Remembering Jonathan Crewe

By Stephen Orgel (Stanford University)

Jonathan Crewe died on October 9, 2022. He grew up in rural Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal), did graduate work at the University of Natal, and then taught for two years at the University of Cape Town, where he and J. M. Coetzee were colleagues. Their friendship is the subject of his exquisite memoir *In the Middle of Nowhere: J.M. Coetzee in South Africa*.[1] In 1974 he and his wife Katherine, a landscape architect and urban planner, determined to reinvent themselves away from the culture of apartheid (or, as they came to think of it, the middle of nowhere) and moved their small family to Berkeley, where Crewe received his Ph.D. in English in 1980, with a dissertation directed by Stephen Greenblatt.

After that, for six exceptionally collegial years we were colleagues at Johns Hopkins, and became close friends. He then moved to the University of Tulsa, and in 1990 to Dartmouth, where he taught in the departments of English and Comparative Literature. He was the first director of the Leslie Center for the Humanities and in 2008 was appointed the Leon D. Black Professor of Shakespearian Studies. He retired in 2016. He is survived by his partner, Professor Melissa Zeiger, his former wife Katherine Crewe, two children, James Crewe and Jessica Crewe, and his brothers Robin and Adrian Crewe.

In the ten years after completing his Ph.D. he produced three books that essentially

[1] Jonathan Crewe, *In the Middle of Nowhere: J.M. Coetzee in South Africa* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2016).

defined the field of early modern studies. They also constitute a chronicle of his own intellectual development. His first book, *Unredeemed Rhetoric*, a study of the notoriously contentious Thomas Nashe, is a remarkable achievement.[2] No critic has more successfully confronted the baffling intensity and embattled centrality of Nashe's work to Elizabethan literature. Crewe brilliantly argues that what we need to understand is not simply Nashe but both the increasing primacy of rhetoric in the age and, paradoxically, the age's increasing resistance to the play of language. Nashe's linguistic virtuousity in the service of what Crewe calls a "powerless frivolity" (4) is then a trenchant example—powerless but nevertheless intensely vexatious, and not only to his contemporary targets (like Gabriel Harvey), but to modern critics (Crewe's example is Richard Lanham). Crewe undertakes to account for "the irreducible power and opportunistic success of Nashe's rhetoric" (19). The book opens by being very much of its period, steeped in structuralist and post-structuralist language and concerns, with moments that are, forty years later, frankly impenetrable; but after the introductory chapter the clarity of the argument is exemplary, and once Crewe hits his stride this book is certainly the clearest and most enlightening discussion of this vexed and vexatious author.

Trials of Authorship (1990), his final book of academic criticism, offers a cautiously presented but in fact quite radically revisionist view of the Renaissance, pointing out early in the argument that the classical writers central to the age were not only Virgil and Ovid, whom modern critics treat as central, but also Horace and Seneca; and thus any account of the period must take into account satire and stoicism as well as pastoral, epic, and metamorphosis.[3] This observation leads to important reassessments of texts that have become foundational to the English Renaissance, Wyatt and Surrey, and the nearly contemporary biographies of More and Wolsey; but also of the generally neglected Gascoigne, the least admired of Shakespeare's works, *The Rape of Lucrece*, the broader emergence of prose as the medium of both revaluation and hagiography, and the changing assumptions of gender norms, "the story of privileged masculine authorship during one phase of the English Renaissance" (20). The book is intensely argued, and beautifully conceived.

[2] Jonathan Crewe, *Unredeemed Rhetoric: Thomas Nashe and the Scandal of Authorshop* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

[3] Jonathan Crewe, *Trials of Authorship: Anterior Forms and Poetic Reconstruction from Wyatt to Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

Trials of Authorship led to the edited collection *Reconfiguring the Renaissance* (1992), and subsequently to the important collection *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (1999), co-edited with Mieke Bal and Leo Spitzer.[4] Although he did not consider himself a Shakespeare specialist, he edited six volumes of the New Pelican Shakespeare, with substantial introductions and commentary, and subsequently for several years taught a large and very popular Shakespeare course at Dartmouth. His last book, published in 2016, *In the Middle of Nowhere*, is nominally a study of J. M. Coetzee's years in South Africa when he and Crewe were colleagues teaching at the University of Cape Town, but is equally a moving meditation on his own past and the world he left behind.

Of his more than forty essays, I single out only "Drawn in Color: *Aethiopika* in European Painting," a beautiful discussion of paintings based on the late classical novel *Aithiopika* of Heliodorus.[5] Crewe conspicuously confronts what art history avoids, the systematic exclusion, and even more striking, the whitening, of the romance's Black figures; and when in later paintings Black figures are included, they are either threatening or sexualized, part of what Crewe identifies as the "sexualized racial projections of early modernity" (141)—there is no warrant for this in the original romance. This obviously reflects Crewe's reasons for leaving South Africa, but also his genius at noticing the previously unnoticed is very much in play here, and the essay is in its way revolutionary.

