

Review · Carl D. Esbjornson

Edward J. Brunner, *Splendid Failure: Hart Crane and the Making of "The Bridge"* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 282 pp.

Edward Brunner's *Splendid Failure* is a well thought-out, surprising, original approach to Hart Crane's poetry. Brunner dedicates his book to the memory of Merle Brown, one of his teachers at the University of Iowa whom he mentions in the Acknowledgments as having "urged his students to find their own approaches . . . and to think them through no matter how far they led in unexpected directions." Brunner's book exemplifies this teaching. It is at variance with critical studies such as R. W. B. Lewis' pioneering *The Poetry of Hart Crane*, which views Crane as a visionary poet in the Romantic tradition. Lewis emphasizes Crane's visionary mode in his study and attends to the rhetorically transfigurative surfaces of the poems that, for example, turn garbage cans into visions of the Holy Grail. In deliberate contrast to Lewis, Brunner contends that the visionary poetic was simply an early phase that Crane abandoned as he matured in his work. Brunner finds the exploratory nature of Crane's poetry compelling: collectively, his poems reflect an increasing awareness of the poet's relationship to modern culture. Accordingly, Brunner reads several poems as representative of a transitional phase in Crane's career. Prominent are his readings of "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" (which prepares us for his treatment of *The Bridge* by analyzing the various stages of the poem's development in order to disclose new meanings), *Voyages*, "The Wine Menagerie," "Lachrymae Christi," "At Melville's Tomb," and the two versions of "O Carib Isle!" Concerning "Lachrymae Christi," Brunner says: "Written as a work of self-analysis, the poem measures the poetry of [visionary] self-abandonment and finds it wanting." Brunner's reading of "The Wine Menagerie" reaches a similar conclusion. In addition he points out that, because Crane is aware of this problem, there is a degree of tension in this and other poems as well.

Brunner considers "At Melville's Tomb" to be a breakthrough in Crane's maturation as a poet. In this poem, Crane directly confronts the sea's cruel indifference to human aspirations, and finds that the human

spirit is animated, provoked to heroic action for the very reason that the unforgiving sea dooms it to failure. This point is highly suggestive in relation to Crane's work at this stage of his career: "At Melville's Tomb" represents Crane's own resoluteness to continue working over and against the burden that the "poetry of self-analysis" has placed on his ambitions for *The Bridge*.

The final preparation for Brunner's treatment of *The Bridge* comes in his reading of the two versions of "O Carib Isle!" A notable shift occurs in the two versions; from the poet's indifference to and isolation from the world in the first, to a sympathetic involvement with it in the second. This shift becomes, in Brunner's estimation, the basis for a remarkable sequence of poems that Crane composed while residing on the Isle of Pines during the summer of 1926. During this time Crane abandoned his attempt to be a detached cultural spokesman and moved toward a more personal and private mode in his epic.

After the summer of 1926, Crane had a sequence of poems that consisted of "Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge," "Ave Maria," "Cutty Sark," "Three Songs," "The Dance," "The Harbor Dawn," "Van Winkle," "The Tunnel," and "Atlantis," in that order, an order that Brunner prefers. Brunner believes that this sequence has a fundamental integrity based on the dialogical relationships between the poems, a belief that accords with his position apropos Crane's evolving "poetry of self-analysis." This integrity is greatly weakened by the poems that Crane later included as he worked toward completing his poem—"Indiana," "Cape Hatteras," "The River," and "Quaker Hill." In addition, Crane further weakened *The Bridge* by changing the order of the original poems in the 1926 sequence. Brunner contends that the 1930 *Bridge* is a muddle and represents a feeble attempt on Crane's part to return to his initial plan of writing an American cultural epic, a plan that Brunner views as little more than a tediously conventional survey of American history. Following Hyatt Waggoner, Brunner wryly points out that Crane capitulated to the pressure of his more influential friends, patrons, and fellow poets: "The 1930 *Bridge* offered history to Tate, the machine to Frank, a strong narrative to Winters, even a passage on the airplane for his new friend and patron, Harry Crosby." Brunner is disturbed with this capitulation because he believes that Crane broke free of an artistic *cul de sac* when he wrote these poems in 1926; they signalled Crane's realization that he

could not simply look to American history, myth, or present culture for his epic. Instead, by looking within himself, he learned that the poet, as Sherman Paul so succinctly observes in *Hart's Bridge*, "builds the poem from the inside out."

Brunner provides many fascinating insights that confirm his sense of Crane's shift in emphasis and develops them in relation to his particular reading of the 1926 sequence. One example is his reading of "Ave Maria" and "Cutty Sark." Brunner identifies the Columbus of "Ave Maria" with Crane's new attitude: "Like his Columbus, Crane had been boastful and possessive, insistent on the rightness of his vision; he had learned to modulate his ambition, and in the process began to find the answers that had eluded him for years." For this reason, Brunner believes that "Ave Maria" and "Cutty Sark" form a significant juxtaposition in the 1926 sequence. The purpose of the derelict mariner's presence in "Cutty Sark" is not to contrast a sordid present with a glorious past, but to show the self-destructiveness intrinsic to the mariner's persistent failure to live in the present. He yearns for the bygone era of the great clipper ships and through these reveries attempts visionary transformation of an unsatisfactory present, his drunkenness tellingly commenting on the failure of this attempt. The derelict mariner, blinded by memories of his youth, fails to come to the self-realization that Columbus reaches in "Ave Maria."

