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A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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"THE SOUTHERN PHILOSOPHER: COLLECTED ESSAYS OF JOHN WILLIAM CORRINGTON," EDITED BY ALLEN MENDENHALL

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John William Corrington

Reviewed by Jay Langdale

Poet, attorney and film-writer John William Corrington was an enigmatic artist whose life (1932-1988) spanned a pivotal era in the history of Southern letters. Raised Catholic during the Great Depression, Corrington attended Centenary College and completed a graduate degree in Renaissance literature from Rice University as well as a D.Phil from the University of Sussex. He went on to serve on the faculties of Louisiana State and Loyola University at New Orleans.

Editor Allen Mendenhall correctly characterizes Corrington as a "latter-day Southern Fugitive" in the tradition of the authors of *I'll Take My Stand*. Like John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Donald Davidson, Corrington, though, is not easily characterized. His peripatetic life mirrors those of the Agrarians, but even more so those of second generation followers like Richard Weaver and Mel Bradford.

Like the Agrarians, Corrington began as a poet, but moved to fiction and literary criticism before, redolent of William Faulkner, venturing into screenwriting. Like Weaver, he was an anti-modernist who viewed the South as embodying a mytho-poetic counterweight to modernity. Like Bradford, Corrington, a partisan of Eric Voegelin and critic of Abraham Lincoln, was a gadfly within the emergent post-World War Two conservative intellectual movement.

The Southern Philosopher is a collection of Corrington's previously unpublished essays on literature, intellectual history and gnosticism.

Corrington's Agrarian anti-modernism is exemplified by the following passage from the opening essay titled "The Mystery of Writing":

We seem to have reached a point in our national development where we are prepared to do anything rather than think, anything except examine our collapsing culture and try to determine what it is telling us—anything but face the reality that we have turned away from the heights and depths of life itself and settled into a kind of spiritual and intellectual fog from which no judgments worthy of the name can issue, and into which every new insight seems to vanish without a trace.

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Like his Agrarian forebears, Corrington's imagination was shaped by the implicit irony of this historical condition and the obligation to, he wrote, "bequeath the mystery to another generation."

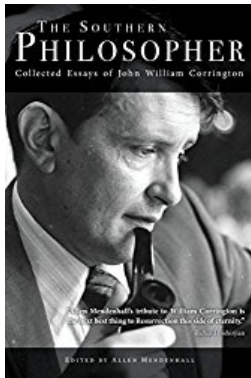
In the remaining essays, Corrington lays forth the conditions under which the modern and postmodern man of letters must strive to render the mystery inheritable. Much like Weaver, Corrington became a historian of both the glory and inadequacy of Western thought.

In "The Recovery of the Humanities," he traces the origins of mythopoetic thought in the West, the impact of Christianity and the Enlightenment declension into scientism and materialism. Corrington's anti-modernism, like that of Mel Bradford, was influenced by Voegelin's meditations on the historical impact of gnosticism. However, unlike Bradford, who largely used the concept to impugn the political philosophy of Lincoln, Corrington elaborated a metahistorical vision of the manner in which gnostic thought, in its premodern and modern varieties, was responsible for modern man's philosophical displacement.

Indeed, Corrington, in his two part "A Brief History of Gnosticism," arguably furnishes a more accessible history of gnostic thought than those offered by Voegelin himself. This, of course, is due to Corrington's intelligence, but equally to what Mendenhall aptly describes as his "stark, provocative and profoundly sensitive" proclivities as a writer.

As such, Corrington is a forgotten pivotal figure in the history of American conservatism and especially to second generation Agrarian traditionalism. Furthermore, his critique of modernity, in and of itself, adds considerably to the history of conservative thought in the West. For these reasons and more, *The Southern Philosopher* is a welcome addition to the history of American letters.

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