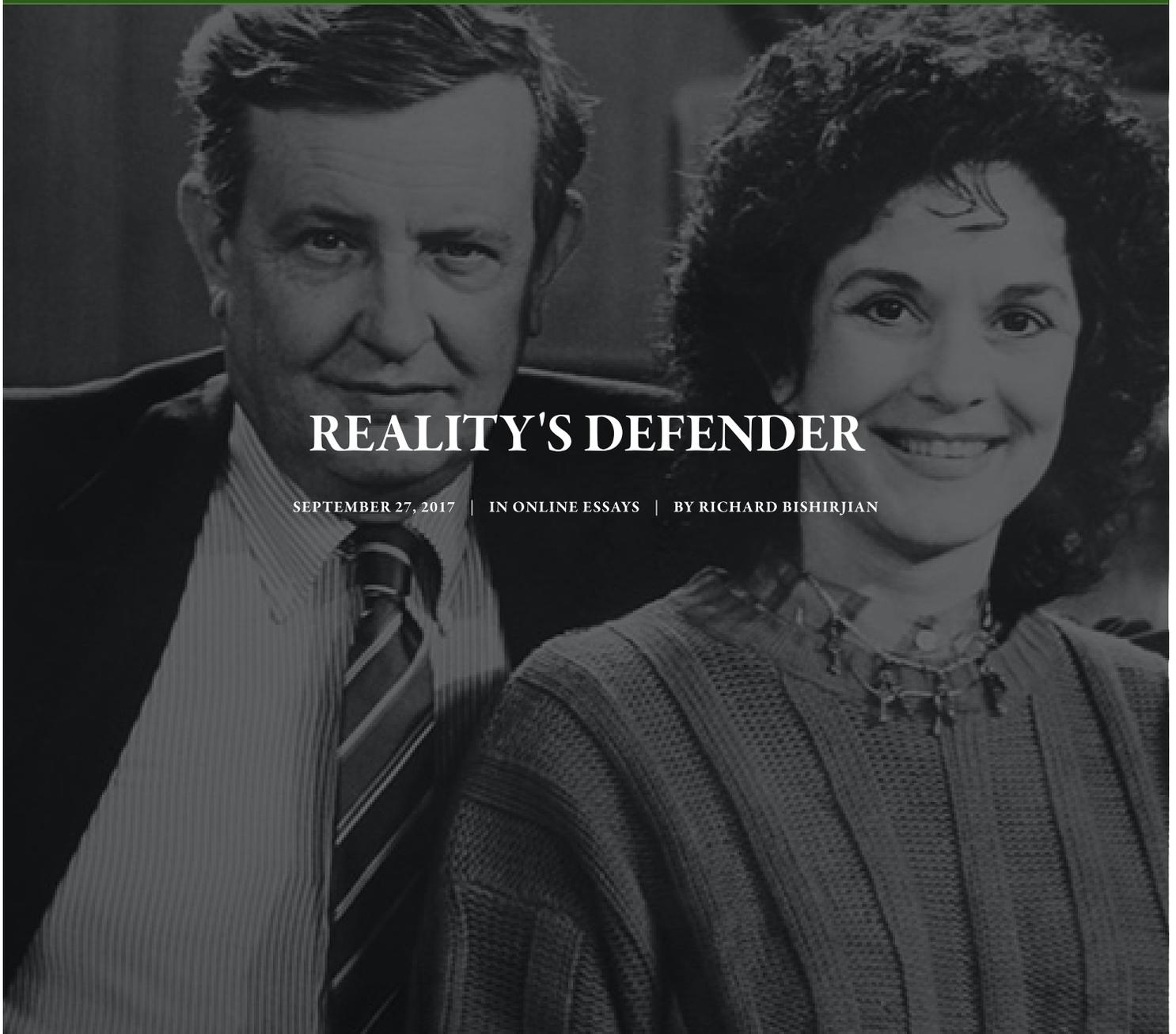


ANAMNESIS



REALITY'S DEFENDER

SEPTEMBER 27, 2017 | IN ONLINE ESSAYS | BY RICHARD BISHIRJIAN

The Southern Philosopher: Collected Essays of John William Corrington.

