

NO CROSS, NO CROWN: THE POETRY OF JOHN WILLIAM CORRINGTON

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It was in 1964 at French House, a graduate women's dormitory back then, that I first saw John William Corrington. I had heard of the young hotshot professor who had just returned to Louisiana State University with a doctorate from Sussex, had heard how he played pool with students in an off-campus dive on Chimes Street and sped around Lakeshore Drive in a little white sports car. I had heard, too, that he wrote poetry, a different kind of poetry. That December evening I discovered that, as for the poetry, I had heard the truth.

Corrington stood beside the piano in the French Renaissance dorm library (men were allowed on the first floor of French House). He was reading from his manuscript to be published in 1965 as *Lines to the South* by Louisiana State University Press. From the high ceiling a chandelier cast bright little circles around the oak floor and onto the laps and shoulders of a handful of students and faculty. One circle of light fell directly on Corrington. Had it been larger or Corrington's head smaller, there might have been a halo effect; instead, he appeared to be wearing a crown.

Was he conscious of this effect? Performance poetry was an unfamiliar concept then, but Corrington was clearly on stage, saying things I hadn't known could be said in poetry, his voice a rhythmical instrument, his face alive. He was entertaining the house with the cool papa word jazz of an ex-trumpet player from the Skyway Club in Bossier City. "Death was dead," he intoned in bongo cadence, his offhanded manner implying a recent event, his title "It Happens Every Spring" promising future feet. Growing up in rural Mississippi, I had heard the Easter message ad nauseam in the language of the clergy, but this was six years before *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and the humanized point of view of "hungover soldiers" was a startling concept:

... bronzejawed noncom
... leaned his shoulder against the stone ignoring
...
celestial razzmatazz
and rolled
it back across the open tomb
so fast
he almost

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mashed a thumb
on somebody coming out¹

Corrington then quoted Shakespeare's Rosalind and read from his recently published *The Anatomy of Love* (1964). In the title poem, the dramatization of eighteen kinds of love is unified by the first scene's connection with the last. In the first scene Christ looks down at the crowd around his cross, and in the eighteenth we're told that Mary "wept silently."

And tried hard later not to
go mad
each time she heard
a hammer strike a nail.²

While I was wondering whether every poem revolved around the crucifixion, he began the lyrical "Pastoral," set in that pivotal moment on 6 August 1945 when idyllic countryside suddenly puffs white "as larks burst into flame / and on the august horizon / the city being eaten by a sun."³ Corrington's having veered from Calvary via Hiroshima to Revelation made me wonder whether his intent was to exhaust the variations on a theme already so familiar to the Bible-obsessed South.

As if he'd planted the question to create an effect by answering it, Corrington next read portions of a long poem obviously modeled on the *Waste Land* with a structural nod to the *Four Quartets*. "Communique" (I, II, & III) (*Anatomy of Love*, 62-86), a verbal symphony played on philosophical, historical, and mythological instruments, blends military orders, pop tunes, and polite conversation into a miasma, its intensity reminiscent of Fellini. Lyrical French passages are sprinkled about like grace notes in this artful orchestration of street talk, fragments of chatter, classical quotes, and classical allusions. The work reveals a range of vision that, Corrington would acknowledge a decade later over lunch in New Orleans, had to be repressed in his work as a screenwriter.

¹ "It Happens Every Spring," in John William Corrington, *LINES TO THE SOUTH AND OTHER POEMS* 2-3 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965)(first appearing in *San Francisco Review* in 1962)(also in John William Corrington, *Mr. Clean and Other Poems* 11 (San Francisco: Amber House, 1964)) (hereafter, documentation for quotations from *Lines to the South* and *Mr. Clean* will be given by page number in the text.)

² "The Anatomy of Love," in John William Corrington, *THE ANATOMY OF LOVE AND OTHER POEMS* 35 (Ft. Lauderdale, Florida: Roman, 1964)(hereafter, documentation for quotations from *Anatomy of Love* will be given by page number in the text).

