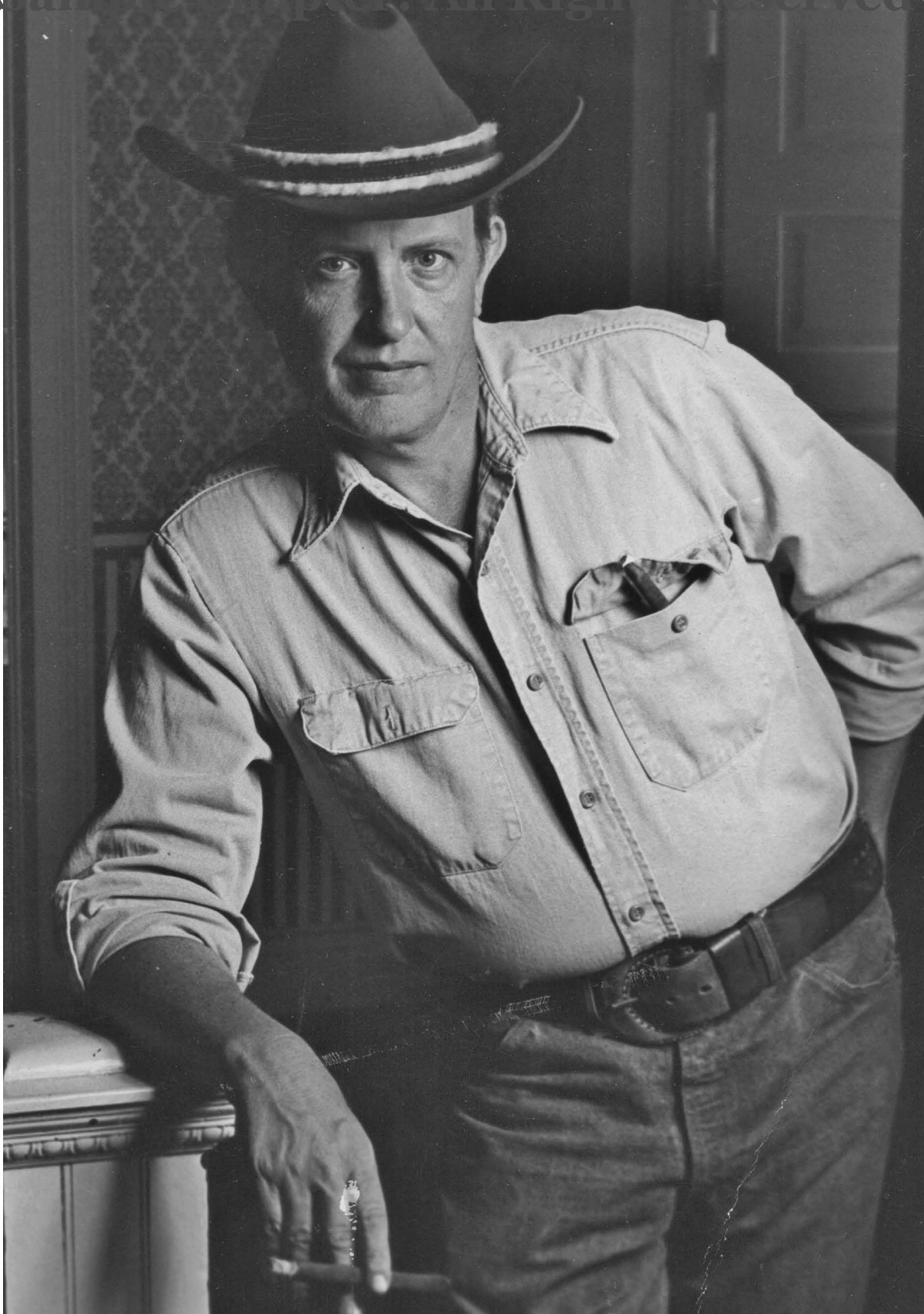


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THE SOUTHERN
PHILOSOPHER

Collected Essays of John William Corrington

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THE SOUTHERN
PHILOSOPHER

Collected Essays of John William Corrington

EDITED BY ALLEN MENDENHALL



Blue Ridge | Cumming | Dahlonega | Gainesville | Oconee

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Part I

WRITING

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The Mystery of Writing

1985

This chapter consists of a lecture that Corrington delivered in 1985 at the Northwest Louisiana Writer's Conference in Shreveport, Louisiana, Corrington's hometown. The lecture is part memoir, part commentary on writing as a craft. Corrington explains that he wanted to be a musician before he wanted to be a writer. He discusses his education at Centenary College and the state of popular literature at the time. He explains that he left academia because he felt disenfranchised politically in the academy, thus causing him to enter law school. The lecture demonstrates that Corrington saw himself as a Southern author who bemoaned the state of current popular writing. He notes how his popular writing for film and television earned him money though his literary writing—novels and poetry—was not profitable. Although he wrote for film and television, he had contempt for those media and felt they did not challenge viewers intellectually, at least not in the way that literature challenged readers. Corrington's conservatism is evident in his emphasis on a discernable literary tradition and his disgust for the technologies that made possible his own career. His advice for his audience is that they write about what they know, just as he writes about the South; therefore, he advises his audience not to become professional writers but to find other employment as a source for writing. His discussion of good writing as an ongoing investigation of perennial themes calls to mind the controversial notion of the literary canon as developed by Harold Bloom, Allan Bloom, John Ellis, and E. D. Hirsch.