Edited by Allen Mendenhall

University of North Georgia Press, 2017. 362 pp.

John William “Bill” Corrington lived an extraordinary life in which he mastered most of the instruments of Western intellectual culture to shape a political and legal philosophy, a philosophy of historical consciousness, compose works of literature and poetry of great beauty, and warn about the spiritual and social danger of the temptation for ersatz immortality of modern Gnosticism. That he made some money writing film scripts for Roger Corman or television scripts for a series produced by Procter and Gamble did not diminish his art.

Allen Mendenhall has collected Corrington’s important, but long forgotten, essays in a volume that will do much to make better known the accomplishments of this extraordinary man.

In 1975 Bill Corrington published an essay titled “Charles Reich and the Gnostic Vision.”^[1] In 1976, the serial librarian at the College of New Rochelle brought this essay to my attention, and that began a twelve-year friendship with Bill Corrington that lasted until his death on Thanksgiving Day, November 24, 1988.

My PhD dissertation examined “Gnostic” aspects of the thought of Thomas Carlyle, and I published my findings in the *Journal of Politics*.^[2] Carlyle, I demonstrated, was engaging in the actions of a Gnostic magician. However, since few colleagues understood this line of argument, I was delighted to make the acquaintance of Bill Corrington because he found Charles Reich to embody what Eric Voegelin called “modern Gnostic speculation.”^[3] On June 15, 1976, I wrote to Corrington expressing interest in his essay and a desire to “co-edit a work on modern gnosticism.” Two years later that correspondence led to a conference titled “Gnosticism and Modernity” conducted at Vanderbilt University on April 27–29, 1978. Mendenhall has reproduced some of our correspondence in order to explain Corrington’s interest in Gnosticism (appendix A).

But, the more interesting aspect of Corrington's work, at least for readers interested in literature and the cultural role of southern literature, is his awareness of his existence as a southerner and a complicated clash that he experienced between literature and philosophy.

A defeated South lived in isolation from the nation at-large for close to a hundred years after the Civil War. During that time, the politics of the South was dominated by schemers, the corrupt, and sociopaths. The South's intellectual elites retained their southern character, and their integrity, by nourishing a unique southern literature.

The *antebellum* South was dominated by social contract theories that justified slavery and, later, segregation and explained that the nation was a confederation of states and that secession was permissible within the terms of a social contract. With no avenue for true philosophy—other than that of John Locke—to develop in the South before the Civil War and with southern society and commerce crippled for a hundred years thereafter, literature became the dominant expression of the deepest longings of southern intellectuals for recovery of order. From that desire came a parade of great writers, poets, novelists, and professors of literature which culminated in the New Critics. John William Corrington was a child of that literary culture.

Corrington writes in his personal notebook:

It has been said that I am an apologist for the South. The South does not, and has never, needed an apologist. . . .

What my work really represents is the openness, the ambiguity, the vastness of the possibilities of human being in the mode of existence as it realizes itself in the South in my time.

Any work that deals with a certain place intensely is a celebration of that place.[4]

This collection of Corrington's writings includes Mendenhall's excellent introduction (ix–xvii), which explains how he first encountered Corrington's work in a law school class, of all places, and situates Corrington's writings in reference to his life and times.

In a lecture that Corrington gave on the subject of writing, delivered in 1985 at the Northwest Louisiana Writer's Conference in Shreveport, Louisiana, Corrington tells his audience that he knew very early that writing wouldn't make him wealthy, so he earned a PhD in order to teach literature. He became department chairman of English at the Jesuit Loyola University of New Orleans, but by 1972 he left teaching.

He had had enough of academia. In the late sixties and early seventies, the academic world was hysterically attempting to respond to student thugs who, in their wisdom, claimed that serious subjects seriously taught were "irrelevant." The Ivy League gutted its curriculum; deans and faculty engaged in "teach-ins," spouted Marxist-Leninist slogans, and sat quietly watching while half-witted draft dodgers and degenerates of various sorts held them captive in their offices. Oddly enough, even as this was going on, there was a concerted effort to crush the academic freedom of almost anyone whose opinions differed from that of the mob or their college-administrator accessories (6).

