

poetry so original and fine could not, with better luck, have produced something less negative in its essential attitudes—for there is an obvious sense in which ‘negative’ applies to his actual work. It is perhaps a tribute to the positive virtue of this ‘negativeness’ that the Group—the post-Eliot Group—have not co-opted him into their bosom along with ‘Wilfrid’ and ‘Kathy.’ And it is worth noting that Georgian taste, though he has perhaps suffered from having made his *début* in Georgian pastoral company, didn’t take to him. Harold Monro, for instance, could see nothing in his work.

Edward Thomas, in fact, got no recognition while he was alive and hasn’t had his due yet.

F. R. LEAVIS.

HART CRANE FROM THIS SIDE

THE COLLECTED POEMS OF HART CRANE (Boriswood, 7/6).

At last it is possible for the reader on this side of the Atlantic to come to a conclusion about the legend of Hart Crane. It was a most impressive legend. So far as one could see, all American critics, with whatever reservations about the actual achievement, were agreed that the poet who walked off the steamer into the sea in 1932, ending at much the same age as Shelley, was a genius of peculiar contemporary significance. The odds and ends of him one came on in American periodicals, together with the kind of claim made for him by the critics, left one wondering. And now that the texts are fully to hand the conclusion seems unavoidable that if the legend, at any rate, remains significant, it is not because of any genius in Hart Crane.

The genius had manifested itself above all, one gathered, in a heroic effort at the creation of an American myth. Of *The Bridge*, the work embodying the effort, it seems fair to say that Mr. Waldo Frank, who constitutes himself its interpreter, is a not unsuitable one. ‘Crane,’ he says, ‘was a mystic.’ ‘Mysticism’ would appear to be an ability to take a vague, confused and grandiose gesturing towards symbolism for an achieved order and a realized significance.

'The revelation of *The Bridge*, as myth and principle, comes to a person in the course of his day's business ; and that person is the poet. In this sense the Poem is allied to the *Commedia* of Dante, who also, in response to desperate need, takes a journey in the course of which his need finds consummation. Lest the analogy be misleading I immediately amend it.'

The reader will not find that Mr. Frank's amendments do much to recommend the analogy. And in the following account of the Bridge symbol the stress should fall on the 'shall':

'It shall synthesize the world of chaos. It joins city, river, and sea ; man made it with his new hand. Parabolawise, it shall now vault the continent and, transmuted, reach that inward heaven which is the fulfilment of man's need of order.'

Crane's symbolism amounts to nothing more than a turgidly rhetorical 'shall,' and in spite of Mr. Frank's insistence that 'the structural pattern of *The Bridge* is superb,' the poem is a wordy chaos, both locally and in sum.

The quality of Crane's rhetoric and of his use of symbols is fairly suggested by this:

And now, as launched in abysmal cupolas of space
Towards endless terminals, Easters of speeding light—
Vast engines outward veering with seraphic grace
On clarion cylinders pass out of sight
To course that span of consciousness thou'st named
The Open Road—thy vision is reclaimed!
What heritage thou'st signalled to our hands!

'Thou' is Walt Whitman, and the relation so easily established between his 'vision,' the aeroplanes and a 'span of consciousness' is representative of Crane's symbolizing. His main 'symbol,' Brooklyn Bridge, pregnant as the obscurities of its elaboration are meant to be, has just as much significance, no more. Crane's ambition, it is clear, was possible because of his lack of all qualification for it: having no glimpse or notion of any principles of order, he was able to take a rhapsodically vatic Whitmanesque warmth as sufficient for the undertaking, which justified itself by its very magnitude.

That the America of the 1920s should have produced a Hart Crane is not surprising. What is surprising is the critical respect the legend commands. For the question is not, as one would gather from American criticism, At what point does Crane fall short? but, Why should he enjoy any reputation at all—as a poet, that is? At any rate, I cannot see that, apart from his conviction of genius and his confidence, he had any relevant gift. Mr. Waldo Frank speaks of his ‘poetic texture’:

‘Here is music plainly related to the Elizabethans. And here is also a sturdy lilt, like the march of those equal children of the Elizabethans—the pioneers . . . always there is this homely metronomic linking him to his fathers. Hence the organic soundness of the verse. Indeed, the entire intellectual and spiritual content of Crane’s verse, and of Crane the child of modern man, could be derived from a study of his typical texture.’