In the next two days, you all¹ will be hearing a great deal about the nuts and bolts of writing, how to write, how to sell what you write, how to hang in there with editors and publishers, and so on. All of that is good, and is, as I understand, the stuff of writers' conferences. I can't say from personal experience, since this is the first such conference I have attended since the 1960s.

In any case, since most of you are from North Louisiana, and from the South, it seemed to me that I should talk not about how to sell and how to get along and how to make a smashing career out of writing—but about what writing meant to me when I was a tow-headed redneck boy growing up in Shreveport thirty years ago, and how that dream has worked out. As my work shows, I am not given to

1 Originally read "youall."

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autobiographical ravings, but each of us starts where we start, and that is all we really have to tell about. The rest is second-hand, and you could get it better in the *Writer's Digest* or some such thing.

To begin, writing was my second love, not my first. The thing I wanted to do more than anything else was to play lead trumpet with the Glenn Miller Orchestra. Those of you who remember those days and that orchestra may understand the passion.

But I was too late, and not good enough anyhow. Major Glenn Miller died in the winter of 1944, and I was just a pretty good trumpet player. The horn got me through high school and even got me a college scholarship and a place on the Symphony. But as much as I loved music, I simply didn't have the skills, the fundamental capacities to achieve what I wanted to achieve.

My mother had always suspected as much. "Be a writer," she said. "You can live where you want to live and be your own boss. Anyhow, that's what you're good at."

I think she must have been right. They had a short-story contest at Jesuit High here in town, and I won it till they stopped having it. Maybe that's why they stopped having it.

I was two years into college before I could bring myself to admit that I was never going to be good enough to be a professional musician. It was as painful an admission as I've ever had to make. But changing my major from music to English taught me something about reality. It is best to respect it, to move with it when you can, to find ways in which you and reality can work together. No dream, however deeply held, is worth a damn if you fail to achieve it, and you can break your heart in the process of failing.

In my third year of college, I learned the fundamental lesson about writing. If you want to write, read. Read everything. By the time I had graduated, I must have read two-thirds of the Modern Library, bought book-by-book on credit from J. B.'s bookshop² through the kindness of J. B. and Henry Meyer.

Aside from reading, you have to talk, to ask questions, to argue your way through things until you see—or think you see—what they mean. My years at Centenary College saw to that. I was lucky enough to have as my professors the best of the best in those years: Edward Murray Clark, John R. Willingham, Lee Morgan, and Bryant Davidson. There are debts beyond payment, and whatever success I've had is largely due to the hours those four men spent with me after class, when they had no further duty to me at all.

Even now, I return in memory to the dark study of Dr. Clark's house where we talked about religion and literature, about the truths of the heart and what they might mean, about what men had known and felt three thousand years ago, what

² The 1955 edition of the Shreveport City Directory contains information about the J. B. Book and Gift Shop. The shop was located at 626 Marshall Street. The owners were Henry N. Meyer and Julia B. Meyer.

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The Mystery of Writing

they were thinking just then, in 1954. I remember the living room of Professor Davidson's house where we met for our weekly Philosophy seminar. I can even recall the ongoing debate between Professor Davidson and me—the only argument I ever won with him—regarding his practice of skipping the Middle Ages in his Philosophy course, going from Plotinus to Descartes as if nothing had happened in between. I didn't know much, but I was smart enough to know that you couldn't skip 1400 years and make things come out right in the history of Western Philosophy.

Professor Davidson finally owned up that I was likely right, but that he just had no use for the Middle Ages, and hence not the sympathy needed to teach the style of medieval thinking.

My teachers at Centenary thought better of my work than I did, and proposed that I should go to graduate school when I was done with my BA. The idea of getting a PhD seemed pretty remote to me, and not even something I was especially interested in. By my senior year I'd reckoned on what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to write. I was in the process of moving my spiritual and intellectual baggage from Artie Shaw and Glenn Miller to William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe.

But I was smart enough to know that I had a choice to make right then. It had become obvious by the mid-fifties that there was an inverse proportion between the amount of money a man could make and the quality of his writing. If you wanted to make a lot of money, you wrote crap. If you wrote quality fiction, you weren't going to make any money. My junior year in college had given me an example. I was working at the *Shreveport Times* in those years, and when I wasn't on the police beat or doing general reporting, I did book reviews. They gave me a big thick novel to review. It was one of the finest novels I've ever read. It was called *The Recognitions*, by William Gaddis. It cost \$7.95 when the average novel cost \$3.95 or \$4.95, and, of course, it made no money at all for its publisher.

Years later, I talked to an editor who had worked at Harcourt, Brace in 1955. He remembered the meetings surrounding the publication of *The Recognitions*. "We knew there was no money in it," he told me. "But everybody thought the book had to be published. In those days, there was still a thing called American literature, and we felt we had to publish a book as splendid as it. We just had to."