For me, Crewe's most important book is *Hidden Designs* (1986), written before *Trials of Authorship*, but with a more wide-ranging and ultimately forceful argument, as the fact that a new edition was issued in 2014, twenty-eight years after it was first published, reflects.[6] The book seemed to me transformative, and I shall treat it here at length. It is a profound and courageous book, not invariably persuasive, but always both deeply learned and provocative. It is framed as both a mystery story and a literary history, but it also includes a good deal of autobiography, which inevitably reflects the careers of any of us in the profession. In a larger sense the book anatomizes the contraction of literary criticism from a humanistic enterprise into an academic discipline, and serves as

[4] *Reconfiguring the Renaissance: Essays in Critical Materialism*, ed. Jonathan Crewe (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1992); *Acts of Memory: Cultural Memory in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999).

[5] Jonathan Crewe, "Drawn in Color: *Aethiopika* in European Painting," *Word & Image* 25.2 (2009): 129-142.

[6] Jonathan Crewe, *Hidden Designs: The Critical Profession and Renaissance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1986; repr. London: Routledge, 2014).

a manifesto for academic criticism. A measure of the book's continued relevance is the fact that it is still in print.

It is a very personal book, deeply informed by Crewe's own involvement with New Historicism; but also valuable for its dispassionate view of issues that are less often debated than simply ignored. Early in the book he states its thesis, avowing "a conception of the critical profession as an activity, a name, and even an object of worldly faith distinct from, though not necessarily opposed to, critical professionalism." It avows, moreover, "a belief in the critical goal, however problematical or impossible, of disinterestedness" (3). The models for criticism as humanistic dialogue are now quite ancient, the genial Lionel Trilling on the one hand, and the acerbic and embattled F. R. Leavis on the other, both far in the past, though the issues they confronted continue. Indeed, Crewe offers a sad rehearsal of Leavisite controversies,

> on an endless regression in quest of the true critical principle…, a principle becoming increasingly dehistoricized, decontextualized, disembodied and finally occult…that might result in a critical dialectic of giving and withholding, of showing forth and occulting, but never in a practice capable of delivering the goods.
> (*Hidden Designs* 10)

Crewe himself delivers the goods in the form of a series of case histories. The guiding spirit at the opening is Stanley Fish; Crewe's starting point is a conversation with Fish around 1980 in which it was agreed that though there were strong paradigms for reading English literature of the seventeenth century, there were none for the sixteenth century, where a certain lack of critical perspective was evident. Crewe's book emerging from this conversation, a series of essays on sixteenth-century works, is in the largest sense an encounter with historicism, both old and new, but it also engages with the most recent work in the field at the time, by Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Goldberg, Harry Berger, Jr., and a number of others. The book consists of a group of Crewe's own previously published essays with commentary. The works treated are, most fully, Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* and Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, essential documents in the traditional construction of Elizabethan literature, but also Spenser's early sonnets in *The Theatre of Worldlings*, his first published work, and the late *Mother Hubberds Tale*, both marginal works through which Crewe illuminates the project of *The Faerie Queene*. There is also, as an epilogue, an essay on the early Shakespeare.

Crewe's own model is the detective story, in which "the quest for a criminal is also a quest for a crime," (13) as it is in *Hamlet*. But of course, the solution of the mystery is never as interesting as the mystery; the book is less a detective story than an extraordinary intellectual autobiography, presenting and contextualizing a group of Crewe's own essays written in response to and under the influence of New Historicist paradigms. In the commentary Crewe powerfully questions the standard New Historicist deployment of subversion and containment in considering the relation of art to authority.

> "Problematization," "subversion," "contestation" and "transgression," for example, all began to seem like terms in the ordinary use of which prohibitive containment, and sometimes the unalterable lawfulness or fatefulness of that containment, are virtually conceded. The terms thus seem logically to facilitate only trapped, guilty, or masochistic discourses, not liberating ones.
> (*Hidden Designs* 20)

Needless to say, the failures of containment—e.g., in civil war and revolution—are of less interest to critics of the sixteenth century; for the next century, they are, of course, unavoidable.

And yet by the end, subversion, transgression, contestation, are what the literature of the period is all about, particularly focused on managing powerful women, as this society headed by a powerful woman drew near its end; hence Sidney's Stella, all Spenser's witch figures, and, the unseen but omnipresent Fairy Queen. Finally in Crewe's reading of Shakespeare's early comedies, culminating in a concluding essay on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the plays are construed as political allegories and veiled threats designed to control or neutralize dangerous women. (As Anthony Dawson pointed out in a shrewd and largely admiring review in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, the similarly early *Love's Labor's Lost*, with its centered and ultmately controlling women, is significant by its absence from the argument.)[7]

A startling essay on *The Arte of English Poesie*, long credited on dubious grounds to George Puttenham, observes that the book was published long after it was written, and proposes that in fact Spenser is the book's guiding spirit, or even its occulted author—it seems designed to place Spenser as the central poet of the age, speaking directly to power.

