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Reclaiming Corrinton

The Southern Philosopher: Collected Essays of John William Corrinton
edited by Allen Mendenhall.
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DANIEL JAMES SUNDAHL

I'm guessing it was spring of 1991; Andrew Lytle was on my college campus to receive an honorary Doctor of Letters. I was hosting him around campus, and as we walked I had the charming sense I was meandering about with living literary history. Before lunch we had time for coffee fetched from the faculty lounge and then back to my office. I wanted to go over my introductory remarks before his afternoon lecture. I referred to him as one of the "Fugitives." He politely corrected me; not a "Fugitive" but an "Agrarian."

I had four bookshelves with works by Southerners of various types. Lytle browsed for a bit and then took down *Southern Writing in the Sixties: Fiction* and *Collected Stories of John William Corrinton*. He said to me, "He's dead, as you may know." I did not and confessed so. One does not lie to Andrew Lytle.

I would have done him a disservice if I had not, then, made my way into the life and times of "Bill" Corrinton, whose literary friendships were extensive and whose work has been neglected, even in the South, with the exception of a few enclaves such as the Abbeville Institute and the Eric Voegelin Institute at Louisiana State University.

There's a Corrinton essay that appeared in the 1984 issue of *Southern Partisan* magazine in which he imagines a meeting of minds—Corrinton, Reagan, Buckley, and George Will. Would the gathering find sweet agreement about the problems of the world and the notion of conservatism? Corrinton notes the group would offer a sentimental nod to the problems of the world but would disagree as to the contents of a conservative Nicene creed. I mention this because Allen Mendenhall has undertaken a quixotic task, which is to place the late John William Corrinton at the vanguard of "Southern Conservatism"; this is the same Corrinton, by the way, who

The survival of any culture, or of the material fabric of civilization, requires vigorous imagination and readiness to sacrifice. By dullness and complacency are intellectual and social orders undone.

Russell Kirk

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N E W S

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once drew up a screenplay for Russell Kirk's *Roots of American Order*, which would suggest that Corrington's intellectual concerns and Kirk's intellectual concerns intersect if not run parallel.

How, then, to introduce John William Corrington (1932–1988) to a contemporary audience? It's fallen to Mendenhall, another Southerner, to immanentize the Corrington eschaton. He was a poet, a neglected novelist for whom one might hope for a revival, a journalist, a lawyer, a respected college professor at Loyola University, and interestingly the author of five screenplays, including *The Omega Man* and *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*. Add to that a philosopher in cowboy boots. With noteworthy research, Mendenhall has gathered a good representation of Corrington's work in *The Southern Philosopher*, dividing the collection nicely into four parts that demonstrate the development of Corrington's thought. A 1966 lecture, for example, "The Uses of History and the Meaning of Fiction," argues for fixed and unchanging aesthetic standards. His major thematic point? Good literary writing does not give an audience "life as it is, but life as [an] audience supposes it to be." As for the uses of history: It can be expressed as war between the classes but for Corrington personally all history is "the gradual manifestation of God's will in the universe."

It is a fair enough statement but is not as not demonstrable as, say, the realism implicit in a chemistry experiment. Still, it is smallish background for the second part Mendenhall's task, placing Corrington's thought in the larger context of "Literature, Literary Criticism, the Humanities, and Academia." Corrington's conservative concerns? The course of literature and literary criticism has "veered"; literary quarterlies abound with phony sentiment from literary apes and pirates. Great writers, on the other hand, "deserve a salute in passing; the yahoos in their shadow are not worth a salute or a fulmination."

Corrington finds that as early as 1961 the battle lines in the Humanities were forming; the culture conflict implies a dispute between those with traditionalist values and those with progressive or liberal values. Mendenhall includes two lectures by Corrington titled "The Recovery of the Humanities." Corrington names his opponents, as he saw them then. "We have been adjured by pseudoscientists and dictators, intellectual, political, or otherwise, that questions regarding such symbols of humanity, the soul, human nature, the eschatological goal of that 'thing' called man—all of these are false questions."

