

Memories of Charles Crow

by A. H. Saxon

Undoubtedly the teacher who had the most profound influence on me during my undergraduate career was Professor Charles R. Crow of the University of Pittsburgh's English department. In my day—this was during the rather leisurely fifties, remember, when Pittsburgh and its “streetcar” university were considered by many to be in a cultural backwater—he had the reputation of being the one bona fide scholar in the department; and although his publications, amounting to a bare handful of articles and a paper on the late style of Henry James that he delivered at a conference sponsored by the English Institute, were hardly extensive, they all gave evidence of his brilliant mind, which possessed a breadth of learning and critical acuity such as I have seldom encountered in any other individual. He was familiar with, and could discuss almost as if he had read it only yesterday, the full range of English and American literature, from Beowulf to the latest novel by James Gould Cozzens; while his knowledge of the literatures of other western nations was almost equally impressive. The last he would generally read in their original languages, for Charles was also quite a linguist, teaching himself classical Greek when he was middle-aged, for example, so that, as he put it, he might finally “read Homer in the original.”

Critical theory, in which he taught a course, was another area where he was especially at home, and many of us hoped he would someday write a book on that topic. Above all else, however, no matter what the subject of his classes or conversation, Charles was what I would term a “stylist.” His speech and writing were never pretentious, never flowery, but were graced with a nicety of word choice, an Emersonian economy and elegance of phrasing, a tone and mode of expression that were uniquely and unmistakably his own. Had Samuel Johnson chanced to be born in the twentieth century, I have often thought, this is how he might have sounded!

But Charles had none of the “Great Cham’s” bearishness, even though, like Johnson, he did possess his share of eccentricities. Whether among students or colleagues, he did not, as Johnson was reputed to do, knock them down with the force of his arguments—preferring instead, especially in the case of the former, to win them over by gentle persuasion, often through the skillful posing of questions that obliged them to confront their abysmal ignorance. His own opinions, no matter how firmly he believed in them, he nearly always advanced tentatively, even deferentially. He eagerly listened to what others had to say and was never hesitant to acknowledge the superiority of their ideas. “All right!” he would almost shout, smiling and vigorously nodding his head up and down in enthusiastic approval. Those “all rights!” did a lot for the self-esteem of more than one budding scholar,

as I myself can testify. It was not by accident—and certainly not with any irony or disrespect—that bright Jewish students in his classes sometimes referred to him as the “perfect Christian gentleman.”

His idiosyncrasies were no less a source of delight, and often wonder, to his students. Of medium height, fairly slender, with a small, sharp beak of a nose (though hardly so sharp as that of a “crow”), he would literally beam at us through his spectacles as he allowed himself to be carried away while reading a favorite poem or essay. Usually he was seated behind a table at the front of the classroom, and his bald, polished head, fringed with gray hair, would bob up and down as he read from the book opened flat before him; his face would break into a broad smile as he savored an especially felicitous image or phrase; his forearms, propped on their elbows, would rise vertically from the table, their hands and fingers vigorously waving and twisting about in time to the rhythm of the words—or suddenly stopping, index fingers pointing upwards, to emphasize some point. Then, having exhausted himself and his students with this unintentionally funny performance, he would slam the book shut, lean back in his chair with his hands now thrust firmly into his pockets, nod his head from side to side a few times in final appreciation of what he had just read, and begin his comments and questions, prefaced by an ejaculatory “Well!”

Whether speaking on his own or reading from the works of others, Charles’ articulation and pronunciation were crisp and most precise, and at times one had the impression there was almost a machine-like quality, even a kind of clicking sound (which may have been caused by his dental work, however), to his delivery. His emphasis, honed by his love of poetry, was also most judicious, and it may be that this same appreciation for poetry and rhythm accounted for his meticulousness in separating and giving each syllable in a word its due weight. We students could not resist imitating him in hesitating between the two syllables of a word in the title of one course he taught: “Writ-ing the Essay.” It wasn’t that Charles was being pedantic, for he was never that. He simply loved that word “writ-ing” and didn’t want to let go of it!

As one can readily imagine, there was always a good deal of suppressed laughter during the first few meetings of his courses; but it was rarely malicious, and I and the other students quickly came to respect and admire him. Besides that course in “Writ-ing the Essay,” I took another with him in seventeenth-century literature—he was, of course, entirely within his element when reading and “explicating” the poems of John Donne and the other Metaphysicals—and, in my senior year, an independent study course that involved a fairly long essay. It wasn’t, I now realize, a very good essay; but Charles, as was his custom, refrained from telling me so directly, although his pungent comments in the margins of the drafts I submitted to him were often deflating enough!