Here is a piece of Crane’s typical texture (the dots are his):

The nasal whine of power whips a new universe . . .
 Where spouting pillars spoor the evening sky,
 Under the looming stacks of the gigantic power house
 Stars prick the eyes with sharp ammoniac proverbs,
 New verities, new inklings in the velvet hummed
 Of dynamos, where hearing’s leash is strummed . . .
 Power’s script,—wound, bobbin-bound, refined—
 Is stopped to the slap of belts on booming spools, spurred
 Into the bulging bouillon, harnessed jelly of the stars.
 Towards what? The forked crash of split thunder parts
 Our hearing momentwise ; but fast in whirling armatures,
 As bright as frogs’ eyes, giggling in the girth
 Of steely gizzards—axle-bound, confined
 In coiled precision, bunched in mutual glee
 The bearings glint,—O murmurless and shined
 In oilrinsed circles of blind ecstasy!

It is true that this doesn’t illustrate the ‘homely metronomic’ beating at its sturdiest lilt. It illustrates rather what happens to Crane’s rhythm when he overloads the naïvely conventional romantic rhetoric (going with ‘thou,’ etc.) that is his basis:

The captured fume of space foams in our ears . . .

The gleaming cantos of unvanquished space . . .

Time like a serpent down her shoulder, dark
And space, an eaglet's wing, laid on her hair . . .

When he attempts modern effects—verse embodying contemporary speech—his rhythmic nullity is brutally exposed.

As for the turgid verbosity and incoherences to which even Mr. Frank admits him to be prone, it looks as if the alcoholic part of the legend would go a long way to explain them. Crane was plainly in the habit of associating alcoholic excitement with poetic inspiration, and there are signs of the habit's persisting even in the absence of the excitement. Frankly alcoholic documents are such poems as those on pages 104 and 106, and there is, significantly, an elegy addressed to Harry Crosby.

Crane's career belongs to the period chronicled in Mr. Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return*. If the legend persists even among the most intelligent American critics, a sufficient explanation is, perhaps, that implicitly conveyed when John Peale Bishop, writing on Thomas Wolfe in the first number of the new *Kenyon Review*, thus brackets Wolfe and Crane together:

' His position as an artist is very like that of Hart Crane. Crane was born in 1899, Wolfe in 1900, so that they were almost of an age. Both had what we must call genius ; both conceived that genius had been given them that they might celebrate, the one in poetry, the other in prose, the greatness of their country.'

Mr. Bishop offers severe and radical criticism of both, but—' genius ' ! The need to feel that America had at least come near to producing such genius as both conceived themselves to have is readily understood. But from this side of the Atlantic it is impossible to see genius in either.

F. R. LEAVIS.

HÖLDERLIN

HÖLDERLIN, by Reginald Peacock (Methuen, 10/6).

There are many reasons why Hölderlin, apart from the attraction of novelty, should have become since the war something of a cult both in England and Germany. His romantic idealizing temperament as well as his unhappy career have naturally attracted those whose interest is in poetic personalities, rather than in poetry. In his unvarying enthusiasm (*Begeisterung*) he reminds us at times of Shelley ; in his innocence, his finer moments of vision, he is sometimes like Wordsworth. But comparisons with English poets are dangerously misleading. That which makes Hölderlin important to-day, which demands something more than a merely literary-historical approach, is his unquestionable poetic talent, the superiority of his technique, which is evident even to the foreigner,

Mit gelben Birnen hängen
Und voll mit wilden Rosen
Das Land in den See,
Ihr holden Schwäne,
Und trunken von Küssen
Tunkt ihr Haupt
Ins heilignüchterne Wasser.

Weh mir, wo nehm ich, wenn
Es Winter ist, die Blumen, und wo
Den Sonnenschein
Und Schatten der Erde?
Die Mauern stehn
Sprachlos und kalt, im Winde
Klirren die Fahnen.

It is impossible for the foreigner to define exactly the superiority of these characteristic lines ; one can only point to the simple felicity of the phrasing—a simplicity which implies a particular concentration—and the impact with which a phrase like ‘ heilignüchterne ’ strikes even the reader who is unaware of its especial meaning in Hölderlin’s verse.

Much of Hölderlin’s thought (and it is with this that Mr. Peacock is chiefly preoccupied) can be related to that of his