



F. Edward Crazz

(Courtesy of the Connecticut College Archives,
New London, Connecticut)

F. Edward Cranz - In Memorium

by
Tom Cheetham

The posthumous publication of F. Edward Cranz's *Reorientations of Western Thought from Antiquity to the Renaissance* in 2006 was the final fruit of the career of a truly remarkable scholar.¹ It is an event that should be widely celebrated among intellectual historians everywhere. The long labors of Nancy Struever and all the others who have seen to it that Cranz's life-work is now readily available should be applauded. His example has been of inestimable value to me over the years and it is with great pleasure that I offer this remembrance.

Ferdinand Edward Cranz (1914-1998) was a professor of history at Connecticut College for 43 years. He held the Rosemary Park Chair in History from 1962 until his retirement in 1985. I was lucky enough to be his student in three courses in the early 1970s and he changed my life. He was "Ed" to his friends and colleagues and "Mr. Cranz" to the students. He was a tall, kind and gentle man with a memorable laugh and a shock of disorderly white hair, who had a wonderful sense of humor and was respected and loved by everyone. He was the first person I had ever known who was astonishingly multi-lingual. One story in circulation, and I think I believe it, was that he was once enthusiastically praising a new book on Kierkegaard to a colleague when he stopped suddenly in mid-sentence to ask "You do read Danish?" To my unending regret I did not heed his earnest advice to learn as many languages as I could. He told me he was disappointed that he would not have time in this life to learn Arabic so that he could fully trace the history of the transmission of Aristotle's works from Greece to medieval Europe. Early on I got some vague sense of the depth of his engagement with language when he commented to me about Nicolas of Cusa that "in order to really understand Nicolas you have to realize that he was a German, writing in Latin and thinking in Greek." The profundity of that kind of scholarship stunned me then, and still does.

He was educated at Harvard and later turned down an offer of a position there in order to stay at Connecticut where he could work quietly in a collegial atmosphere without all the distraction and complexities that such an appointment would bring. He did not own a car - he and his wife rode bicycles everywhere - including 100 mile journeys to visit her mother in Massachusetts. When I knew him he took regular naps in the afternoon and was in his office late into the night after dinner. He wore horn-rimmed glasses he held on his head

¹ Edited and with an Introduction by Nancy S. Struever. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006.

with one of those black elastic things, and used little metal clips to keep from getting his pants caught in his bicycle chain. He was not a particularly riveting lecturer, but as a *teacher* he was superb. I desperately wanted to know what it was he was trying to teach me about how to read a text – it was something subtle that he seemed to feel could not be *taught* but only *learned*. I may have a bit of an idea of what he was getting at now after all these years. I thought he was very mysterious – but I was young and I did not know him well.

His courses always relied on original sources, where English translations were available at all – and in those days many of our readings were in quite archaic English. Even in introductory courses we read authors whose names seemed outrageous and impossible – Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite -- “Because,” he said with a twinkle, “he wasn’t the *real* Dionysius the Areopagite” -- the Venerable Bede, Eusebius of Caesarea, Alexander Aphrodisiensis and on and on through thickets of the strangest ideas and the most awkward prose that an 18 year-old has any business struggling with. We wrote a two-page paper every week – when asked why they had to be so short he would say that if you wanted to work really hard then he would let you make them shorter. In those days we wrote our papers with typewriters, but he was always forgiving of mistakes and hand-written corrections. Looking over his own manuscripts one sees why.

He was a scholar of the first rank, but his scholarship was always in the service of something greater, something grand and deeply personal, deeply human. He was of course, among many other things, an authority on Nicolas of Cusa. His papers on Nicholas have been collected by Thomas M. Izbicki and Gerald Christianson in *F. Edward Cranz, Nicholas of Cusa and the Renaissance*.² He tried one semester, without much success, to help me discover what Cusanus was all about. He was passionate about Nicholas in his quiet and understated way. It seems to me now that his may have been the first voice I heard raised against the optimistic progressivism of Western culture. Of Nicholas’s vision of an ecumenical Christian civilization he said to me once, “It’s rather sad really – it’s something that should have happened and never did.” The sense of loss implicit in this judgment remains part of my spiritual heritage.

His office was a notorious nightmare of bookish disarray and it was impossible to imagine how he ever laid his hand on anything – the anxious student visitor literally had to clear papers and books away in order to sit down. The college library had purchased, for Cranz alone, the entire enormous set of Migne's *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, both the Greek and the Latin Series, which was of course extremely expensive. I know, because my mother was the circulation librarian,

² Thomas M. Izbicki, and Gerald Christianson. (Eds.) *F. Edward Cranz, Nicholas of Cusa and the Renaissance*. Aldershot [England]: Ashgate/Variorum, 2000.

that he had somehow in all that chaos lost two of these irreplaceable volumes and I never heard that they were found.