Mendenhall has collected other essays, including a lecture that Corrington delivered in 1966 as part of a discussion series created by the National Defense Education Act. There he discusses reality and illusion and the writer's use of common speech to communicate that experience (24–29).

Another early essay, "A Poet's Credo" (1966) expresses his frustration with academic journals:

So now the battle lines are shaking themselves into recognizable shape: we can play the sewaneeatlantickenyonhudsonpartisan2 game, or we can play for keepsies and hold onto our nuts.

(35)

This sentence captures both the robust humor that makes Corrington's writing style uncommon and Corrington's frustration with the commerce of literature.

A lecture that Corrington delivered to the South-Central Modern Language Association in 1971 that criticizes "message literature," or what we today would call "PC," reveals Corrington's disgust with the corruption of writing so prevalent as America was recovering from the excesses of the 1960s (51–53). One wonders if he was ever invited back to any meetings of the MLA.

Bill Corrington remained a southern writer of literature but, one day, he was ruminating among the bookshelves in the library at Tulane University. He had given up college teaching at Loyola-New Orleans in frustration with academic politics and was studying law at Tulane. Ever inquisitive, Corrington found volume one of Eric Voegelin's *Order and History*, titled *Israel and Revelation*. When he returned home, he told me that he informed his wife, "By God, he's done it."

What "it" was doesn't need explaining for southern intellectuals cast in Bill Corrington's mold. But since *ANAMNESIS* attracts a few "Yankees," I should explain that Corrington discovered that Voegelin had recovered what every Baptist, Methodist, or Church of Christ southerner knows, that God intervenes in history and that Voegelin had constructed the philosophical mode for examining that experience.

The American nation that Bill Corrington experienced upon reaching maturity had long before begun the journey away from the Western Christianitas. In the modern era, that can be traced to the spiritual injury done to Americans by our Civil War (and a long series of wars into the twenty-first century that America has endured and sometimes welcomed) and the acceptance of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) that turned the hearts and minds of post-Civil War Americans toward science and against the Protestant Christianity that dominated American culture at the time.

Colleges that had been solidly Christian began to become secular in a generational “dying of the light” explained in James Burtchaell’s study of America’s religious colleges. [5] And, of course, that turning away had deep roots in the Enlightenment philosophy that inspired the framing of the Constitution of the United States and, particularly, the Declaration of Independence of Thomas Jefferson. Reason and science, understood in the restricted sense those concepts have in modern culture, outline the origins of the cultural, intellectual, and “religious” disorder of our times. I place the word “religious” in quotation marks because religion, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith observed, is different from “faith.” [6] The passion for religion reflects the perspective of an observer. Faith reflects the experience of transcendent divine reality. Bill Corrington, by this meaning, was “faithful.” [7]

Corrington’s study of philosophy in light of the work of Eric Voegelin created a chasm between him and the southern literary critics who taught literature in such places as Vanderbilt, the University of South Carolina, and the University of Dallas. In that respect, he was like Flannery O’Connor and Marion Montgomery, who pursued the study and writing of literature from the perspective of Voegelin’s recovery of classical philosophy. [8]

Mendenhall has collected all of Corrington’s works that reflect that “leap in being,” [9] to use a concept from Voegelin, that describes the transformative experience of the ancient Greek philosophers who transcended cosmological myth. After making that leap, Corrington was so out of place among “academic” teachers of southern literature that, like Socrates, who became ill when he left Athens, he would become refractory when he encountered English teachers. [10]

The seminal essay in this collection that reveals what Corrington achieved in breaking away from literature as an academic enterprise and entering into the interpretation of

literature as an act of philosophy is his 1986 lecture given at Kansas State University. In that lecture, Corrington interprets a passage from an early essay by T. S. Eliot:

... the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of [one's] own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (89)

That “order,” Corrington writes, exists concretely in the psyche of the poet who experiences something that Heraclitus called the *zynon*, “that which is common to all,” in which time is lost in the fathomless reaches of that psyche whose limit, Heraclitus tells us, cannot be plumbed, so deep is its Logos (90).