That was then. This is now. I think it safe to say that no American publisher would risk three dollars and ninety-five cents in the name of American literature. There is little reason to suppose that *Raintree County* would be published today. Less reason to think that any of Faulkner's major works would find print. Can you really imagine a contemporary publisher reading *As I Lay Dying* or *The Sound and the Fury* and, as they like to say, "committing corporate funds" to it? This is the age of Herman Wouk and John Updike, John Irvin, Stephen King, and, inevitably, James Michener. Some of you may have seen *Space* on network TV. It had one of

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the lowest mini-series ratings of recent years, and yet, believe me, the mini-series was better than the book.

One looks at the best seller list nowadays in amazement. There are sex novels, do-it-yourself books, diet techniques, spy fiction, thrillers. There is rarely any literature at all. And when there is, it comes from abroad—like D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*. It's likely that most of you know the sorry history of John Kennedy Toole's book *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Dozens of publishers are said to have turned it down before LSU Press published it—and won the Pulitzer Prize in fiction with it.³ I will not argue that it is a great novel, but it is immeasurably superior to most of the tripe published each year by those who rejected it.

I suppose I had some intuition that things might go that way as far back as the late 1950s. That's why I went on to graduate school and entered college teaching. Not so much for love of teaching as for a little security while I got on with what it was I thought I should do in life.

I spent ten years teaching at LSU, Berkeley, and Loyola in New Orleans. During that time, I managed to publish eleven books and more pieces in magazines and journals than I care to remember. The three novels published during those years were well reviewed, picked up for publication in England, and, taken together, didn't make me enough money to pay for the books I needed to buy.

In 1972, though I'd become a department chairman and had been offered a full professorship, I'd had enough of academia. You may remember that 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," spouting 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.

It seemed a good time to get out and leave the classroom to idiots who couldn't learn and didn't know better, and imbeciles who couldn't teach and should have known better.

I went to law school at Tulane. At least in Southern schools, the lawyers were having none of this educational anarchy. The work there is simply too demanding and too competitive to allow for pretensions of any kind. It was a good time for me, and it produced a series of short stories dealing with life from the point of view of lawyers and the law that hasn't finished yet.

³ *A Confederacy of Dunces* was published posthumously at the urging of Walker Percy. Toole committed suicide in 1969 at the age of thirty-one. A carbon copy of the manuscript was recovered from Toole's home after his death. The novel did not appear until 1980. It received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction the following year.

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The Mystery of Writing

Meanwhile, in 1968, after I'd come back home to Louisiana after a term at the University of California, Berkeley, I got the strangest phone call. It was from a man named Roger Corman, whom I'd never heard of, and he'd read my second novel, *The Upper Hand*. He wanted me to write a movie for him—about Manfred, Baron von Richthofen, the great German air ace of World War I. I told Roger I didn't know how to write movies and wasn't especially interested. He said that was too bad, because he'd pay me \$10,000 for a 125-page script. Since I was making \$12,000 a year teaching at Loyola, it dawned on me suddenly that I sure as hell could learn how to write movies, and that, secretly, I'd always wanted to do just that.

Dr. Joyce Corrington and I together wrote the script *Richthofen and Brown*,⁴ later re-titled *The Red Baron*. It marked the beginning of our work together as writers in film and television. After that came *The Omega Man*, *Boxcar Bertha*, *The Arena*, *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*, *Killer Bees*, and years of writing for television.

But even as I practiced law and wrote for what folks like to call “the movies,” I kept in mind where I had started, what I had meant to do. Even when the work to pay the bills took almost all my time, I managed to do a short story or two each year. During a lull between jobs, I wrote a novel some of you may have seen called *Shad Sentell*. In almost all my work, Louisiana—Shreveport and New Orleans—has been central. It still is. Presently, I have three novels with my agent in New York, all laid in and around Shreveport.

Now I'd always wanted to write a mystery novel, because it's a classic American form almost as stylized as the Western. But it seemed to me it had never been used to carry much intellectual and emotional freight. The crimes all seemed pretty ordinary, the characters just a cut above cartoon figures. I thought it was possible to do better. So the first novel Jo⁵ and I collaborated on, called *So Small a Carnival*, is a detective story set in New Orleans—but the protagonist is a redneck reporter from Shreveport who can't stand the place. That book has been purchased by Viking Press and is scheduled for publication next fall. The crime is anything but ordinary, and the reporter from Shreveport would never have believed he'd accidentally become involved in solving one of the great and memorable crimes of the century.

Plans for the future work range from two more mystery novels to go with *So Small a Carnival*, to a book dealing with the labor movement and its travails in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in America. For those of you who know my work, *Under the Double Eagle* will fit chronologically in between my first book, *And Wait for the Night*, and my most recent, *Shad Sentell*, and tell the story of E. M. Sentell, II, in the 1880s and '90s. He is son of Major Edward Malcolm Sentell and father of E. M. III and Shad Sentell.

⁴ The full title is *Von Richthofen and Brown*.

⁵ Joyce Corrington.