One of his major projects was the *Catalogus Translationum Et Commentariorum: Mediaeval and Renaissance Latin Translations and Commentaries*, which at the time seemed to me the most arcane and yet somehow alluring kind of work. But it was precisely this seemingly pedantic scholarly work on catalogs and bibliographies that made his grander hermeneutic enterprise possible.³ It was through the meticulous study of commentaries and translations that he came to see that “Aristotle” meant quite different things to different people.

Mr. Cranz was an intellectual historian of a very unusual sort. As Struever says, he was engaged in “phenomenological hermeneutics.” He was a humble, cautious and careful scholar, who based everything on the closest possible reading of the texts. And his immersion in the texts was total. Very late one night I unexpectedly saw a light in his office and I came to his door on the top floor of the otherwise empty New London Hall. I will never forget that sight, and the feeling it roused in me. His desk was completely empty – which was stunning enough – and he was bent, head in hands, over what I took at the time to be a Greek text. He looked up at me from so far away, from somewhere so private, that I felt I had violated a profound intimacy. It still makes me feel a pang of guilt.

In the spring of 1973 he gave a talk on campus entitled “Anselm’s Legacy.” It was I think the first time I heard him speak at length about the idea that is his own great legacy for us. I have carried a copy of that manuscript and quite a number of others around with me for almost 40 years now. All of them, to my continual distress, unpublished until recently.⁴ I stayed in touch with him on and off over the years and he sent me manuscript copies of his latest talks. He always promised that he would publish these things and that he was still working on “the book” about his fundamental idea of “the re-orientation of Western thought.” His argument had been my first encounter with the idea that the perception of reality is historically mutable, that our way of apprehending the world is not the only way. It seemed to me a very great and tragic loss that he died without completing the book. It was with excitement and delight that I heard

³ See Struever’s Introduction to *Reorientations*. His major publications in this area include Cranz, F. Edward. *A Bibliography of Aristotle editions, 1501-1600: With an introduction and indexes by F. Edward Cranz*. Baden-Baden: Verlag V. Koerner, 1971; Cranz F. Edward. *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum: Medieval & Renaissance Latin Translations & Commentaries*. Catholic Univ Of Amer Pr, 1984; Cranz, F. Edward. *A Microfilm Corpus of the Unpublished Inventories of Latin Manuscripts Through 1600 A.D.* New York: Renaissance Society of America, 1987.

⁴ The single exception is a significant essay “1100 A.D.: A Crisis for Us?” given as a history department lecture in 1974 which was so obscurely “published” as to be essentially inaccessible. See Despalatović, Marijan. (Ed.), *De Litteris: Occasional Papers in the Humanities*. New London, Ct: Connecticut College Library, 1978.

that his fascinating work had at long last been published thanks to the dedication of his friends and colleagues.

He gave a summary statement of the “reorientation thesis” for colleagues at Connecticut College in 1985:

There was a general reorientation of categories of thought c.1100AD, say in the generation of Anselm and Abelard. Against the ancient position...in which sensation and intellection lead to conjunction and union with what was sensed or intellected, we find a dichotomy between the mind and what is outside it, between meanings and things. [Rather than the] ancient *extensive* self, a self open to the world around it, we find a move to an *intensive* self, a universe of meanings separated by a dichotomy from the world of things. Finally, against an ancient reason which is primarily a vision of what is, we find a movement toward a reason based on the systematic coherence of what is said or thought. [These phases] are held together in the experience of what we call language...⁵

He said elsewhere that our mode of thought “is different from, even alien to, all previous thought, and ... there is nothing normative, or even normal, about it, or us.”⁶ But it is really not just a change in modes of *thought* that he is concerned with, but rather ways of experiencing the world. He wrote “the thrust of my argument is not that there were different theories about the same seeing and knowing, but rather that there were different seeings and knowings.”⁷ And he clearly thought that whatever we may have gained by this transition, something had been lost. Struever writes that Cranz’s project “shows... a deep sympathy with an Aristotelian psychology which presumes a continuum of capacities – sensation, perception, fantasy, memory, passions and intellect – that are continuously interactive... [He] describes a loss that transpires in the domain of experience: the post-Anselmian disjunction is a psychological deficit, a loss of ‘dimensionality’. And the loss is our loss as well.”⁸

Cranz was cautious and reticent about his thesis that the “ancients” experienced the world in a way radically different from ours. He knew he faced an uphill battle making his case. As Struever notes, “Cranz expressed many times his rueful awareness of the generally disbelieving scholarly response.”⁹ Although he often said that it shouldn’t be possible to ever recapture this vanished way of knowing, he was living proof that it could be done, if only fleetingly. He said to

⁵ Struever, Introduction, xii.