³ "Pastoral," in John William Corrington, *WHERE WE ARE* 11 (Washington, D.C.: Charioteer, 1962)("Pastoral" was reprinted in *Lines to the South*, at 13).

By 1974, Corrington and his wife, Joyce, had been living in New Orleans for eight years, teaching at Loyola and Xavier Universities, and co-writing screenplays. The mind that in "Communique" had kept half a dozen ideas in the air, juggling voices and time periods, found Hollywood's restriction to one idea, preferably one simple-minded idea, intolerably frustrating. He was through with screenplays, he told me that day over lunch in 1974, and hoped to be able to "make it" soon with his serious writing. He had been through with teaching at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge since 1966 and through with teaching altogether since leaving Loyola University in New Orleans in a huff to enroll in Tulane Law School in 1972. By the end of 1977, he was through with the practice of law. After that, he wrote.

Corrington had begun writing poetry in the 1950s as an undergraduate at Centenary College. Actually, that was when he began receiving recognition, going on to publish in little magazines and authoring four collections of poetry in the 1960s. Privately, he admitted to having "dabbled" in poetry since high school in the late 1940s, when he read Randall Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" and could not forget it. The title for his first book, however, was taken from Auden. *Where We Are* (1962) was praised by reviewers, and Corrington was compared to Ezra Pound and James Joyce. Corrington himself called the book "nice old noise instead of gutwringers," disparaging one poem, "Footnote," for having a smooth fopishness about it that makes you want to kick the writer in his smart mouth," dismissing his "Exemplary" (series of poems) as "just learning," labeling "Diplomats" and "Middleman" as "bad ones . . . which even if they were written better, still could not possibly matter," apologizing for including a love poem—"Protoepithalamion," written near the time of his marriage to Joyce Hooper in 1960—which departed from his "antiautobiographical principle."⁴

The rare personal moment in Corrington's poetry is a strength, not because it is personal, but because that's when he seems to trick himself into allowing the "lump of boy . . . snuffling in my throat" ("On My 18th Birthday," *Lines to the South*, 20) to sneak past the usual, stereotypically masculine posture. In "The Functions of a Complex Variable," written after meeting Joyce, he successfully juxtaposes fragility and anguish. In "For My Daughter Nine Months Old," the achingly true parental insight all soft voiced and vulnerable is slammed against a

⁴ John William Corrington to Charles Bukowski, 10 and 24 April 1962. Corrington's letters are quoted with the permission of Joyce Corrington. The letters are in the John William Corrington Papers, Centenary College, Shreveport, Louisiana. (Subsequent quotations from the Corrington-Bukowski correspondence will be cited in the text.)

cold-eyed vision of the future in the poignant last line: "I must love her especially now, / commit her magic gabble to memory: / against the time she grows articulate."⁵

Corrington's more characteristic, hard-voiced poetry is carried by its dramatic tension. There is a drama in his violent rejection of things longed for and in the internal conflict implicit in a fascination with condemned behavior. There is also the tension straddling the two worlds, as Richard Whittington recognizes in his introduction to the second book, *The Anatomy of Love* (pp. 5-14). Whittington posits two kinds of contemporary poetry, inside academe and outside, citing Corrington's snippy denunciation of the former in "To a Poet Gone Dry in Houston," while linking him to the latter by his establishment bashing and his shock language. Note how mainstream today the attitude and language have become that served as Corrington's passport to Outsiderville in 1964.

Corrington was even then an insider, although he claimed *au contraire*. Witness his erudition, his use of literary and operatic models, his acquaintance with formal structure. Witness his friendliness with the sonnet. His academically traditional objectivity allowed him, as Whittington points out, to dramatize others' feelings without committing to their values.