[7] Anthony B. Dawson, "Review: Jonathan Crew, *Hidden Designs*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39.1 (1988): 94.

(This is the solution to the mystery cited at the beginning.) One doesn't have to swallow the whole argument to feel its force; and to say that the case is overstated is to acknowledge that there *is* a case, and it is a case that criticism has, on the whole, not perceived. If it does not fully account for the strangeness of the work's anachronistic appearance, it does make clear how much there is to account for.

Crewe engages richly with Puttenham's foundational treatment of the origins of drama:

> Drama remains bound, as one might say, to the original sin that elicits it. It remains not only bound to the forms of evil that it combats, but becomes increasingly bound to represent the evils that it seeks to overcome. As its forms develop beyond that of "satyre" (satire/satyr play), the "good" of drama, unlike that of poetry, comes to consist in its conquest of the evil that is present within it from the start.
> (*Hidden Designs* 34)

Crewe observes that the role of theater in Elizabethan society is manifestly at issue in Puttenham's history.

> The institutional apparatus of the state alone remains, in Puttenham's view, insufficient to establish effective control of a divided society or to hold it together as a community; what is called for, either in fact or in principle, is the powerful hegemonic institution of theater as a political conventicle. The history of the dramatic forms thus doubles as an explanation of successful rule in general and of an always-possible Tudor good government in particular; the phenomenon of theater as a major public institution carries with it this one inescapable meaning for Puttenham.
> (*Hidden Designs* 34)

Following Daniel Javitch's *Poetry and Courtliness in Renaissance England* and the work of Louis Montrose, Crewe shows how Puttenham became, for the history of the sixteenth century, "a manual of political courtship, an art of government, and a treatise on the relationship between the poet and the sovereign, in particular Queen Elizabeth." Crewe continues, "from the moment historicists broke a major taboo and began reading the poetry of the sixteenth century as politically encoded discourse, Puttenham's work began to look like the most powerful decoding machine available" (121).

> The historicist approach increasingly revealed what could be done with *The Arte of English Poesie* as a manual of courtly maneuver and above all of courtly dissimulation.... Puttenham's work seemed also silently to be displacing Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* as the major interpretive document

> of English sixteenth-century poetics. Precisely to the degree that Puttenham's *Arte* demystified the poetry in question…Sidney's *Apology* appeared to do the opposite by idealizing and hence obfuscating the practice of sixteenth-century poets…Not only is the *Arte* a manual of instruction about how to please rulers, but also about how to subvert and unmask them; how to restrain their tyrannical presumption. The genre of tragedy, for example, is explicitly anti-tyrannical, and the warning it gives to princes is that, although they may dictate their own representation during their lives, their image for posterity is in the hands of poets.
> (*Hidden Designs* 126)

All this, of course, had implications for our own critical practice:

> The purported historicization of sixteenth-century literature, in the course of which such topics as those of ambition, of career management, of patronage and clientage, of authority and power, of social mobility and of *ancien regime* political styles rapidly became dominant, was often little more than an allegory of current professional life.
> (*Hidden Designs* 71)

And invigorating as Crewe's developing analysis was to his close associates, to the profession at large it was deeply disturbing; the subtext was clearly enough that the narrative of New Historicism was a narrative of the profession justifying itself. Crewe writes,

> The dangerous turn that my discussion had taken was, however, quite soon brought home to me. One reader of the following essay [on *Astrophil and Stella*] for an exalted journal wrote in terms unusually threatening in an academic context that "[he] had better mend his ways." "It isn't my style," said a professional colleague dismissively about another of these essays. "You seem to be trying to do things differently," said yet another colleague, failing to add whether that was a good or a bad thing. If I had begun innocently enough, I could not long remain so. I understood express or implied charges to include those of un- or anti-professionalism (the sorest point?), regression to conspiracy theorizing and/or fanciful biography, and perhaps a certain failure of the required attitude.
> (*Hidden Designs* 73)

Crewe's response in the book is summed up in a breathtaking epigram: "Etymologically speaking, tradition not only carries on but lies" (90).

In print the career was relatively short but brilliant; institutionally it was long and influential. Both at Tulsa and Dartmouth he organized important conferences on the English Renaissance and on the teaching of Shakespeare. As the first director of

Dartmouth's Humanities Center, founded in 1999, he began a proliferating series of colloquia and symposia, emphasizing the importance of the humanities in a largely technological and scientific environment. Long after his retirement he was still being asked by younger faculty to lecture on Shakespeare. His loss to the profession is immense; to his friends, it is incalculable.