Anyone who has studied Voegelin understands that this is the *arche*, the beginning in the West of a unique Western philosophic mode of existence in which the philosopher experiences the human psyche “as the instrument for experiencing transcendence.”[11] Influenced by Voegelin, Corrington was now beginning to read literature from the perspective of the soul’s response to the divine ground of being. Corrington writes, “the great driving force at the foundation of human culture . . . is the human *psyche* in search of itself in the multiplicity of its forms, dimensions, and possibilities—and the loving and fearing tension within that *psyche* toward the divine ground” (94).

Because that drama of the soul is the ontological basis of all literature, not only the literature of the West, Corrington is critical of Eliot for confining his essay to “half a hemisphere,” leaving out Asia and India. It is in Eliot’s poetry, and the footnotes in Eliot’s “The Wasteland,” however, that Corrington finds the range of historical materials that informed Eliot’s art and those “notes explode the idea of an ideal order comprised exclusively of European literary monuments” (98).

Bill Corrington knew he was playing with fire, since the literary critics who made southern literature famous belonged to what Voegelin called “a mutual admiration society.”[12] They relished the particular, the regional, even the noncommercial character

of southern society. They especially wanted to read texts closely and not prejudge them with theories. Like Presbyterian churches that have only one bathroom, these southern literary critics read literature only one way.

I can explain this a bit better by reference to a meeting of the Philadelphia Society in New Orleans on October 13, 1979, where the topic was “The South and American Conservatism.” [13] Andrew Lytle gave a presentation on a presumed golden age of the “Southern Agrarians.” During the discussion period, I confronted Lytle with the observation that growing up in Pittsburgh, I experienced loyalties to neighborhood, church, family, the Pirates, and the Steelers that were equivalent to growing up in the agrarian South. He did not agree. Lytle, and so many other southerners, believed that the world of the South was *the* world.

Bill Corrington and I finally met in person to discuss a possible volume titled “Gnosticism and Modernity,” and that led to an invitation on September 1, 1976, to Eric Voegelin. Voegelin responded on September 6:

... when I hit on this problem, that was 25 years ago. In the meanwhile, science in this matter has advanced. And today I would have to say that Gnosticism is one component in the historical structure of modernity but no more than one. Of equal importance, it has turned out, are Apocalyptic, Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, Alchemy, and Magic. [14]

Corrington commented on Voegelin’s explanation in a letter dated September 30, 1976:

If I were to define Gnosticism as widely as Voegelin does—including Hegel and Marx in it—it should be no problem to subsume these other symbolisms also. I would hope that new investigations & findings will not tend to create semantic battles in an area which has not yet made nearly enough penetration into political science as a theoretical tool to afford quibblers as to what is Gnosticism, what is hermeticism, & so on. [15]

Voegelin followed up in a letter dated October 21, 1976:

The literature on Magic, Neoplatonism, Apocalyptic, Kabbalah, Hermeticism, and Alchemy is growing prodigiously and can be read by anybody who cares to read it. All of these are components in the present intellectual disorder, just as is Gnosticism. On one special point, not treated sufficiently elsewhere, I have dwelled in my Ecumenic Age, that is on the transformation of mythical and revelatory symbols into "doctrines."[16]

By December 20, 1976, Corrington and I agreed that we would first hold a symposium on the theme "Gnosticism and Modernity." In a joint letter mailed to prospective participants, we wrote:

The term "Gnosticism" should be understood, we feel, in an extended rather than in a narrow sense. Generally, we take our inspiration from the work of Professor Eric Voegelin whose use of the concept in its generic sense includes those intellectual movements such as Hermeticism, Alchemy, Magic, Kabbalah, Rosicrucian's, Millennialism, and certain strands of Neoplatonism and Scientism. Obviously, we are concerned with patterns of "Second Reality," using Musil's phrase, which tend to contract consciousness of reality. (270)

An undated, handwritten letter accompanies the abstract of Corrington's paper titled, "Gnosticism and Modern Thought: A Way You'll Never Be." Voegelin was impressed and called it "the best paper" in a symposium that he said "was the best I have attended." The text of that paper is found in part 4 of Mendenhall's volume (157–203).

