

An American Tragedy

HART CRANE: THE LIFE OF AN AMERICAN POET. By Philip Horton. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 1937. \$3.

Reviewed by GORHAM MUNSON

THE two qualities most demanded of a biographer of Hart Crane, the frenzied poet who jumped to death in the Caribbean five years ago, are understanding and balance. Mr. Philip Horton exhibits these qualities beyond one's most sanguine expectation in his full length narrative of the torments and achievements of Hart Crane. None of Crane's friends understood him so well as his biographer has, a principal reason being that they had not complete access to the childhood and family background of the poet. His friends had, of course, guessed at an "Œdipus complex," thus accounting for the poet's diabolization of his father, his idealization of his mother, and his homosexuality, but this was crude and amateur psychoanalysis. Mr. Horton is much better informed and more subtle and profound in his tracing of the insoluble psychological tragedy of Crane.

The key to Crane's character is, in Mr. Horton's words, "the lack of security, both spiritual and worldly, which, like an interior cavity hollowed by fear, distorted the surfaces and substrata of his life with fatal displacements." Crane never knew the security of a home. His father neglected him in the early years, and his parents were often in a state of ugly tension. Violent scenes and divorce actions fell with cruel force upon the extremely sensitive and defenceless child.

Never during Crane's life did his seismic family situation quiet down, even though his parents were divorced during his adolescence (they were on the point of remarrying each other very soon afterwards). The poet was always breaking with his father, being reconciled, breaking again; similarly with his mother. There were upheavals about money. The family was prosperous, but Hart was "strapped" much of the time, and undertook many disheartening makeshift jobs such as peddling Maxfield Parrish prints from house to house. Too early exposed to the treacheries of human relations, Crane was haunted throughout his life by the fear of betrayal the while he yearned for unqualified affection. The last years were dissolute in the extreme and verged on madness.

Mr. Horton's psychological insight is matched by his good judgment. It is comparatively easy for a sophisticated writer to avoid being "clinical" or sentimental or moralistic, but it is exceedingly difficult to avoid confusion between the life and the poetry, as the history of commentary on Poe attests. Mr. Horton does not get confused because, it presently ap-

pears, he is an excellent critic of Crane's visionary poems. He calmly elucidates their intention and meaning—in so far as their meaning can be described—without a trace of the polemical spirit that necessarily marked Crane's young champions ten or fifteen years ago. Crane is not yet accepted by the official literary mind, but no matter now that he is dead.

In a single sentence Mr. Horton contrives to throw light upon both the life and the poetry. Crane, he says, "was at once possessed by the desire to discover an absolute faith and by an abhorrence of all rational discipline." His poems from 1922 onwards were, in a sense "mystically" explained by him, intended not to mean but to be; they were to be absolute experiences for the reader like those "varieties of religious experience" Crane underwent several times. He believed in



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the revelation, in the Word that Uttered would change Life. In this belief in a faith without works, or rather in a faith that automatically would perform works, Crane was an incorrigible romanticist, both in poetry and in living. Apart from discipline in verse-craft, he fled precipitantly from all disciplines, rational or mystical; few lives have been more wildly undisciplined. His friends could tolerate his genius but the record shows that hardly any of them could long endure the pathological violence of his behavior during the last five years. Their regard for Crane remained what it had been, but flesh and nerves could not stand the pace of entertaining him under one's roof. "*Ce n'est pas un homme; c'est un ouragan,*" it used to be remarked of him by his friends in "transition valley" in Putnam County, N. Y.

Yet "the roaring boy" was a very lovable person. He did not cultivate an "arty" temperament or the femininities of sexual

abnormality. He was bleedingly honest, affectionate, supercharged with vitality, and absolutely smitten by the love of poetry. He was absolutely smitten, and that made him modest, made him in his conversation a communicant of the supreme excitement of art, made him in the end despair of life when he realized his creative gift had been dissipated. He was smitten absolutely, and that initiated him into moments of greatness in his own poetic labors.