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So much by way of inventory. I've been gone from Shreveport for almost thirty years, but, as you can see, Shreveport has never left me. It remains the subject and matrix of my work, and it always will. Not because my recollections of it are without pain, or because I lived a golden untroubled childhood here. It wasn't that way. But the experiences I had here, the places I remember, the people I loved—and even the ones I despised—have been as useful to me, as evocative, as Paris of the 1880s and '90s was to Marcel Proust. Not in a direct sense, certainly. I have never written a *roman à clef*⁶ about Shreveport, using real people with fake names. Yet, at the same time, all my characters live here. They fitted smoothly and anonymously into the interstices of time and space in the period between 1863 and 1960.

As I told a friend once, people in America, even in the South today, throw their pasts away. Graveyards and City Directories and old dance cards and flowers pressed in Bibles [where]⁷ no one remembers to enter births and deaths in any more—all of them are filled with thousands of pasts that are ignored, forgotten, thrown away. Nobody wants them, nobody sees any use in them. Who knows or cares who developed Broadmoor? Does anyone remember Dehan's Restaurant or Le Chat Noir or the Peerless Cleaners? Who remembers Worm's Hilltop House or The Chef, or the Rex Theatre or Mrs. Pat's Food Market? They belong to me now, and they have appeared—or will appear—in my work as it goes forward.

In a recent novella called "The Risi's Wife," I put it this way:

Shreveport is not a contemporary city to me; it is a palimpsest, a transparency through which I can see to an overarching past standing beyond time where its borders were more narrow than today, in which a host of vanished men and women dominated its collective life.

Put me on any street of this town, and I will raise up for you the structures that stood upon it a decade, two, three, four decades ago. I will evoke for you the houses, the business places, bars and brothels, schools and hospitals, and the people now long dead who lived and walked and plotted and loved and laughed amidst them.

I have the power to draw forth from the stuff of memory an unreal city as it existed on some arbitrary summer day in 1937, 1942, 1956, or 1970. It is an awesome and terrible capability, and I use it for my own most inward purposes, uncertain as I am of the meaning, the use—even the propriety—of a nostalgia more powerful than avarice or cupidity or the awful sweat-drenched dreams of that *libido dominandi* that hustles us each and every one toward the commonest of graves as if we were on the path toward the eternal salvation that we demand and ignore and plead for and dread simultaneously.

6 Originally no accent on the "a," perhaps because Corrington didn't use accent marks with his typewriter.

7 "Where" added.

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The Mystery of Writing

There is not a lot of use discussing the motives for serious writing. There may not be much use in talking about “serious writing” in that it seems to be an invention of modern times when the awesome power of the written word as understood by the archaic Greeks and Indians has been reduced to a mere vehicle for the transference of confusion.

Those of us who consider our writing more than a mere way to make money or an odd hobby should be aware that time—history, the opinion of generations—makes the decision as to what is serious work and what is not. I used to tell my university classes that they, not literary types, gave life to what we call literary classics. The *New York Review of Books* can make you immortal, for about fifteen minutes.

For example, I doubt that anyone in this room knows who the bestselling British novelist was in the nineteenth century, and it would be a safe bet that none of you has read more than one novel by him—if that.

The best-selling British novelist of the nineteenth century? Let’s get at the answer by telling you who it wasn’t. Not Dickens, or Thackeray. Not Jane Austen or one of the Brontës. Not George Eliot or Robert Smith Surtees, Anthony Trollope or even Sir Walter Scott. It was a gentleman named Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton,⁸ whose only surviving work that anyone has heard of is *The Last Days of Pompeii*.

In other words, there is no necessary connection between a bestselling writer and the best writers. One might extend the axiom by remembering that the overwhelming opinion of sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and even eighteenth-century critics listed Ben Jonson above Shakespeare, or that Bach’s work was forgotten by the mid-nineteenth century and had to be recovered and re-popularized by the unselfishness and brilliance of Felix Mendelssohn.

Things get even more complex in regard to the writer’s trade when we consider that pure capacity to write is no assurance of permanence, either. William Gaddis is unknown; George Meredith is unread—though either of them on the worst day he ever lived could write Margaret Mitchell or Carson McCullers into the ground. But *Gone with the Wind* and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* are great tales, and the compelling power they possess as stories overrides their authors’ insensitivity to language, and the banal style in which they are told.

One reads a great deal about best sellers and their authors nowadays. Works of fiction and diet plans and exercise books and self-improvement manuals all seem to be lumped in together simply because the only determinant of literary success has come to be the amount of profit one can make from a book—or a film or a TV show, for that matter. The idea that there are qualities other than profitability that might reasonably be considered in evaluating a piece of work is not a notion held in high esteem.

⁸ There is now the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, which invites contestants to write the worst possible first line to a novel—in the “It was a dark and stormy night” vein.

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The result of this attitude should give all of us pause to consider both the phenomenon and the result.

Joyce Corrington and I have consistently been paid best for our worst work. Neither of us could make a decent living writing what we want to write, writing in the great literary tradition that T. S. Eliot told us extends from the work of Homer to the present. If we are willing to write garbage and not complain, we can make thousands of dollars a week. If we insist on doing the best work we can do, we'll be lucky to make ten thousand a year.

