from the European scene to the America of the 1920's, we may observe the same attempt to enlarge the frontiers of poetry through the exploration of the unconscious and the irrational and through the elaboration of new techniques to express the intensity and range of poetic experience. Hart Crane is among the most representative of the American poets who participated in this enterprise. In both theory and practice, his work provides a striking illustration of the continuity and inter-relatedness of European and American poetry in our time.

We can readily understand why the doctrine of furor poeticus should have been congenial to Hart Crane at the beginning of his poetic development. A youth of unusual sensitivity and delicate balance, easily susceptible to external excitation, alienated in his environment, Crane seized on the tradition of the poet's divine inspiration as a way of justifying the uniqueness and sanctity of his poetic vision. In his copy of Plato's *Phaedrus* he underscored in heavy lines the assertion of Socrates that "the poetry of sense fades into obscurity before the poetry of madness." ¹⁹ We know that Crane was reading Plato in the spring of 1919; ²⁰ the Platonic view of poetic inspiration was to affect his poetics and his poetry throughout the whole of his career.

Few poets have been as susceptible as Hart Crane to literary influences. From the very beginning of his discovery of his poetic vocation, Crane read avidly in the classics of ancient and modern literature, and especially in contemporary poetry. With other young writers of his time he shared an admiration of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, and delighted in the paradoxical wit of Donne and the Metaphysical poets. At the same time, Crane selected his masters carefully, deliberately constructing a poetic tradition that he felt would respond to his aims and temperament and serve to guide his development. His principal models, in addition to those mentioned, were Blake, Whitman, Nietzsche and Rimbaud.

It was probably in the pages of *The Dial* for 1920, where some of Crane’s first published poems appeared, that he came to know Rimbaud. In the summer of that year *The Dial* published a translation of the “Lettre du Voyant,” and also versions of the poet’s two collections, *Les Illuminations* and *Une Saison en Enfer*. At once, Crane wrote to a bookseller in Paris for a copy of Rimbaud’s poems. He received them in the fall of 1920 and read them as well as he could with the aid of a dictionary. Thereafter he frequently drew upon Rimbaud for guidance in his writing and in his evaluations of other poets. Edgell Rickword’s study of Rimbaud, published in 1924, furnished him with additional evidence of the French poet’s significance. In a letter of June 20, 1926, Crane declares flatly that “Rimbaud was the last great poet that our civilization will see,” and in almost the same breath he couples Rimbaud and Blake as the prime examples of the generative power of the poet’s inner feelings and explorations. In his demand for “a reasoned derangement of all the senses” so as to make of the poet a seer, Rimbaud provided the young American with a poetic credo fully in accord with his unusual excitability and with the demonic and irrational impulses animating his art. In its fundamentals, Hart Crane’s poetic theory is a direct expression and enlargement of that of Rimbaud.

It is in some ways surprising to see Hart Crane attempting to provide a conscious rationalization of an art founded on the exploration of the unconscious and irrational. Yet Crane was far more concerned with questions of poetic theory than many more learned poets of the 1920’s, and his aesthetic speculations provide at least some measure of the seriousness of his efforts to define his attitude toward his art. Perhaps his most important critical statement is the essay, “General Aims and Theories,” written in 1925 by way of clarifying the poems in his first collection, *White Buildings*. It is here that he sets forth most elaborately his theory of the “logic of metaphor” as the organizing principle of poetic expression:

As to technical considerations: the motivation of the poem must be derived from the implicit emotional dynamics of the materials used, and the terms of expression employed are often selected less for their logical (literal) significance than for their associational meanings. Via this and their metaphorical inter-relationships, the entire construction of the poem is

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21 See n. 8 above.
23 An extended discussion is provided by Brom Weber, ibid., pp. 144–150.
raised on the organic principle of a "logic of metaphor," which antedates our so-called pure logic, and which is the genetic basis of all speech, hence consciousness and thought-extension.

The reliance on emotional dynamics and on free association in the use of language points clearly to a technique of syntactical dislocation and metaphoric fragmentation, of wilfully induced hallucination very much in accord with the aims of Rimbaud and of his followers in the avant-garde movements of European poetry.

At the same time, there are significant differences, and it is especially important to recognize that at times, Crane’s view of the role of acquired skill, of conscious art, in the creative process is altogether traditional. “There is little to be gained in any art so far as I can see, except with much conscious effort,” he wrote in a letter of 1921. 27 Yet the aim of this effort as subsequently set forth came to be the total transformation of the realm of rationally ordered logic into a vision that will embody “the so-called illogical impingements of the connotations of words on the consciousness.” 28 Rimbaud too had insisted on the deliberate as opposed to the unconscious source of poetic madness, but Crane goes further than his predecessor in asserting the primacy of intuitive vision, of ecstatic joy, of “the tremendous emotional excitations” that characterize for him the poetic act. 29 He is not as bold as the Lorca of Poeta en Nueva York who held that madness is the poet’s divine right and the mark of his greatness, but Crane’s impassioned cry, “New thresholds, new anatomies!” is not only an ecstatic outburst inspired by alcoholic intoxication; it is a plea for an enlargement of the poet’s province, an affirmation of the power of vision and transformation that the true poet possesses. In this claim we can see once more an attempt to re-establish the sanctity of poetic inspiration through the invocation of the doctrine of furor poeticius.

