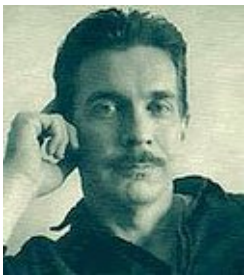
Corn, Alfred (b. 1943)

by Christopher Matthew Hennessy


Alfred Corn. Image courtesy Copper Canyon Press.

Alfred Corn, born August 14, 1943, in Georgia, has become widely respected as one of his generation's finest poets. Corn is a multifaceted writer, an intelligent observer and chronicler, and a master of poetic technique.

As his work has developed over the course of nine volumes, Corn's style has progressed from a conversational eloquence to a rhythmically complex and rich elegance. He has been praised by critics such as Harold Bloom, who has marked for canonization Corn's second book, *A Call in the Midst of the Crowd* (1978), whose title poem takes a sprawling view of New York City, and has cited Corn's first book, *All Roads at Once* (1976), as the best poetic debut of that year.

Boyhood in Georgia

Corn was born in Bainbridge and raised mostly in Valdosta, Georgia. While he has been read by some as an American Southern writer, he actually writes infrequently about his boyhood in the South. Perhaps the most important poem in the context of his childhood is the long poem "The Outdoor Amphitheater," from his third book *The Various Light* (1980).

This poem, celebrated as luminous by several reviewers, uses lush language and richly textured images and details to recall summers spent as a child and teen watching community plays, visiting circuses and vaudeville performances, and listening to fiery sermons from a handsome preacher at an old-fashioned revival. Corn's message, however, is to look forward, not backwards, with the poem ending: "the assembled will / A continuance; that this stage not be the last; / And that the performance move on from strength to strength."

Other poems that touch upon his childhood include "Dreambooks," "Getting Past the Past" (both from *All Roads at Once*); "Stepson Elegy," "Sugar Cane," and the long autobiographical prose piece "A Goya Reproduction" (all from *Present*, 1997).

As he contemplates a Goya painting in this latter piece, he recalls discovering that his mother, who died on his second birthday, painted, played the violin, and loved poetry. Corn reveals he was the youngest of three children, that his father drank heavily, and that his family never seemed to have enough money. Young Alfred was a solitary boy who sought the comfort of books, which often made him the target of bullies.

"Dreambooks" depicts a young boy whose imagination, love of books, and clumsiness make him feel different. "Sugar Cane" is a riff--complete with a bluesy refrain, "I knew sugar was love"--on sugar, slavery, and the speaker's memories of a young black boy his father forbade him to play with.

Corn's poems about youth are rife with vibrantly detailed memories recollected through adult wisdom. Along with remembering people and places from his childhood, Corn in these poems wonders about issues such as memory itself, time's passing, and sentimentality.

Education and Urbanity

Corn left Valdosta to study French language and literature at Emory and then Columbia University, where he earned a B.A. (1965) and M.A. (1970) respectively. (He has also studied Italian, Latin, German, Spanish, and Attic Greek over the years.) During the period of the mid-1960s, he traveled through Europe, including to Paris in 1967 courtesy of a Fulbright Fellowship. Though much of Corn's poetry is emphatically American in its embrace of the country's landscape, language, and sensibilities, it is also greatly informed by the author's travels around the world and his great appreciation and knowledge of the rich literary, historic, artistic, and cultural traditions of Europe.

In fact, some of his strongest poems are set in Europe and draw from his experiences there. "Seeing all the Vermeers" (*Contradictions*, 2002), for example, chronicles Corn's travels through Europe to see Dutch painter Jan Vermeer's masterpieces up close and in person. The poem contemplates the paintings and recounts Corn's reactions as he is moved by their artistry.

In the moving "La Madeleine" (*Autobiographies*, 1992), the poet revisits the histories and myths surrounding the story of Mary of Magdala (known as Mary Magdalene) and the theme of Proust's famous "petite madeleine." The poem ranges from the caves of Lascaux, to the paintings of Caravaggio, to a Parisian cafe. The work is also a moving memorial to Corn's friend critic David Kalstone, who died of AIDS in 1986.

Marriage and Coming Out

In the 1960s Corn met and fell in love with Ann Jones. The two intellectuals married in 1967 and divorced in 1971 as Corn became more fully aware of his homosexuality. This part of Corn's life is recalled in Corn's fourth volume, the warmly received book-length poem *Notes from a Child of Paradise* (1984), which also explores the counterculture and the anti-war movements of that time in American history.