This particular analysis exemplifies Brunner's treatment of the poems in the 1926 sequence. Overall, Brunner finds that Crane's poetic quest is qualified by his new understanding of the epic poet's difficult task in the modern age. The poem is characterized as a "splendid failure" because, in taking an unexpected turn in relation to Crane's original intentions, Crane realized that he could not, in the manner of the epic poets, speak for the culture as a whole; modern culture is too fragmented, reality too discontinuous to be accommodated by the poet's vision. "Atlantis," coming as it does at the end of the sequence, does not represent a renewal of Crane's visionary faith or even his visionary impulse (contrary to R. W. B. Lewis' reading) but, by way of contrast with "The Tunnel," measures the extent of Crane's loss of vision and the giving over of his public role as visionary, as cultural spokesman in favor of a private, more restrained and analytical mode of poetry.

My guess is that some readers are going to become uneasy about certain aspects of Brunner's thesis, even wondering why it was necessary to raise

the issue of the superiority of the 1926 sequence when Crane had no intention of publishing it as *The Bridge*. Brunner makes a strong case for the 1926 sequence, but what is the proper function of such a reading in relation to the completed *Bridge*? I believe that Brunner's mode of literary second-guessing here detracts from his engaging study and is unfair to Crane's own conception of the poem which continued, however belatedly, to concern American history and culture. In many respects, the 1930 *Bridge* derives much of its greatness from Crane's own recognition of his difficulty in formulating an American *mythos* given the knowledge he accrued in working through the poems of the 1926 sequence and given the fact that he remained faithful, nonetheless, to his original intentions. I agree that the later poems are weaker, but I also believe that they serve to underscore more emphatically the tensions between his public role and his private self. These tensions account more fully for the poem's continuing interest to readers in a way that the 1926 sequence does not. In one sense, Brunner is right; if Crane had left the 1926 sequence intact, we would now have something like *Voyages* but we would not have *The Bridge*.

Nor do I think *The Bridge* is a "splendid failure." Do we really need another discussion of "the failed epic"? The title of this book suggests that, in some ways, Brunner wants to revive this issue one more time which is, perhaps, the most unoriginal aspect of what is otherwise a provocative revisionary reading of Hart Crane. Even though these "failed" epics do not achieve the unified world view that characterizes the *Odyssey* or the *Commedia*, works such as the *Cantos*, *Paterson*, and *Maximus*, which always get drawn into this discussion, do not fail, but succeed, coming into their own fullness of self-realization by opening themselves to the "doubts and uncertainties" that are a part of their essential nature. Like Pound, Crane, too, "cannot make it cohere": *The Bridge* opens itself up by exposing its inherent tensions, between detachment and sympathetic involvement, between the public poet and the private self, and, most of all, between Crane's ambitions for the poem, the unexpected insights he achieved in working it out, and his sense of the failure of modern culture which made him write a different poem from what he intended. But this does not make the poem a failure, not even a "splendid failure," and Brunner's account of Crane's maturation as a poet serves to reinforce my own view of the essential greatness of the 1930 *Bridge*.

Although I question Brunner's implicit claim that his rewrite of *The*

Bridge is superior to the final version, I strongly recommend this book. Brunner is a thorough scholar; his readings are consistently clear-headed, convincing, and backed by careful attention to the text and scholarship. I prefer his reading of "Cutty Sark" to James E. Miller's in *The American Quest for the Supreme Fiction*, which resorts to a lax methodology of comparison and contrast to make some broad generalizations concerning the similarities between that poem and Whitman's "Calamus." In this case, Brunner is a sounder critic and scholar. His instincts concerning "Three Songs" are also sound; his apprehension of the underlying tension and sense of isolation that characterizes "Virginia" is at variance with more optimistic readings of the poem. R. W. B. Lewis' reading is impressive, but his conclusion that "Cathedral Mary" represents a "stir of hope" for the recovery of virginal innocence ignores the crucial ambiguities of the poem. For me, the vision of "Cathedral Mary" is undercut by some of the imagery: "green figs" suggests not only a fecund sexuality but "figs" is also an Italian obscene gesture as readers of the *Inferno* well know, and the "nickel-dime tower" that "Cathedral Mary" inhabits along with the "crap-shooting gangs in Bleeker" suggest a sordid world of commerce, perhaps some of it illegitimate, that, along with the suggestive image "Saturday Mary, mine!" makes me wonder if she is a virgin or a whore. Had Brunner focused more closely on some of these images, he would have lent further support to his thesis that Crane is aware of the tensions inherent in *The Bridge* as a whole. Nonetheless, he does well to point to "Cathedral Mary's" isolation in the tower and to characterize her as "unpromising" since the promise and renewed innocence initially suggested by some aspects of the poem could very well be an illusion.

While Brunner's treatment of the 1926 sequence does not succeed in rewriting *The Bridge*, he has much to say toward a *rereading* of the poem and has added a new dimension to our sense of the poem as a whole. Brunner's reading of the 1926 sequence does not invalidate the 1930 *Bridge* but makes a legitimate point that adds greater richness and complexity to the final version. In this respect, *Splendid Failure* represents a substantial, if somewhat flawed, contribution to Crane scholarship and criticism. Brunner simply runs into a problem common to many revisionists: at a crucial point in the book, he falls too much in love with his own analysis. As a result, he is not very generous in his treatment of the 1930 *Bridge*, the one failing in an otherwise splendid reading of Crane.