The final version of the paper prepared for publication is titled "The Structure of Gnostic Consciousness" and is a *tour de force* in which Corrington reaches into his past as a novelist, calling up the "mythical structure" on which great literature depends.

Corrington argues that the Gnostic personality "is unable to maintain the balance in tension" of existence and to "seek release from the disorder and confusion it experiences."

“The result is a speculative return from the noetic field . . . to the mythopoetic field” (145).

Corrington’s sensitivity to mythic imagination enables him to understand that some who cannot traverse the distance between myth and philosophy may choose to return to myth and the control that choice allows. “Such people choose, in Professor Voegelin’s phrase, to live in a certain untruth rather than in an uncertain truth” (146).

Corrington concludes that all classical Gnostic speculation is “a regression to an archaic mythopoetic mode of thinking in which Gnostic manipulative magic is possible.” This “reversal constitutes fantasy-construction of the first order” (149).

There are political conclusions that we can infer from Corrington’s paper and from his critique of Charles Reich as Gnostic. Corrington understood that the world in which he lived was a dangerous place because so many persons were living in a fantasy world of their own construction, and the most dangerous of them wanted to compel him to join them in their world. If he did not obey them, they would kill him.

Richard J. Bishirjian, president of the American Academy of Distance Learning, is a frequent contributor to *Modern Age*, editor of *A Public Philosophy Reader*, and author of three books, *The Development of Political Theory*, *The Conservative Rebellion*, and *The Coming Death and Future Resurrection of American Higher Education*.

[1] William Corrington, *New Orleans Review* 5, no 1 (1975).

- [2] Richard Bishirjian, "Carlyle's Political Religion," *Journal of Politics* 38, no. 1 (February 1976): 95–113.
- [3] Eric Voegelin, "The New Science of Politics," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 5 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), p. 192.
- [4] As quoted in Lloyd Halliburton, "The Man Who Slept with Women: John William Corrington's *Shad Sentell*," *Legal Studies Forum* 27 (2003): 664.
- [5] James T. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).
- [6] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief: The Difference between Them* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1998) and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: New American Library, 1962).
- [7] His dying words were, "It's alright."
- [8] See Marion Montgomery, "The Poet and the Disquieting Shadow of Being: Flannery O'Connor's Voegelinian Dimension," *Intercollegiate Review* 13 (Fall 1977): .3–14
- [9] See Thomas Hollweck, "Cosmos and the 'Leap in Being' in Voegelin's Philosophy," paper presented at the Eric Voegelin Society meeting, Washington, DC, 2010, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1666989.
- [10] Corrington told me that he was rejected for a position in the English department at the University of Dallas because during his visit he "cursed."
- [11] Voegelin, "New Science of Politics," 141.
- [12] Conversation with Eric Voegelin at the University of Dallas, 1971.
- [13] <http://phillysoc.org/meetings/past-meetings>.

[14] Eric Voegelin to Richard Bishirjian, September 6, 1976, in the author's possession.

[15] Corrington to Bishirjian, September 30, 1976, in the author's possession. The "quibblers" were those who "walked away from Voegelin's first formulation of modernity as Gnostic. It was, simply, too political, for German Voegelinians escaping political reality in political theory" (Richard Bishirjian, "Conservatism and Spiritual and Social Recovery," *Anamnesis*, October 28, 2016, <http://anamnesisjournal.com/2016/10/conservatism-and-spiritual-and-social-recovery/>).

[16] Voegelin to Bishirjian, October 21, 2016, in the author's possession.



ADD COMMENT

Name *

Email *

Website

POST COMMENT

© 2017 Anamnesis Journal All rights reserved