The book is ambitiously structured around Dante's *Commedia*, using as its structure one hundred cantos divided into three parts and often alluding to both Dante and his themes and including some fine terza rima. Jay Parini in his review of the book remarks that the poem traces "the poet-hero's journey through an academic Inferno in Paris and New York made all the more intense by sexual confusions and longings."

One section from *Notes . . .* recounts the married couple's trip across country by car from New York to Oregon and a growing but vaguely felt anxiety and distance between the two. Corn's homosexual inclinations, both at the time of his marriage and after his divorce, are addressed casually. Corn reveals his sharp wit on this score in these lines, which follow right after the word "gay" (as in "happy"), as Corn speaks to Jones:

> ". . . [I] had just come out
> From under six months of scarifying
> Lovesickness (smiles, hugs, promises--he was
> What I didn't then want to call a tease).
> The case seemed to have escaped your notice.

After the divorce Corn writes, again with nonchalance, that both he and Jones were "snapped up by someone else / (Your new Victor . . . / My new Walter)."

In his later books, Corn addresses more frankly the themes of homosexual love and the domestic life, most poignantly in the poems "A Marriage of the Nineties" and "Insertion Arias" (both from *Present*). In the latter, the speaker talks to his lover as they listen to Mozart's arias after love-making:

Eyes closed, we let intentional sound sink in.
For a while, all we are is a voice
as it steps and glides over textured strings
made one harmonic flesh with woodwinds.
The music's pulse is hard to tell from ours,
and blind attention doubles what it hears.
Dancelike themes and pitched words
in an old language not by me always
translatable replace the "I love you"
we save for times we mean it to the bone.

In *Contradictions*, Corn furthers his frank exploration of life as a gay man in poems such as "My Last June in Chelsea" and "To a Lover Who is HIV-Positive." The latter begins "You ask what I feel," and answers:

Love; and a fear
that the so far implacable
cunning of a virus will smuggle away
substantial warmth, the face, the response
telling us who we are and might be.

In a review, Grace Schulman says that Corn's poetry "contains urgent lessons for our time: presence, care, visibility--all related, I think, in the code of this gay writer, to the wisdom of coming out." She also describes Corn as "one of our finest living poets . . . [who] makes bold new uses of classical and European influences."

Coupling the Personal to Broader Concerns

Although Corn is known for injecting autobiographical details into his poems, his work is not confessional verse. Rather, Corn couples the personal with historical, artistic, musical, and literary concerns. A perfect example of this weaving of different strains can be seen in "La Madeleine." The poem ends with a prayer on the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene that poignantly recalls Kalstone and seeks a more general blessing on "the sick, the dying. / And those who watch at their side. Help us to dry our tears . . . ."

In his review of *Stake: Selected Poems, 1972-1992* (1999), William Reichard describes Corn as "an obsessive cataloguer of the self." In the poem "A Call in the Midst of a Crowd," as well as in the books *The West Door* (1988) and *Autobiographies*, Corn himself explores the anxiety of writing about the self, turning life's details into art. In "A Call . . . ," the anxiety is faced head-on as the poet muses on the difficulty of sustaining "the doubtful subject of a self": "Trying to feel actual / in the absence of a human echo." The anxiety is soothed by the realization that "The word [is] its own gloss; though still, / I suppose, lit by me from within."

In a Line of Gay Poets

Corn's work has often invited comparison to great twentieth-century poets and to gay contemporaries and ancestors. The style and concerns of his first two books were compared to those of John Ashbery and James Merrill. Critic and fellow gay poet Richard Howard, in reviewing *All Roads at Once*, wrote: "Like Ashbery's, [Corn's] poems are about what it is like for him to be alive and conscious; like Merrill's, they are about how much must be gainsaid, renounced and forgone in order to have, at least, themselves; they are like no one

else's in their zealous disposition to let the world speak through them, to praise being...."

Some of Corn's best known works pay homage to or draw upon the influence of great American poets such as Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore. Robert K. Martin, author of *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (1979), argues that Corn belongs in a line of visionary poets that includes Whitman and Crane.

Along with "visionary," Corn's work is often also described in terms such as "transcendent." One of Corn's most famous poems, in fact, "The Bridge, Palm Sunday, 1973, " from *All Roads at Once*, begins with an epigraph taken from Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," describes a walk Corn took across the Brooklyn Bridge, and echoes Crane's masterpiece "The Bridge." The poem itself concerns issues of tradition and the question of influence. Corn's poetry embodies the embracing, transcendent vision of Whitman and the linguistic richness of Crane.