Mr. Clean and Other Poems (1964) and *Lines to the South and Other Poems* (1965) received mixed reviews; still, there were flattering comparisons to Wallace Stevens's intellect and to Ferlinghetti's wit. Corrington was more self-critical. He wrote to Beat poet Charles Bukowski, "Mr. Clean' [is] one of my beasts . . . strong at first reading, but not too much else" (17 February 1963). "If it succeeds, it does so like '[They Were Killing Us] On the Ridge' by a whisker" (10 March 1963). "Man in the Purple Sheet" is "no damned good and if I had been a good man, I would have pulled it and thrown it away" (20 April 1963). "Rudolph to Greta" "swings like a pavingstone on a frazzled string" (September 1961). "I can build better singings by opposing NOW to some THEN" as in writing about the Hindenberg disaster in "Variations on a Theme from Isaiah" (16 August 1961). It dazzles the reader, says New Orleans poet Ralph Adamo, how he can "keep his ideas straight while he

⁵ John William Corrington, "The Functions of a Complex Variable," 4 (1) *Descant* 30 (1959) and "For My Daughter Nine Months Old," 6 (1) *Descant* 14 (1961).

makes language bend and shift, as historical periods merge with their essential counterpoints."⁶

"A Trip to Omaha" (*Mr. Clean*, 5; *Lines to the South*, 24) opposes NOWS and THENS, death and love, bitch and goddess. It mixes humor and seriousness: "Hamlet would have laughed his tragic socks down" seeing "us" in 1944 storming the beachhead at Normandy. For a unified blend of NOW and THEN, see "The Mystic" (*Lines to the South*, 33), a sonnet memorably understated, as is "Photo of a Lady" (*Lines to the South*, 22), which

calls to mind the irony of shutters,
the impossibility of focusing for long
beyond our depth of field:

were you gesturing me closer
or waving me away—

Corrington and I argued his indebtedness to Browning's dramatic technique in this poem and to the theme of "Fra Lippo Lippi" in "Catabasis."⁷ We argued for years (he liked presenting new evidence) over his repeated insistence that he was not a dramatist. But, every time he read aloud at Loyola University, I would win a round, having to mouth the words "I rest my case" over thunderous applause.

During our years at Loyola (he had hired me as an assistant professor in 1967), he spoke of working for a voiceless style, the author refined out, disappearing, not in the Browning sense behind characters, but behind an invisible style. He had by then stopped writing poetry, and I assumed that he was referring to the fiction he was then writing. But now, reading letters that he wrote Bukowski in the early 1960s when poetry was his art, I find Corrington referring to himself in the third person as one who cannot be found in his poems. "When you read the poem, he is gone. . . . Like [James] Joyce used to say, he tries to be 'above, beyond, behind the work, refined out of existence'" (September 1961).

Corrington loved to talk writing theory but laughed at the idea of anyone actually taking a course in "CrEaTiVe WriTtInG" (Corrington to Bukowski, 24 December 1962). It won't wash, he'd say, his argument—that one's art is a measure of character, that one's time is better spent

⁶ Ralph Adamo, "An Exemplary Poem: An Overview of the Poetry of John William Corrington," in William Mills (ed.), *JOHN WILLIAM CORRINGTON: SOUTHERN MAN OF LETTERS* 46-58, 53 (Conway, Arkansas: UCA Press, 1994).

⁷ John William Corrington, "Catabasis," 1 (3) *Renaissance* 52 (1962).

in prayer than at Iowa—spelled out to Bukowski: "If a man writes badly, it is because he is a fool or a liar or a phony. If he writes well, it is because the gods have touched his lips with the burning coal" (21 January 1963). In light of Corrington's deep South, Roman Catholic mythology, one can read him to be saying: God does not anoint the lips of the unlearned, the fearful, the bearer of false witness. Hypothesize the degree of conviction and shouting required to convince the Supreme Judge, the poetic parade of learning needed to seduce the "burning coal."

Corrington dedicates his books to God's glory.—*A.M.D.G. (ad majorem dei gloriam)*. But the angry rebel is a favorite persona, one sure, as in "Lucifer Means Light" (*Anatomy of Love*, 22), to get God's attention: "the old man never knew him till he fell / hunched on a dying comet . . . / tired of the light in his eyes."

