South of the Right

The regional conservatism of John William Corrington

by ALLEN MENDENHALL

When John William Corrington died in 1988, Southern conservatives lost one of their most talented writers, a refined Cajun cowboy with a jazzy voice and bold pen whose work has since been unjustly neglected.

A lawyer and an English professor, an ambivalent Catholic and a devotee of the philosopher Eric Voegelin, Corrington wrote or edited over 20 books, including novels, poetry collections, and short-story collections. His most recognized works are screenplays—"Boxcar Bertha," "Battle for the Planet of the Apes," and "The Omega Man"—but he had hoped for the legacy of a belletrist. "I don't give a damn about TV or film for that matter," he once wrote. He cared about "serious writing—the novel, the story, the poem, the essay." William Mills, who after Corrington's death collected commemorative essays from his friends under the title *Southern Man of Letters*, declared that should Corrington have a biographer, "the story of his life will be very much the life of a mind, one lived among books, reading them and writing them."

Corrington's fascination with Catholicism, the South, and the works of Voegelin combined with his disgust for Marxism and campus radicals—he had taught at Berkeley in the late 1960s—to make a unique blend. During the Reagan era, when traditionalists and neoconservatives battled with one another to fill offices and define the right, Corrington felt compelled to offer a Southerner's perspective on conservatism. He considered his outlook to be regionally specific: "I am a Southerner and for all my travel and schooling, I am not able to put aside the certain otherness that sets a Southerner apart from the rest of America even in the midst of the 20th century." "The South," he maintained, "is a nation buried within another."

His essay "Are Southerners Different?" was published 30 years ago in *Southern Partisan* and still resonates even today, when Southerners have become less "different." He used the essay to compare three contemporary icons of conservatism—Ronald Reagan, George Will, and William F. Buckley—to ascertain whether they expressed regional distinctions within the American right.

Because Corrington identified as a Southern conservative, he doubted whether he could sit down with Reagan, Will, and Buckley "over glasses of sour mash" and achieve "such sweet agreement on the range of problems facing the world" that "any opinion one of us stated might by and large draw nothing more than approving nods from the others." He rejected as "mere sentimentality" and "downright delusion" the "notion that conservatives east, west, midwest and south" could "find themselves in agreement on most matters of public policy."

Corrington criticized Reagan for stationing Marines in Lebanon "without a clear-cut combat role" or a "mission to achieve," and he doubted whether he and Reagan held "the same view of the use of military force." He regarded his own strategic disposition as "simple and founded purely on Roman principles":

> Avoid battle whenever an interest or purpose can be obtained by other means, political, diplomatic, or economic; fight only for clear-cut interests which can be won or preserved by force; fight when and where you will be able to achieve a determinable victory. If you engage, win—at whatever costs—and make sure the enemy suffers disproportionately greater loss than you do.

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This view of war appears in Bill's first novel, *And Wait for the Night*, which begins with a long section on the siege of Vicksburg. If there's a theme common to Bill's fiction on the subject, it's pride in a soldier's duty combined with sensitivity to the horrors of war.

He hesitated to "presume to enunciate a 'Southern view' of foreign policy" but noted that "there remain a few antique verities stretching from President Washington's Farewell Address to the Monroe Doctrine." These verities had to be "reviewed" and "re-interpreted" in light of what was then the most pressing threat abroad: "the rise of a Russian empire bound together by force."

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The policy of containment that was a shibboleth for policy experts during the Reagan years was for Corrington a waste of time. "I do not recall that our liberal predecessors argued for the 'containment' of National Socialism as it ravaged Europe in the late 1930s and '40s," he said. That did not mean he categorically favored military intervention. "Obviously," he qualified, "direct military force to attain specific goals is not among our options."

Then what was? Corrington's answer was unhelpfully obvious: "political economics." He anticipated that the Soviet Union would "find itself pressing the last drop of economic usefulness out of the poor befuddled bodies of its subjects," if the West quit supplying the Soviets with "western technology, western food, and vast sums of western credit."

Corrington's dislike of George Will arose from the controversy over the proposed nomination of Mel Bradford, a fellow Southern literary scholar, as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1981. Will had taken to his *Washington Post* column to decry Bradford's attachment to the "nostalgic Confederate remnant within the conservative movement." Among Bradford's offenses was proposing that Lincoln was a "Gnostic" in the sense that Voegelin used the term, a philosophical radical seeking to "immanentize the eschaton." Corrington himself had a more concrete complaint about the 16th president: as he put it in a 1964 letter to Anthony Blond, the British editor who had published *And Wait for the Night*, Lincoln stood "in relation to the South very much as Khrushchev did to Hungary, as the United Nations *apparatchiks* did to Katanga."

"Will's stance," Corrington announced with typical bravado, "comes close to requiring a loyalty oath to the Great Emancipator, and I for one will not have it. It is one thing to live one's life under the necessity of empirical events long past; it is quite another to be forced to genuflect to them." But Bradford's supporters did not prevail, and the NEH nomination went to a rival candidate, William J. Bennett.