Do not be deceived into thinking that we insist on taking an elitist position and want to write strange experimental stories. On the contrary, we want to write stories of adventure and romance, stories in which the past and present intersect to change the future. Stories about the most serious and deepest feelings and thoughts of people like the people in this room. Stories of the kind that Faulkner said were the only ones that mattered: stories of the human heart in conflict with itself.

One comes to believe that there is a fundamental flaw in mass societies like ours. We make much of our freedom to write and say what we wish. And yet, despite the legal rights we possess, the product of publishing houses, film studios, and TV networks is as effectively censored as if we lived in the Soviet Union. It is not a political censorship, and no one threatens us. It is a censorship founded in taste so debauched that even mass audiences of ordinary people have begun to turn away from network TV, from theatrical films, from trade fiction.

Twenty years ago, very few of us watched PBS. Today, most of the folks I know watched *The Jewel in the Crown* and *The Forsyte Saga*. We're watching *Reilly: Ace of Spies* now, and enjoying it thoroughly. Since we've gotten cable in New Orleans, we spend ninety percent of our time watching films like Michael Mann's *The Keep*, or *Sixteen Candles*—neither of which was successful in their theatrical releases. Even *Star Trek* in its umpteenth syndication holds more interest than the present junk on network TV.

What is true of TV and film has become true of publishing. I would be willing to argue that today there is no such thing as American literature. "Media standards," as they are humorously called, have taken over publishing as thoroughly as film and TV. The occasional triumph of talent and determination, such as that represented by the publication of Ellen Gilchrist's *In the Land Of Dreamy Dreams* and *Victory Over Japan*, or by the posthumous publication of *A Confederacy of Dunces* is not enough to establish—or re-establish—the kind of literary tradition that guided me in determining what direction my work should take, and what I should intend by it. Again, it is important to remember that Miss Gilchrist's first book and *A Confederacy of Dunces* were both originally published by university presses, and Southern university presses at that: Arkansas and Louisiana State, not by commercial publishing houses.

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The Mystery of Writing

Young Americans today grow up with the bizarre notion that movies are an art form rather than, at best, an innocuous form of mindless entertainment. To my horror, my youngest son walked into my office a year or so ago and announced that he wanted to be a television producer. “For God’s sake, think of your family,” I answered. “Have you considered being a pimp instead? Among the various forms of prostitution currently available, I tend to prefer the old-fashioned kind.”

Now I know that America’s strengths and its weaknesses are two sides of the same coin. The national love affair with fad and tackiness also permits the endless fabrication of new forms, the working out of new ideas. I also know that the pendulum tends to swing back over time toward some kind of norm. I acknowledge this, and it is possible that we gain more than we lose by it. At least I like to think so.

But we are driven, carried along, by our own technology today, because that is easier than the alternatives. 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.

But perhaps I shouldn’t be complaining. Perhaps it is precisely in these desperate circumstances that a writer in the great tradition finds his way and his meaning most readily. Because I know what it means to be from somewhere, to belong to a place and a people, and to possess the skill to recreate both in a form that may challenge time itself.

Even today, with 30 years and 400 miles between me and Shreveport, when someone asks where I’m from, I invariably answer without thinking, “Shreveport.” When I start to put together a new story, I think of its setting here, or in New Orleans, or somewhere in between. Even when I write of New York or London or Los Angeles, the people are from Louisiana—simply because those are the people I know in the same way I know myself.

To know who you are and what you are about seems to be a rare thing today. But it is at the very center of serious writing. And if you have that sense, it is possible to shrug off the fads and the tackiness, the poor workmanship and stupidity of contemporary writing—even if, from time to time, you are forced to engage in it. Perhaps it is a little like the meditation practice of Zen Buddhism. You possess the capacity to withdraw into a real world of real people doing intelligible—even if terrible—things. You look at the world around you as an especially perverted illusion, and turn inward to a truth that expresses itself through the symbols of

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language, a truth that does not depend on a moment or a popular attitude or the deformed consciousness that supposes the end of language is to make money.

One morning just as we awoke, Joyce turned to me and told me of a dream she had. In that dream, it was clear to her that each one of us, every person alive, is a story told about God. She could tell me no more than that, but that was surely enough, for she had told me the tale she was told in dream. Some of us are destined to be triumphant stories, some tragic. Some of us may be epics, some lyrics. All that remains is the transition of what it means to be human into human language. The mystery of writing is the realization that in language carried from the heart, we possess the power to stand against any absurdity, to stand for any sublimity until, in time, that writing which speaks final words, which defines our humanity in some special way stands no longer challenged by the rubbish and stupidity that claimed a place some length of time ago.

There is a novel called *What Will He Do with It*, which you have never heard of. There is another novel called *Great Expectations*. The first is by Bulwer-Lytton, the other by Dickens. The first outsold the second when they were originally published. Today, you would have to go to a major university library to find a copy. *Great Expectations* can be bought almost anywhere.

