

Ernest G. Clarke: A Personal View

Walter E. Aufrecht

The writing of a doctoral dissertation is one of the most bizarre of human endeavors: it trains one to do something that one will never do again. It also makes uncommon intellectual, emotional and physical demands on both student and teacher: extraordinary standards of honesty, openness, creativity, and intellectual prowess; toleration of criticism, both personal and intellectual; and endurance of drudgery without promise of reward. While it is a wonder that anyone finishes, it is not a wonder that the relationship between student and *Doktor Vater* can be a complex one. Such, at any rate, was my relationship to Ernest G. Clarke, known by students and colleagues alike simply as “Ernie.”

We met on a traffic island going in opposite directions. He walked up to me, introduced himself, and after a few pleasantries, invited me to his office to talk about my career. To this day I have no idea of how he knew who I was, though I learned then and there that I would have to scramble to keep up with him. At any rate, I turned around on the spot and went to his office, whereupon we immediately got into an argument. Subsequently, by turns, he became my teacher, colleague and friend. And for nearly thirty years, we continued to argue.

Ernie was a gifted teacher. He could make the most difficult material clear and exciting. His graduate seminars were so interesting and so much fun, that sometimes, students would ask for an extra hour of class each week. Ernie always granted this request with enthusiasm, despite the fact that it required him to do more preparation. He loved the give and take of the classroom and he loved students. His thoughtfulness to and consideration of them was exceptional. To give one example: when one of his graduate students was hospitalized for months with treatment for cancer, he regularly visited the hospital until the student died. To my knowledge, he never told anyone of these visits. Indeed, I found out about them by accident one day when saw I Ernie leaving the hospital.

Ernie’s method of supervising a dissertation could be characterized as “indirect.” When the text was presented to him, he never made comments or suggestions, he just asked questions. To him, a dissertation was not so much a matter of right and wrong, as it was a matter of honesty, accuracy and defensibility. Each submission to him became a kind of mini thesis-defense, a procedure which had three consequences. First, it forced the student to think and write with clarity and precision. Second, it ensured that the content of the dissertation was entirely the student’s. Third, it virtually guaranteed that the formal “defense” would be successful: nothing could be as grueling as the interlocutories with Ernie.

He was not as long-suffering with colleagues as he was with students. He was impatient with those whose ideas were not as well-conceived or as firmly-held as

his own. Furthermore, his emotions were close to the surface. This was usually salutary because of his great sense of humor, but some real or imagined slight would hurt his feelings, causing him to get very upset and then brood. Fortunately, these periods—though intense—were short. Generally, his devotion to his colleagues was unswerving. It was manifested not only in personal loyalty, but in the length and quality of service to his beloved Victoria College, to his department and to the larger scholarly community. Ernie did his best to set the example of his often-too-high standards of loyalty, commitment, and responsibility.

With a heavy teaching and administrative load, he had little time for writing. I think he did not especially like to write. He was much too gregarious a person to suffer writing's lonely demands. This notwithstanding, his publications are of exceptional quality. A significant number of them are editions of texts (either in the original language or in translation), something which identifies him as a member of the "Toronto School" of Near Eastern Studies. Ernie did not eschew "great ideas," but like many of his teachers and colleagues at Toronto, he understood that ideas could be "great" only to the degree that they are based on accurate and reliable editions of texts. So his scholarly energies were devoted to this *Grundlage* of knowledge.

Finally, one could not ask for a better friend than Ernie Clarke. He was loyal, generous and forgiving. He was a wonderful companion: a raconteur, gourmet, adventurer, musician, philosopher and world-class arguer. He and his wife Ruth, whom he adored, created a gracious and lively home, full of love, ever open to students, colleagues and friends. And as with his students, Ernie imparted a love of learning and an enduring example of *humanitas* to his children Paul, Peggy, Patsy and David, to whom he was devoted and about whom he was inordinately proud (and who, I might add with gratitude, made me feel like one of them).

So this is my personal view of the complex and truly remarkable man who was my teacher, colleague and friend. I had written a version of these remarks for him to read in this volume. I am sorry he did not get to see them. I was looking forward to the argument that they would surely have provoked.