Pattern of Destiny

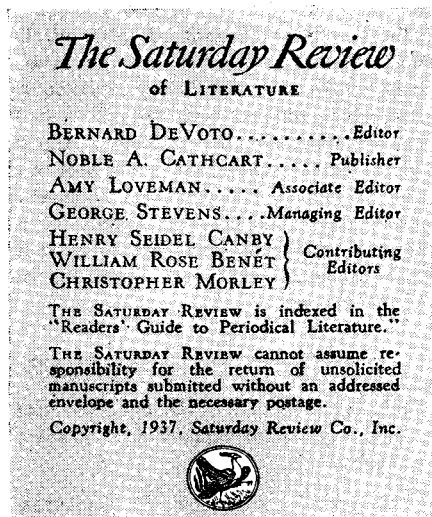
THE RING IS CLOSED. By Knut Hamsun. New York: Coward-McCann & Co. 1937. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PHILLIPS D. CARLETON

THIS new book by Knut Hamsun fuses his several philosophies. His chief character here, Abel, has reached the center of indifference. He desires nothing for himself—he has been in the depths—but he does feel a pity for those about him who still strive for place and position and are eternally grieved or disappointed. He is a Hamlet-like figure frustrate in action, but nonetheless untroubled over his incapacity. His fortune and his life he gives away with no hope of return; he shrugs away both ingratitude and malice. Yet there is in him none of the desperate feeling of the futility of living that the suicidal hero of "Chapter the Last" knew. Life is to be accepted and enjoyed.

The setting of the novel is the familiar one of Hamsun's novels—the small fjord village, a busy microcosm, where the little figures rush about on their own peculiar errands and are tossed up or down on the long floods of time. Class distinctions between druggist's clerk, lawyer, and landowner are drawn tight and sharp only to disappear under sudden good fortune, fierce young men grow old and sit in the sun, the disasters of love and marriage are submerged under the waves of the years. Abel is the son of the local lighthouse keeper, early alienated by long sea voyages, who drifts back to town after his father's death to live on his patrimony. Through his eyes the town lives, busy, but as remote as a town seen under water. The sharp desperations, the petty ambitions, the slanders, and the gossiping become almost like the motions in a dream. One sees, understands, but one also sees that this town is a pattern of man's universe, a pattern, says Hamsun, without meaning save in its own movement.

The tide of Hamsun's interests has broadened from an intense but often erratic interest in an individual to a wise but gentle preoccupation with the whole realm of human relationships. This, possibly his last novel, belongs to the genre of philosophical novels that deal, at least by implication, with man's destiny on this earth.



Defining American Literature

THERE are two ways in which the literature of the United States may be defined in its relations to world literature, of which the first is important, yet does not go far beyond the obvious.

America is, after all, a transplanted Europe, and American literature is an articulation on this soil and under these skies of European (and to a slight but considerable extent, of Asiatic) ideas crossing the ocean in great waves of influence that beat into sensitive American minds.

In the earliest days of the Republic, for example, the intellectual currents set up by English Deism are strong; while a little later the Romantic Movement, which was transforming European emotions, flows in from every important source and colors American life from the seaboard to the frontier. If the sober thinkers, like Franklin, responded to the ideas of Deism, the novelists and essayists, such as Cooper, Irving, and later Hawthorne and Poe, react to the egoisms or the expansions of Romanticism and reproduce with strong American variations the romantic literature of Europe. Were there space, it would be easy to name dozens of specific European excitements of the intellect which set up by direct flow or an induced electricity new charges and new kinds of literature in America.

Viewed this way, American literature is a vigorous colonial product, responding and reacting from its own vitality to the cultural charges of the European power house.

But this, though a necessary preliminary, is the least interesting and least penetrating view of American literature. The waves from the mother countries were inevitable if books and the right men crossed the waters. But what happened to these waves in what was after all a new and strange environment, and what new waves of influence have rolled back?

The best summary perception of American literature will be had by those willing to forgo the general for the particular.

More can be learned from a few individuals and a few types of literary expression, than from a history of American writing. The definition of American literature which can be deduced from the characteristics and the influence of a few writers is much too narrow to cover American reading. Yet it is surely true that the traits of a national literature must be drawn not from what a nation reads but from what it creates.