This view of the poet’s demonic possession and divine inspiration can be found in 19th century poetic thought in the United States as well as in Europe, and we should not overlook Crane’s conscious affinities with his American forbearers in his poetic theory. Emerson had declared in his essay on “The Poet” (1844) that poetry is a response to an inner voice, the fruit of the poet’s wonder and exaltation in discovering “what herds of daemons hem him in.” The act of composition he held to be a systematic and deliberate process, the organization of “a metre-making argument,” but he adds that the poetic impulse is a divine gift. It is altogether understandable that Emerson’s greatest admirer among American poets, Walt Whitman, shared this view of the poet’s supernatural origin

27 Letters, p. 52.
29 Cited ibid., p. 152.
and character. In “Song of Myself” the prophet-seer proclaims his
divinity “inside and out”: “Through me the afflatus surging and
surging.” Poetry for Whitman is the expression of a cosmic spirit
that gives life and energy both to the poet and to the universe.
The *furor poeticus* is not so much a description of the way poetry
allegedly comes about, as a sign of the special function of poetic
expression: the communication of the poet’s unique insight into the
divine poem of which he is a part.

From the beginning of Hart Crane’s speculations on his epic
poem, *The Bridge*, early in 1923, Whitman was foremost in the
poet’s mind. His growing sense of personal identification with
Whitman, that reached its culmination in the “Cape Hatteras” sec-
tion of *The Bridge*, was in large part a response to his need for a
“gigantic vision” as a means of ordering his inner turbulence. The
glorification of the poet’s conception of “the American myth” in
his major effort flows directly from his interpretation of the spiri-
tual message of Whitman’s poetry. Crane came to see himself as
Whitman’s immediate successor and repeatedly urged the impor-
tance of Whitman’s example for all American poets, present and
future. There can be no doubt that Crane’s deliberate attempt to
liberate poetry from the shackles of rational logic and scientific
discourse owed at least as much to Whitman as it did to Rimbaud.
In both instances, the doctrine of *furor poeticus* was available in
a contemporary form that could be readily absorbed into the poet’s
aesthetic.

Hart Crane’s poetry provides ample proof of the importance of
his preoccupation with the roots of poetic expression. In his lyrics
such as “Voyages” in *White Buildings* as well as in the poems that
make up *The Bridge*, the poet’s language is marked by an unusual
reliance on associational values, a fluid expansion and amalgama-
tion of metaphors and symbols. Often, his imagery is reduced to
fragments, in which an extended series of acts or feelings may be
rendered in a single word or phrase. The poet’s radical individual-
ity, his free employment of autobiographical reference and private
allusion, further complicates his art. Yet the poems of Hart Crane,
like those of Rimbaud or García Lorca, cannot be dismissed as
unintelligible simply because they do not reveal all of their secrets
at a single reading. The best of these poems are not so much the
products of uncontrolled thoughts and feelings as the expression of
an inner vision transcending literal statement in order to make
known the hidden, underlying relationships and values of objects
and events. For the poet, inspiration and its accompanying inner

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20 Letters, pp. 128–129.
Crane* (New York, 1946), p. 179.
turbulence is the source of poetic composition, but it does not exclude the operation of acquired technique; rather, it enhances what art the poet may possess and aids him in his deliberate quest for a fusion of chaos and order. Clearly, there is nothing in the poetic theory of Hart Crane that would exclude the most rigorous revision, but this too, he would hold, should be inspired by the poet’s awareness of his secret and dynamic powers. It is this unique consciousness that directs and shapes the poet’s language in accordance with the dictates of his inner vision. That Crane in his most ambitious poetry organized his vision into a harmony of parts and whole may be doubted, but the energy and power of his shorter poems as well as of sections of The Bridge are a lasting testimony of his poetic genius. His best poetry is in perpetual readiness for rediscovery and assimilation by all who would enlarge the resources of the poet’s art.

It is not difficult to understand why poets committed to radical experimentation in language and to an intense and passionate exploration of their innermost feelings as the groundwork of poetic expression should find the doctrine of furor poeticus congenial to their art. Whether theory preceded or followed technique is not always clear; often the two develop hand in hand, interacting and mutually reinforcing one another. In the instances of Rimbaud, García Lorca, and Hart Crane, there can be no doubt that the age-old view of the poet as a being at once inspired and possessed, and thereby endowed with unique powers of intuition and devination, has been of vital importance in their poetic art. It has mattered both as strategy and tactics, justification and exploration, a means of evading common reality and of enlarging the poet’s vision of a deeper, mysterious reality. From an objective and critical standpoint, furor poeticus can never provide a satisfactory account of the poet’s ways and means, but this has not been its office. It has served in our time as a reassertion of the poet’s primitive authority and spiritual power, a liberation of the ecstasy and wonder of the poet’s universe.