Let me conclude with a quotation from another Southern writer, one of those whose work I have always revered, and who, as much as any, has served as a model for the kind of work I've always tried to do. This is a passage out of a letter from Thomas Wolfe to his mother:

I know this now: I am inevitable. I sincerely believe The only thing that can stop me now is insanity, disease, or death . . . I want to know life and understand it and interpret it without fear or favor. This, I feel, is a man's work and worthy of a man's dignity . . . God is *not* always in his heaven, all is not always right with the world, it is not all bad, but it is not all good. It is not all ugly, but it is not all beautiful, It is life, life, life—the only thing that matters. It is savage, cruel, kind, noble, passionate, selfish, generous, stupid . . . painful, joyous—it is all these and more . . . I know there is nothing so commonplace, so dull, that it is not touched with nobility and dignity. And I intend to wreak out my soul on paper and express it all. This is what my life means to me: I am at the mercy of this thing, and I will do it or die . . . This is why I think I'm going to be an artist . . . I will go everywhere and see everything. I will meet all the people I can. I will think all the thoughts, feel all the emotions I am able, and I will write, write, write.⁹

⁹ Corrington's quotation of Wolfe's letter is very close to the original, albeit without some of Wolfe's capitalization: I know this now: I am inevitable. I sincerely believe The only thing that can stop me now is insanity, disease, or death . . . I want to know life and understand it and interpret it without fear or favor. This, I feel, is a man's work and worthy of a man's dignity . . . God is *not* Always in His Heaven, All is *not* always right with the world. It is not all bad, but it is

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The Mystery of Writing

Six years after the letter was written, *Look Homeward, Angel*, one of the finest first novels ever written by an American, was published. Nine years after that, Thomas Wolfe was dead. But not before he had established his vision of American reality firmly and permanently, in such a way that a boy only six years old when Wolfe died saw the truth of that vision and determined that he would carry it forward—no matter what the cost. And, if a man is any kind of writer at all, that capacity to bequeath the mystery to another generation, to send the message onward, is the only thing that matters.¹⁰

Career of Writing

1. *No way to make a living*
 - a. Fewer and fewer jobs for people who haven't already made it in one area or another.
 - b. Media jobs call for one to live in New York or Los Angeles. Neither is a place to raise children or to live normally.
 - c. Some people interested in "the writer's life," rather than writing itself. Very little glamour. Much hard work, very long hours, and constant frustration—if you care about the kind of stories you want to do.
2. *Describe* how a TV show is put on the air, how structured, how it becomes a success.
 - a. Copy-cat procedures. *Hunter* failing, so it starts copying *Miami Vice*, which is successful.
 - b. Nelson ratings are dominant over judgment.
 - c. Network as determinant. Any show on CBS likely to have +3 share points over NBC. This changes in cycles, but slowly.
3. *Describe* the making of a film, especially what determines whether a film will be made or not.
 - a. Requirements of a film script.
 - b. Position of the writer in film vis-à-vis TV.
4. *Publishing*
 - a. Has become nothing more than another arm of visual media. Books published to sell large numbers. Quality of no account at all.

not all good, it is not all ugly, but it is not all beautiful, it is life, life, life—the only thing that matters. It is savage, cruel, kind, noble, passionate, selfish, generous, stupid...painful, joyous—it is all these and more . . .

I know there is nothing so commonplace, so dull, that it is not touched with nobility and dignity. And I intend to wreak out my soul on paper and express it all. This is what my life means to me: I am at the mercy of this thing, and I will do it or die . . . This is why I think I'm going to be an artist . . . I will go everywhere and see everything. I will meet all the people I can. I will think all the thoughts, feel all the emotions I am able, and I will write, write, write. (Wolfe 2006)

10 This is the conclusion of the essay. It is unclear whether Corrington delivered the material that follows as part of his talk. Corrington did not give other talks, or participate in other panels, at the conference. Thus, the material at the end of the essay is not likely preparation for another panel or discussion. Because Corrington's handwritten notes are legible and there is something more intimate about reading handwritten notes, I have reproduced the original images of the notes.

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- b. Cost constraints. Rarely 500 page books unless by pot-boiler writers.
- c. Bookstore chain buyers now able in some measure to control what books will sell, what books won't. Displays in windows, etc.
- d. General decline of audience for novels and serious fiction on account of TV, etc.
- e. University presses now considered as a first line for serious writers of poetry, short stories, and novels.
 - i. Especially true for works strongly concerned with a given locale or area. Mention Sr. Dorothea¹¹ and her books on the Daughters of the Cross in Shreveport, published by LSU Press.
 - ii. Quality must be high, because university presses accustomed to people who know what they're doing.

Writing best treated today as one's own private commitment, as a thing one has to do because it is a good thing to do, as an offering to the love of humanity and the glory of God.

If anyone has anything serious to say, writing should under no circumstances be undertaken as a way to make a living. Be a carpenter or a lawyer, a doctor or a teacher. Do something you like to do which leaves you time for the writing. I always thought running a fishing camp would be a great way to make a living. When Faulkner was asked what job would be best for a writer, he said he thought the ideal job would be to be the landlord of a bordello. You'd have all your time free, and everything you need close at hand.