Still, if Corrington grew up in the same South I did, getting God's attention and getting God's blessings were two different things; Jacob had to wrestle all night with the angel (Gen. 32:24-29) to earn a blessing. The crown is not bestowed until the cross has been suffered. There's the rub. There begins the need for others—someone to fight, a need as basic in my South as someone to suffer for. Corrington wrote Bukowski: "You are held together in one piece and one place by the forces blowing against you from outside. Your enemies . . . are what keep you together. . . . If they didn't exist, we'd have had to invent 'em" (17 January 1962). If the enemy fails to pull you up Cemetery Ridge with that Ole Miss class that signed on as a unit and fell as a unit, if the enemy fails to mock and spit on you, to whip you up Golgotha Hill (Hebrew for place of a skull), if they fail to nail you to the cross and cast lots for your garments—then, if you would have a crown, you must crucify yourself. Corrington was a man of conviction who did not duck enemies: On 1 March 1966, he blasted LSU's administration in the Red River Room at the student union; and thereafter on a regular basis from August 1966 through May 1972, he reminded Loyola's Jesuits of gory details from the Inquisition; he railed in my liberated ear against liberated women; used taboo words for homosexuals; used taboo words for nationalities and for races, including his own.

He was also a man of contradictions: For three years he fought the Jesuits over their treatment of a gay member of our English department. He was married almost thirty years to one of the most independent women I've met. He longed vocally for Shreveport the twenty-seven years that he made south Louisiana his home. He roundly condemned New Orleans the twenty years he lived there for posing as genteel while producing "more distinguished second-raters than any city in the country" and for possessing a crassness that would level the French

Quarter if ever the cash registers cease to sing"⁸—almost as bad, he'd add, as California. He wrote me in 1987 that he was leaving the New Orleans university district, not for his beloved Shreveport, but to move to the twenty-six acres in California he'd just bought and named "Louisiana." Twelve years (1960-72) as a university professor taught him to prefer "Hollywood's cultural decay to academia's psuedo-culture." His last ten years (1978-88) he wrote for television, explaining with dancing eyebrows that it "beat pumping gas in a service station." Yet, he never stopped writing serious fiction and in his last years returned to poetry.

After I moved to San Antonio in 1977, I saw very little of Corrington. Our correspondence was erratic, and at the time of his death, 24 November 1988, I had owed him a letter for months. However, for the ten years that I lived in New Orleans (1967-77), with the exception of the semester that he spent teaching at the Berkeley campus of the University of California, he and I met almost weekly over lunch to argue writers, writing, and the Equal Rights Amendment. Halfway through, a conversation, he'd invariably resort to the filibuster, talking history, ethics, religion, philosophy, military strategy (Lee's brilliance at it), and what may have been his favorite subject—his wife Joyce. He was in awe of her beauty, intuition, logic, expertise at plot construction, and her understanding of the male psyche. It was unfair, he bragged, that one person could be both a disciplined thinker and an intuitive psychologist. She had the ability to explain from the inside the characters he had created in his fiction. The fly in the ointment, he said, was his "compulsion"—he couldn't say dependence—to take her advice. "A man who can't write humor should quit and spare the people," he would quote her and ask if I thought the humor that strained through his Irish came out too dark.

The answer then, the answer now, is no. In "Absalom on Entropy," the title character has a self-knowing laugh at his wry, compulsive admission, "I have to win," and at his vow, simultaneously earnest and flippant, to "[bel]get a child that even chance will recognize as wise." In good-humored voice, the "poet cursed with a little gift" asks his wife in "For Joyce on Her 35th Birthday" if she recalls "the million threads this loom of years has made?" Even in exile, "The Beloved" St. John the Divine, "blessed by his memory of things undone as yet," has a good laugh waiting for his dire prophecy to unfold. The sophomoric humor of Salome's choice in "The Baptist" is redeemed by the truth of John's zealotness:

⁸ Note Corrington's play on the words of the Mardi Gras song: "If ever I cease to love."