The antidote? Corrington develops an argument familiar to any cultural conservative. He invokes the notion of order as experienced through literary texts, a concept he admits is nuanced and complex but in keeping with understanding humanity's place in the world in relation to the divine. The role of order, for Corrington, is never for any divisive ideological

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goal, however, but always for the unifying potential of human purpose over time.

Good background, then, for what follows in Mendenhall's edition of Corrington's works: his philosophical treatises, and the book's bulk. Corrington calls, first of all, for a rebirth of philosophical thought in an essay that first appeared in *The Southern Review*. The thesis is that philosophical thought abounds but the totalizing ideologies of the last century caused a disordered philosophy. In response, Corrington praises the efforts of Eric Voegelin and Ellis Sandoz to revive the "‘complementarity’ of the Hellenic and Judeo-Christian [symbolic] visions."

The problem, however, requires a certain refinement. Corrington notes that contemporary readers of Voegelin are likely puzzled by the way in which he concentrates on the philosophy of consciousness. But the truth of consciousness is less psychological, and man's consciousness in the premodern era was an engagement between the consciousness of humanity in a "participatory tension toward the divine ground and to no reality beyond this restricted area."

Voegelin's point embraced by Corrington? Gnosticism is a spiritual disorder at odds with doctrinal Christianity, and is the "sin" fundamental to our "disordered" modern age. Gnosticism is at odds, in other words, with the spiritual experience of the authors of the Bible for whom "order" is an "attunement" to a transcendent reality. One need only visualize Michelangelo's iconic Sistine Chapel fresco where God's paternal finger reaches to touch the finger of Adam, a depiction of Genesis 1:27.

What follows in Part IV of Mendenhall's edition is Corrington's own contribution to the debate, beginning with an essay on "The Structure of Gnostic Consciousness." It is vital but heavy lifting. His philosophical understanding of Gnosticism is not unique, but Corrington enlarges the notion into the daily activities of which we are a part, arguing that we have become unaware as to how the consequence is a deformed system of symbolism and a false eschatology.

Marxist theorist Frederic Jameson, for example, published his *Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* in 1981. His argument is for a new "vanguard of interpretation" since the master narratives (Augustine's *Confessions* comes to his mind), are no long applicable upon us. Our contemporary defining "modes" are Marxist and Gnostic.

Corrington's larger thematic point is that Gnosticism recasts human history in such a manner that all "traditional" value symbols are reversed. But how? One might take, for example, a phrase from Genesis 1:26, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ..." and follow the process by which earlier Gnostics recast the character of the *imago dei* into something far more sinister than the honorific straight metaphysical spiritual element implied in Hebrew theology.

For Corrington, then, the “pneumatic” injection, so to speak, of a spiritual element into earthly man as part of creation has become less a spiritual bond between Creator and creature and reinterpreted as an entrapping of divine substance into earthly man. The consequence? Gnosticism purports to own a variety of schemes to awaken and release that divine substance. Human history and the eschatology it represents are also an unfolding of ever new Gnostic incarnations.

Corrington’s cultural conservatism purports to rescue the “field of consciousness” from the vast array of Gnostic speculations that have proliferated over the centuries, but more so in the modern era where Corrington argues for an extraordinary similarity between Gnostic thought and the thought of contemporary “nihilist and existentialist thinking.” As Corrington points out, there have been numerous Gnostic schools of thinking over the span of historical time, which presuppose various ideological “drives” for a perfect order here on earth, an unrealizable reality, and what is sacred having become secular.

Gnosticism’s purpose, if there is such, has always been an attempt to set aside the burdens of history by offering bogus certainties that are preferable to the faith in things unseen. But for Corrington, the life of the soul is openness toward God “and faith and love are all in the waiting.”

Corrington was a mere fifty-six years old when he died on November 24, 1988. Likely the enormity of his intellect was realized only in smallish circles and thus overlooked. He deserves more sustained attention and it’s to Mendenhall’s credit to begin this process of discovery. 🚩

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Posted: October 8, 2017

Did you see this one?

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Allen Mendenhall
Fall 2011