Final Notes:

No writer is better than the sum of what he has read. Despite what people think, writing of the serious kind is not done in isolation—unless it is done badly. You are responsible to that long shadowy line of men and women who have gone before you, and who knew that language is God's special gift to our species, and that the word is sacred and should be realized as such by those who have the audacity to try to use it for something more than calling the dog, scolding the children, or lying about where you caught that 8-pound bass. To read is to educate yourself. Nothing that you read is ever lost or useless.

One can even profit from reading junk. After reading something by Sidney Sheldon or Tommy Thompson, you have at least seen how not to do it. Then, turning to Joseph Conrad or Henry James, you'll have a deeper appreciation of their accomplishment—and a sense of how far you still have to go.

¹¹ Sister Dorothea Olga McCants was, among other things, the translator and editor of *Our People and Our History: Fifty Creole Portraits* by Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes.

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The Mystery of Writing

When reading fiction, don't get put off by the distance in time or place or in manners and attitudes between you and Proust or Hawthorne or Goethe or Shakespeare. Remember that human nature is constant in the very diversity of its presentation in life. What human beings want and fear and love and trust may change, may shift in emphasis from the sixteenth century to now, or from France to here. But human beings will always want and fear, love and trust.¹²

It is the writer's task to tell stories that reveal that wanting and fearing, loving and trusting as it is in the secret hearts of his characters.

At last, writing has never been a career for anyone worthwhile. Few have made a living from it if their work was the kind that survives, and almost none has become rich from it. Absolutely none has become as rich as he might have in business or trade.

Writing is no more a career than loving, marrying, or raising one's children is a career. It is a way of living that entails seeing into the flow of one's own life and that of others—either close by or immeasurably far away—and then [making]¹³ use of one's hard gained skill to recreate that life in language. So that the life thus preserved enters into the ongoing life of generations—even nations—as yet unborn.

Not many people would think of referring to Homer's career, or Dante's, or Shakespeare's. When I think of Thomas Wolfe or William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway or Scott Fitzgerald, I do not think of their careers. I think of their lives and how they spent them. Writing. Perhaps a better word for the writer's life is vocation—as a preacher has a call, or a priest a vocation. Surely what we do at our very best serves to contain and record the travail and triumph of the human spirit even as do the holy books of the world. As Dylan Thomas put it in dedicating one of his books, "These poems are written for the love of mankind and the glory of God, and I'd be a damned fool if they were not."¹⁴

12 In the handwritten manuscript, there is a line that seems to mark a section break before this paragraph.

13 The grammar was not parallel; therefore, "to make" was changed to "making."

14 This passage is from a note at the beginning of Dylan's Thomas's *Collected Poems, 1934–1952*, later republished as *Selected Poems, 1934–1952*. Corrington omits a phrase and misremembers a few words: "These poems, with all their crudities, doubts, and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God, and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't" (New Directions 2003).

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THE MYSTERY OF WRITING

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that the pendulum tends to swing back over time toward some kind of norm. I acknowledge this, and it is possible that we gain more than we lose by it. At least I like to think so.

But we are driven, carried along, by our own technology today, because that is easier than the alternatives. 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 judgements worthy of the name can issue, and into which every new insight seems to vanish without a trace.

But perhaps I shouldn't be complaining. Perhaps it is precisely in these desperate circumstances that a writer in the great tradition finds his way and his meaning most readily. Because I know what it means to be from somewhere, to belong to a place and a people, and to possess the skill to recreate both in a form that may challenge time itself.

Even today, with thirty years and 4000 miles between me and Shreveport, when someone asks where I'm from, I invariably answer without thinking, "Shreveport." When I start to put together a new story, I think of its setting here, or in New Orleans, or somewhere in between. Even when I write of New York or London or Los Angeles, the people are

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The Mystery of Writing

THE MYSTERY OF WRITING 17
from Louisiana--simply because those are the people I know
in the same way I know myself.

To know who you are and what you are about seems to be a rare thing today. But it is at the very center of serious writing. And if you have that sense, it is possible to shrug off the fads and the tackiness, the poor workmanship and stupidity of contemporary writing--even if, from time to time, you are forced to engage in it. Perhaps it is a little like the meditation practice of Zen Buddhism. You possess the capacity to withdraw into a real world of real people doing intelligible--even if terrible--things. You look at the world around you as an especially perverted illusion, and turn inward to a truth that expresses itself through the symbols of language, a truth that does not depend on a moment or a popular attitude or the deformed consciousness that supposes the end of language is to make money.

One morning just as we awoke, Jo turned to me and told me of a dream she had. In that dream, it was clear to her that each one of us, every person alive, is a story told about God. She could tell me no more than that, but that was surely enough, for she had told me the tale she was told in dream. Some of us are destined to be triumphant stories, some tragic. Some of us may be epics, some lyrics. All that remains is the translation of what it means to be human into human language. The mystery of writing is the realization that in language carried from the heart, we

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THE MYSTERY OF WRITING 18
posses the power to stand against any absurdity, to stand
for any sublimity until, in time, that writing which speaks
final words, which defines our humanity in some special way
stands no longer challenged by the rubbish and stupidity
that claimed a place some length of time ago.