Corrington was one of those conservatives Will decried for having a too favorable view of the Confederacy. He once dashed off a missive to Charles Bukowski that referred to Robert E. Lee as "the greatest man who ever lived," and he later asked to be buried with a Confederate flag in his coffin. A statue of General Sherman on a horse inspired—or rather, provoked—Bill's book of poems *Lines to the South*. The literary critic Robert B. Heilman observed that 75 percent of Corrington's short stories involved the Civil War. Asked whether he was a Southern writer, Bill quipped, "If nobody else wants to be, that's fine; then we would have only one: me."

Corrington defied simple classification. He informed Bukowski, for instance, that as a poet he had taken up the sonnet just to throw "dirt in the eyes of those who would love to put some label on my ass." But he may have paid a price for accepting the label of Southern conservative. Shortly after discovering Voegelin, Corrington began to read Russell Kirk, and Bruce Herschensohn—then a producer with a Los Angeles television station—commissioned him to write a screenplay of Kirk's history textbook, *The Roots of American Order*. Corrington drew up the script, but it was never produced.

Kirk entrusted the script to his friend Richard Bishirjian, who later intimated that the documentary's failure had to do with "the new political appointees at NEH that Bennett recruited." These appointees, Bishirjian said, were "ideologues for whom John Locke, the Declaration of Independence, Abraham Lincoln, and Harry Jaffa define America."

Corrington's outline for conservatism—unlike Reagan's, Will's, and Buckley's—involved what he called "traditional Southern thought and sentiment": to wit, the land, the community, and a foreign policy of "decency and common sense," which is to say, a "realistic, non-ideological orientation toward the rest of the world."

He was unable to put his finger on what irked him about Buckley, but Corrington didn't take kindly to sophisticates who seemed to put on airs. He preferred thinkers who possessed "a hard-nosed intelligence, an openness to experience, a limited but real sense of classical past and a profound respect not only for institutions in place but for the work of a man's hands and mind, as well as a deep and unshakeable certainty of the role of divine providence in the affairs of humanity, not to mention a profound contempt for inherited title, place and dignity."

He may not have found those qualities in Buckley, yet he shared Buckley's penchant for erudite language. Within weeks of publishing "Are Southerners Different?", Corrington delivered a paper in Chattanooga that decried the "rise of ideologies from the Enlightenment egophanies of the *philosophes* through the scientism and materialism of the 19th century to the political mass-movements and therapies of the 20th century, including, but not limited to, National Socialism, Marxist-Leninism, secular humanism, and logical positivism," all of which, he claimed, had "resulted in a virtual decerebration of the Humanities."

The heavy burden of the past on their consciousness suited Southerners for the type of humanistic inquiry that interested Corrington. "It is a handy thing for a writer to discover that his geographical and spiritual situations are parallel," he said. "It makes the geography live, and lends concreteness to the soul." And Corrington's soul was shaped by the South. He speculated that the symbolism of General Lee's and General Joseph Johnston's surrenders "made all the difference" in terms of his "development as a writer." Whatever he wrote or thought, he knew he'd already lost.

In a basic sense, this is true of us all: life heads unswervingly in one fatal direction. Better to realize we're fighting battles we cannot win—that we cannot, of our own accord, bring about a permanent heaven on this temporary earth. ■

OLD *and* RIGHT

The Greeks, until the fourth century before Christ, were characterized by the joy of life. They lived in close touch with nature, and the human body was to them not a clog or a curse but a model of beauty and a means of participating in the activities of nature. Their life philosophy was egoistic and materialistic. They wanted to enjoy all which their powers could win, yet their notion of *olbos* was so elevated that our modern languages have no word for it. It means opulence, with generous liberality of sentiment and public spirit. "I do not call him who lives in prosperity, and with great possessions a man of *olbos*, but only a well-to-do treasure keeper" (Euripides). Such were the mores of the age of advance in wealth, population, military art, knowledge, mental achievement, and fine arts—all of which evidently were correlative and coherent parts of an expanding prosperity and group life.

The decline of the Greeks in the three centuries before our era is so great and sudden that it is very difficult to understand it. The best estimate of the population of the Peloponnesus in the second century B.C. puts it at 109 per square mile. Yet the population was emigrating, and population was restricted. A pair would have but one or two children. The cities were empty and the land was uncultivated. There was neither war nor pestilence to account for this. It may be that the land was exhausted. There must have been a loss of economic power so that labor was unrewarded.

The mores all sank together. There can be no achievement in the struggle for existence without an adequate force. Our civilization is built on steam. The Greek and Roman civilization was built on slavery, that is, on an aggregation of human power. The result produced was, at first, very great, but the exploitation of men entailed other consequences besides quantities of useful products. It was these consequences which issued in the mores, for in a society built on slavery as the form productive industry, all the mores, obeying the strain of consistency, must conform to that as the chief of the folkways.

It was at the beginning of the empire that the Romans began to breed slaves because wars no longer brought in new supplies. Sex vice, laziness, decline of energy and enterprise, cowardice, and contempt for labor were consequences of slavery, for the free. The system operated, in both classical states, as a selection against the superior elements in the population.

The effect was intensified by the political system. The city became an arena of political struggle for the goods of life which it was a shame to work for. Tyrannies and democracies alternated with each other, but both alike used massacre and proscription, and both thought it policy to get rid of troublesome persons, that is, of those who had convictions and had the courage to avow them. Every able man became a victim of terrorism, exerted by idle market-place loafers.

—William Graham Sumner, *Folkways*, 1906