⁶ “The Reorientation of Western Thought c. 1100A.D: The Break with the Ancient Tradition and Its Consequences for Renaissance and Reformation,” Delivered at the Duke University Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, March 24, 1982.

⁷ “Eyes of the Mind: anitquity and the Renaissance” in Cranz and Struever, xi.

⁸ Struever, Introduction, xi, xiv.

⁹ Struever, Introduction, xiv.

me once that as he sat lost in contemplation over these ancient texts, sometimes he was afraid that he wouldn't be able to get back. This made me shiver forty years ago, and it still does today.

I can quite clearly recall being very uneasy about all of this. It was exciting because it seemed to make the world a much richer, larger and more complex place than anyone had ever suggested. But as a young and naïve realist I was bothered by the suggestion that our experience of reality is not normative, or perhaps even very common. What could this mean? Surely there are things "out there" about which we have "ideas" and that we describe in "language." We need only look and there they are. It seemed to me that he was upsetting any common-sense notion of the reality of the world as I, and any hard-headed scientific rationalist would know it. I remember asking anxiously "But Mr. Cranz, what about *rocks*?" My recollection is that he smiled his wonderful smile and said that he was a historian and didn't know about rocks.

The implications of Cranz's work are profound and far-reaching. His hermeneutic project is in agreement with R.G. Collingwood's claim that metaphysics is an historical discipline. Both hermeneutics and metaphysics can serve to describe shifts in absolute presuppositions about the nature of reality and our very experience of it.¹⁰ Cranz's work can be understood as part of the "hermeneutic turn" in contemporary philosophy. But his stance is always that of the historian and his detailed exegeses reveal the difficulties inherent in this kind of research. He emphasizes the *invisibility* of these shifts in orientation and the difficulty, indeed the near impossibility, of detecting them. In the end though, they can be discovered – and this discovery implies that it is possible to stand outside of your culture and your time to glimpse an opening towards something like a primary human potential which is given particular shape and limitation by the historical circumstances in which we live. These investigations raise so many profound questions about the nature of reality and what it means to *be in history* that I still find it astonishing that the scholarly community has not taken more notice of this work. Now that it is all published, Cranz's writings could mark a milestone in our understanding of our place in the world.

There is one other task that Cranz has left us among his papers. In addition to the unpublished essays that he intended to someday make into a book, he left also a collection of what he called "sermons" – talks addressed to the general public – sometimes an audience in Harkness Chapel at Connecticut College. He felt very strongly that the work of the specialized scholar always had broader implications for society. If it didn't then it was pointless. This was Cranz's truly public face – as a consequence I have always thought of him primarily as a religious thinker and a Christian. The talks were complex and

¹⁰ Struever, Introduction, xiii.

fascinating, full of moral exhortations and commentaries on the difficulties, puzzles and contradictions of modern life, and deeply informed by his contention that there is something very odd about Western history after about the year 1100. I still have manuscript copies of several of them, and I have read them many times over the years, often not quite sure of their meaning, but as always with Cranz's work, feeling that there is something there that I need to know. They seem as relevant now as they did when he wrote them. It would be a useful task to see that they too are someday made available to a wider audience. It would be a fitting tribute to this remarkable scholar and human being.

Last spring I visited Connecticut College for the first time in 35 years. I made a pilgrimage to the top floor of New London Hall. Cranz's spirit has haunted me for a long time. His humility, generosity and kindness still inspire me. The powerful aura of wisdom and mystery that surrounds him in my memory is an enormous part of my heritage from those years long ago and seems only to grow with time. What was once his office is now a laboratory of biology, but the view across the college green is the same as it was. The memory of the space he filled for all those years is far more powerful for me than the present, more transient reality.

Tom Cheetham is a Fellow of the Temenos Academy in London and the author of three books on the implications of Henry Corbin's hermeneutic phenomenology for contemporary spirituality: *The World Turned Inside Out*, *Green Man-Earth Angel*, and *After Prophecy*. He was Associate Professor and Director of Environmental Studies at Wilson College in Pennsylvania. He has taught at the College of the Atlantic and Pacifica Graduate Institute. He and his wife live in rural Maine.