There is a novel called, WHAT WILL HE DO WITH IT, which
you have never heard of. There is another novel called
GREAT EXPECTATIONS. The first is by Bulwer-Lytton, the
other by Dickens. The first outsold the second when they
were originally published. Today, you would have to go to a
major university library to find a copy. GREAT EXPECTATIONS
can be bought almost anywhere.

Let me conclude with a quotation from another Southern
writer, one of those whose work I have always revered, and
who, as much as any, has served as a model for the kind of
work I've always tried to do. This is a passage out of a
letter from Thomas Wolfe to his mother:

I know this now: I am inevitable. I sincerely
believe the only thing that can stop me now is
insanity, disease, or death...I want to know life
and understand it and interpret it without fear or
favor. This, I feel, is a man's work and worthy
of a man's dignity....God is not always in His
heaven, all is not always right with the world.
It is not all bad, but it is not all good. It is
not all ugly, but it is not all beautiful. It is
life, life, life--the only thing that matters. It

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The Mystery of Writing

THE MYSTERY OF WRITING

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is savage, cruel, kind, noble, passionate, selfish, generous, stupid...painful, joyous--it is all these and more....I know there is nothing so commonplace, so dull, that it is not touched with nobility and dignity. And I intend to wreak out my soul on paper and express it all. This is what my life means to me: I am at the mercy of this thing, and I will do it or die....This is why I think I'm going to be an artist....I will go everywhere and see everything. I will meet all the people I can. I will think all the thoughts, feel all the emotions I am able, and I will write, write, write...

Six years after the letter was written, LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL, one of the finest first novels ever written by an American was published. Nine years after that, Thomas Wolfe was dead. But not before he had established his vision of American reality firmly and permanently, in such a way that a boy only six years old when Wolfe died saw the truth of that vision and determined that he would carry it forward--no matter what the cost. And, if a man is any kind of writer at all, that capacity to bequeath the mystery to another generation, to send the message onward, is the only thing that matters.

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Career of writing

1. No way to make a living
 - a. fewer & fewer jobs for people who haven't already made it in one area or another.
 - b. media jobs call for one to live in New York or Los Angeles. Neither is a place to raise children or to live normally.
 - c. Some people interested in "the writer's life," rather than in writing itself. Very little glamor. Much hard work, very long hours, & constant frustration — if you care about the kind of stories you want to do.
2. Describe how a TV show is put on the air, how structured, how it becomes a success.
 - a. copy-cat procedures. Hunter failing, so it starts copying Miami Vice which is successful.
 - b. Nelson ratings as dominant over judgement —
 - c. Network as determinant. Any show on CBS likely to have + 3 share points over NBC. This changes in cycles, but slowly.
3. Describe the making of a film, especially what determines whether a film will be made or not.
 - a. requirements of a film script.
 - i. position of the writer in film vis-à-vis TV.
4. publishing.
 - a. has become nothing more than another arm of visual media. Books published to sell large numbers. ~~Cost~~ Quality of no account at all.
 - b. cost constraints. Rarely 500 page books unless by pot-boiler writers.
 - c. Bookstore chain buyers now able in some measure to control what books will sell, what books won't. Displays in windows, etc.
 - d. General decline of audience for novels & serious fiction on account of TV, etc.

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The Mystery of Writing

- E. ~~Vanity presses~~ University presses now considered ^{2.}
as a first line for serious writers of poetry,
short stories, novels.
- i. especially true for works strongly concerned
with a given locale or area
 - ii. Quality must be high, because university presses
accustomed to people who know what they're
doing.
Mention of Sr. Dorothea in her books on the
Daughters of the Cross in Shreveport, published
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Writing best treated today as one's own private commitment,
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Final notes:

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One can even profit from reading junk. After reading something by Sidney Sheldon or Tommy Thompson, you have at least seen how not to do it. Then, turning to Joseph Conrad or Henry James, you'll have a deeper appreciation of their accomplishment — & a sense of how far you still have to go.

When reading fiction, don't get put off by the distance in time or in place or in manners & attitudes between you & Proust or Hawthorne or Goethe or Shakespeare. Remember that human nature is constant in the very diversity of its presentation in life.

What human beings want & fear & love & trust may change, may shift in emphasis from the 16th century to now or from France to here. But human beings will always want & fear, love & trust.

It is the writer's task to tell stories that reveal that wanting & fearing, loving & trusting as it is in the secret hearts of his characters.

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The Mystery of Writing

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life & that of others—either close by, or immeasurably
far away— & then to make use of one's hard-gained
skill to recreate that life in language. So that the life
thus preserved enters into the ongoing life of generations,
even nations— as yet unborn.

Not many people would think of referring to Homer's
career, or Dante's or Shakespeare's. When I think of
Thomas Wolfe or William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway
or Scott Fitzgerald, I do not think of their careers.
I think of their lives, & how they spent them.
Writing, perhaps a better word for the writer's life
is vocation— as a preacher has a call, or a
pneit a vocation. Surely what we do at our very
best serves to contain & record the travail &
triumph of the human spirit even as do the holy
books of the world. As Dylan Thomas put it
in dedicating one of his books, "These poems are
written for the love of mankind & the glory of
God, & I'd be a damned fool if they weren't."

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