Use of Traditional Forms

Corn is often praised for his tight control of traditional forms, as well as for his fluency and accessibility. Critic David Orr, in reviewing *Contradictions*, observes that while Corn began his career as "one of the most talented heirs of James Merrill," he has "over the course of nine collections . . . frequently proven that fluency can have its own quiet drama."

Corn's accessibility is counter-balanced by a cutting wit, irony, an urbane sense of the world, high verbal energy, and a linguistic playfulness. His irony and wit have led some critics to describe him as "cool" or " cerebral," and his intelligence has brought comparisons to W.H. Auden, yet another twentieth-century master and gay predecessor.

Corn's work in traditional forms ranges from blank verse narratives to set stanza forms like the villanelle to experiments in English sapphics. His poem "Song for Five Companionable Singers" (*Various Light*), for example, is comprised of three villanelles, a sestina, and a pantoum. Not surprisingly, he has written a well-received manual on prosody called *The Poem's Heartbeat* (1997).

An often-discussed poem of Corn's is the Frostian blank verse poem "An Xmas Murder" (from *The West Door*), in which an elderly doctor tells the story of a small town murder and how it has left him with a life of guilt. The poem testifies to the power of blank verse to cast a narrative spell.

In "Musical Sacrifice" (from *Present*), Corn explores the lives of writer Franz Kafka and composer Johann Sebastian Bach through a series of poems that take on various musical forms (the "fugue," "waltz," " chorale," etc.). In its exploration of spirituality and faith, the poem presents a recurring theme in Corn's work, as manifest in the final lines that examine art's connection to divinity:

> Fine art is not, beyond all else, technique.
> The agile keyboard virtuoso tears
> The soul open to God, who will surely speak
> In each resounding step of the long stairs.

Corn also edited *Incarnation: Contemporary Writers on the New Testament* (1990), a collection of essays in which contemporary poets and writers (including Anthony Hecht, John Updike, and David Plante) reflect upon the contemporary significance of the Gospels and Epistles.

Other Themes, Other Works

Another theme that runs throughout Corn's work is that of America and what it means to be an American. Corn has declared himself as "[f]irst and last . . . an American writer" and cites as his influences some of the greatest gay poets and writers America has produced. Poems like his series "American Portraits" (from *Contradictions*) and "1992" (from *Autobiographies*) literally span the country's history and geography, the latter examining the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century as the speaker spends a year traveling the country via its interstate highways.

Among other work, Corn has also published a novel, *Part of His Story* (1997), and a collection of critical essays titled *The Metamorphoses of Metaphor* (1987). He also frequently writes art criticism for major publications.

Corn has received Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, an Award in Literature from the Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, a fellowship from the Academy of American Poets, and the Levinson Prize from *Poetry* magazine, among other honors.

A longtime faculty member in the Graduate Writing Program of the School of the Arts at Columbia, Corn has also held visiting posts at the University of California-Los Angeles, the University of Cincinnati, Ohio State University, Sarah Lawrence, Yale, and the University of Tulsa. Recently, he has also been a fellow of the Rockefeller Study and Conference Center at Bellagio, Italy, and in 2004-2005 he held the Amy Clampitt residency in Lenox, Massachusetts.

Conclusion

It is a testament to Corn's talents that he is so often compared to several of the great American poets, many who happen to be gay. Yet critics seem to conclude that Corn has carved out his own space in contemporary poetry by combining unaffected honesty and a finely honed poetic skill. Further, Corn's expansive thematic reach and embracing vision have set him apart from many of his contemporaries.

Part of his singular ambition as a poet lies in setting the intensely personal against what lies outside himself--elements ranging from the European tradition of art to twentieth-century Americana. His quiet but frank autobiographical explorations and charged observations (on self, friends, lovers, city, nature, history, art) can serve as a chronicle of an artist (and man) who lived through personal and historical turbulence, who has sought out beauty and grace, and eloquently traced his own emotional, social, intellectual and sexual discoveries.

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About the Author

Christopher Matthew Hennessy is the author of *Outside the Lines: Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets,* in which he interviews some of the most prominent poets writing today, including Frank Bidart, J.D. McClatchy, Alfred Corn, Carl Phillips, Mark Doty and Henri Cole. He has published interviews, reviews, author profiles, and poetry in national and international journals. Hennessy is associate editor of *The Gay and Lesbian Review-Worldwide.*