He could not rest: the sun went down behind
 some village he had not yet catechized,
 and so instead of sleep at night he'd find
 a trail marked out in stars . . .⁹

Humor beneath the notion that rain seeks "The Rainmaker" is made lyrically appealing: "In my wake green explodes like the dream of a winter tree." The joke is on the reader in "K.627," the title repeated in the last line. The disembodied voice addresses Mozart whose death had left the *Requiem Mass* (K.626) unfinished:

We dance across the stage, tranced by the lights,
 . . .

You are not the shadow, but the truth,
 . . .

We are all Köchel's unlisted entry—
 loving, possessed, uneven,
 your one work more:

K. 627.

"A Former Poet Decides to Tell the Truth," with its eight-line Homeric Cliff notes, is all humor:

A soldier got pissed off and said
 You all can fight without me and
 see how well you do.
 His best friend fell,
 he cried,
 went back to tear the city down.
 And did. And died.
 And went to hell.

That's half of Homer with
 two lines to spare.¹⁰

All humor except "the concealment and the lies" in the poem's last two lines that add a dark touch of cynical Irish commentary to the Greek.

⁹ John William Corrington, "Absalom on Entropy," 4 (1) *New Orleans Rev.* 31 (1974); "For Joyce on Her 35th Birthday," (unpublished manuscript); "The Beloved," 85 (2) *Sewanee Rev.* 207 (1977); and "The Baptist," 50 *Cimarron Rev.* 52 (1980).

¹⁰ John William Corrington, "The Rainmaker," 51 *Cimarron Rev.* 24 (April 1980); "K. 627," 16 (1) *Southern Rev.* 153 (1980); and "A Former Poet Decides to Tell the Truth," in *Southern Man of Letters*, *supra* note 6, at 56.

It is not cynicism but a fervent note of longing sounded beneath comic pictures that concludes both "Second Childhood" and the "Old Man among His Flowers," who, facing death, remembers his youth. Written shortly before Corrington's death, this, his last poem, invites personal comparisons, although at fifty-six he was not old. Blending with and strengthening the pathos of

Not that I am afraid.
Better say the years . . .
...
somehow have strayed
...

life draining like a garden hose.

The humor works in the final stanza's double images: James Joyce's "Stephen seeking in the streets of Dublin" after Mollie Bloom's song and Corrington's old gardener calling out to his flowers, "Bloom, Bloom."¹¹

The overstatement in this poem—for example, the five lines following "no cross, no crown"—is the flaw in Corrington's poetry. Whether it is a failure to trust his words or his reader, I do not know, but, knowing Corrington, I suspect the latter. Knowing Corrington, I also imagine that he would be pleased to argue the question. He hated safe poetry. It was, in his words, like "a Hathaway shirt ad. . . . [It] may not sell everybody, but don't [*sic*] alienate a soul. . . . Men make mistakes. . . . They go nuts for God and slice off their peckers. They booze and bleed and . . . die for forty cents or for the flag" (Corrington to Bukowski, 17 August 1961).

This voice, with its strident, early 1960s rhythms and too wise tone, brings to my ear voices in some of the very early poems. Later poems bring other voices: agonized, fervent, enraged, or that cool-jazz voice with its cultivated Southern inflections that I first heard at LSU's French House. But it is in reading his last poems that I hear vintage Corrington. Note the increasing depth of quieter emotions, the progression from anger to calm acceptance. Note the dropping of pretensions and stereotypical masculinity (although he reverts in line 3, stanza 4, of "Old Man among His Flowers"). Note the growing courage and generosity in parting with more of the personal, where the truths come harder; and it is the harder truths that I admire in Corrington's poetry. Note less muscle flexing, more power, the eye fixed less on destination crown

¹¹ John William Corrington, "Second Childhood," in Mills, *supra* note 6, at 57-58, and "Old Man among His Flowers," 25 (3) *Southern Rev.* 595 (1989) ("Old Man Among His Flowers" was also published in *Pegasus* 44 (Centenary College)(1989)).

and more on journey toward the cross ("the blessed earth I will surely call to . . . Bloom, Bloom"),¹² more on gardening for its own sake with a growing faith in the flowering.

¹² "Old Man among His Flowers," *id.*

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