I shall choose, therefore, for my analysis the work of four individuals and then, to get a broader base for generalization, shall add a tentative characterization of what may fairly be called the most vital mass literature of the Americans.

Emerson would have been an original, creative mind in any civilization, but it is not his originality, it is what his creative spirit made articulate for his country and his time that is important here. The current of European idealism in him rose through new springs. He was a scholar and a specialist in religion who lived in an expanding civilization. What in Europe and in his own Massachusetts was a revolt against dogma and against codes, what in America generally was crude energy, he transformed into a faith in the power of man to make each day a new beginning and into a confidence that good (which he did not too sharply define) was more fecund than evil (which he regarded as a wild beast that the superior man could inevitably subdue). He brought idealism to the frontier and offered it a continent. The comfort-seeking nineteenth century outmoded him, yet his ideas are coming home again in the area which twentieth century science has left open for religion.

Hawthorne is the perfect example of the metabolism of an American imagination at work upon a mood which did not originate here. He was a romanticist strongly attracted, like all that European generation, to history, but in strong skeptical revolt against the easy moral theories of the age of amelioration. The weakening chains of Calvinism, which had bound together the impulses of the American will to subdue a continent, left him unshackled, but brooding. He represents that karma from the moral uncertainty of the American past, which still creeps upon our long conflict between idealism and the pursuit of the dollar. Sin for him was the pathology of individuals in a country that had never reconciled its present with its past, or with its future. A little too soon and with bad models yet in a golden style, he wrote the tragedy of our Lincolns, our Wilsons, our Poes, and our Grants.

Thoreau also was a scholar, a first-rate scholar in the great classics of world civilization, if too much of a transcendentalist ever to become a scholar in the natural sciences where most of his energies were spent. He got his idea of the significance which lies behind facts from Emerson, and thus indirectly from the European idealists, but his application of it to the business of living was his own. Here he

was entirely himself, a deeply religious, intensely self-sufficient, and acutely suspicious Yankee. He saw life in a new country being swung from its natural vitalities of satisfying experience, into accumulation, its neck going under the burdens which had made life unendurable for all but the privileged in Europe. He saw economic experiments under way which left the essential out of account, which was that man should learn how to do what he really wanted. He saw the industrial revolution passing into the phase where it was to set new and one-sided standards of living. Against these world ideas, he put his own life which he lived as an experiment—and could so live it in a New England where intense individualism was still a pioneer virtue. He wrote a book on how he lived without either despising or yielding to the machine, and an essay on what he proposed to do if the dictators should proclaim the state more important than the individual soul.

Walt Whitman took all literature and all the brotherhood of man for his province. The first he read badly; the second he celebrated in its passing, not in its eternal, aspects. The *en masse*, the democrat, the noble workman, the sweaty pioneer he wrote of, were actors in only one scene of a great drama. They seemed to be the future to a mid-century American because democracy in a country with an unsettled West made them not only possible but types of success. It was with a vision differently conditioned, but equally short-sighted, that Marx saw his classless proletariat. What the Civil War left of Whitman's dream, the industrialization and exploitation of the United States ended. Yet he dreamed it so long and with such reality for his imagination to play upon, that his rough lines were able to break the conventions which still made poetry and all higher literature aristocratic. The American experiment in a society run for the benefit of the average man, which still continues from Jefferson to Roosevelt, got its heroic articulation from Whitman. And it was a rough, crude, vulgar heroism belonging to men who never forget their stomachs or their sexual organs, and so transferable to whatever in the future shall be the expression of the common people.

Last — journalism. The indisputable contribution of the American to world articulateness is journalism—a method of making news sensational, so that, like literature, it will appeal to the emotions. The excesses of sensationalism I am not concerned with here. My point, as far as America is concerned, is this: that the quickened intelligence of a pioneer country, the high recurrence of movement among its populations, and the interest in events in a continent which for three centuries has been in constant and rapid process of change, made the art of journalism as inevitable here as it was native to circumstance. In this there is no foreign

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