

Brian Henry

ON ALFRED CORN

From the publication of his first volume of poetry in 1976, Alfred Corn has striven for mastery of both the long poem and short lyric while evincing intelligence, sophistication, and technical competence. His efforts have yielded mixed results: the ambitious and brilliant "A Call in the Midst of the Crowd," the uneven but groundbreaking "1992," the overly self-conscious "Notes from a Child of Paradise," a handful of perfect lyrics, and a host of forgettable ones. But each new collection delineates Corn's trajectory as a poet, a progression marked in particular by his efforts at the long poem and poetic sequence.

In *Present*, Corn's seventh volume, he has purged his work of most of the weaknesses that inflicted otherwise healthy poems in his earlier books. The painful syntactical contortions, the heavy-handed allusions, the overt references to his elite education, and the relentless focus on the minutiae of his life have worked against him in the past. However, in this volume, Corn seems determined to write himself out of his shortcomings, resulting in his most accomplished collection to date. When Corn demonstrates his literary and historical knowledge instead of talking about it, he resembles Lowell (albeit a calm cousin of Lowell). Fortunately, Corn's overt references to his education, which attained their most irritating form in the summer school reading lists and mention of his "A" grades in "Notes from a Child of Paradise," by now have dwindled to passing remarks. In *Present*, he enriches our own understanding of history, music, literature, and art.

Corn's poetry makes for pleasurable reading in part because it is unpredictable—a refreshing quality in a literary environment where most poets learn and perfect one type of poem and then fill book upon book with its clones. Although Corn is not as unpredictable as poets such as Merrill, *Present* reveals an attempt to grow into new forms and subjects. His long preoccupation with literature, music, visual art, history, and travel establishes the pulse of this volume, as with others, but he also includes a nine-page essay, a poetic fugue,

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“Sapphics at a Trot,” a poem translated from the Russian of Marina Temkina, and a poem in the shape of a conch shell. Evidence of his able craftsmanship is everywhere in the book—in the delicately rhyming quatrains of “*Lago di Como: The Cypresses*,” “The Cloak of Invisibility” and “Balanchine’s *Western Symphony*”; in the numerous forms of “Musical Sacrifice”; in his highly structured free verse poems; and in “Maui: Concerto for Island and Developer,” in which the slant rhymes and shifting metrics contribute to a stunning symphony:

... surf crashes to the accompaniment
of gull cry, of sonic boom—and a few sounds that can’t
be heard, like soft crunchings of bone
as a matter-of-fact vulture consumes the fine
wings and breast of a dead tern scooped up
from a shallow grave in the golf course sand trap.

Although Corn has earned a reputation as an elegant poet, his need to experiment—to create new forms and modes and to invigorate old ones—also makes him a compelling one.

Sacrifice, ascension, and apotheosis establish the mood of many of these poems. In “The Bonfire,” the world itself becomes a burnt offering. The first stanza of the poem resembles James Dickey’s “The Hospital Window,” and the entire poem enacts and reenacts an image similar to Dickey’s:

Each window possesses the sun
As though it burned there on a wick.
I wave, like a man catching fire.

...

Ceremoniously, gravely, and weakly,
Dozens of pale hands are waving
Back, from inside their flames.

But the ceremony in Corn’s poem is one where sacrifice becomes transmuted into holocaust. The man behind the window is a prison inmate; and the poet, for now, is safe from the flames:

Lamar Jenks on Death Row at Sing Sing
drops the letter sent from Florida
stares out high windows through the chain-link screen
to where brick walls
meet the sky and the sun sets
a window opposite on fire atomic white
the brick begins to burn
and the cell his clothes the little gold
cross around his neck
and his right hand comes clean
in a glove of flame

Punctuated only by line break and caesura, the poem sheds the conventional trappings of grammar and thereby gains additional torque and tension within and between the lines. As readers of the poem, we become the spectators of this bonfire, which gives way to a conflagration that consumes the entire world. Everything burns, including literature and music and art:

White lights everywhere widening
begin to merge grass trees asphalt concrete
alight Dresden Toledo Mogadishu bright torches
Osaka Montreal Petra Auckland Pyongyang
the violins horns printing presses *Principia*
Mathematica on fire "Nighthawks" *Glas*
Ajanta To the Lighthouse Benin ivory
Siegfried Karnak The Hall of Memory
fuel for the flame
eternal flame the substance of language molten
a spontaneous revulsion from hegemony awkward
construction site lines of glass
dismissed seeing them in the opera
shun attention span shortening
do we have clearance from the terminal
do we serve
a terminal flame
term fla

The places that catch fire in the poem serve as versions of stations of the cross; not only King's Cross (an Underground stop in London), Espirito Santo ("Holy Spirit"), St. Anthony's in Pittsburgh, and Death Row, but Belfast, Sudan, Uganda, and Detroit. But the poem, with its thirteen stanzas, falls short of the fourteenth station: resurrection is never attained. Our cities and buildings and monuments appear in the roll call of things burning, and the works of Hopper, Woolf, Wagner, Derrida, Russell and Whitehead are "fuel for the flame." This terminal flame—the flame at the end of the world—ultimately cannot be described because the words themselves have been burnt.

Sacrifice appears in various ways in "Musical Sacrifice," a sequence (of fourteen sections) that juxtaposes narratives about Bach and Kafka with poems that wed the pace of various musical movements to the rhythms of the poems. As in Bach's work, counterpoint—the interplay of distinct musical strands—becomes the poem's *modus operandi*. Thus, Corn posits the plain melody and hymn-like tune of "chorale" against the light and playful "scherzo in B-minor," the tercets and loose triple meter of "waltz" against "canon," which spins a note-for-note imitation of one melodic line by another into a pantoum with ingenious variations achieved through subtle shifts in syntax. By turns inspired and reverential, but always imaginative and engaging, "Musical Sacrifice" has the makings of a tour de force.

For readers curious about why Corn chooses Bach and Kafka, he explains his interest in them in the sixth section of "Musical Sacrifice": the music illuminates the *mysterium tremendum* and the prose activates "fiction's deepest resource: identification." The notion of fear in the face of God's magnificence and the dilemma of identity constitute the drama of the sequence, which owes its title to Bach's own *Musikalisches Opfer*, "exacted by that musical monarch, Frederick II of Prussia" in the form of a challenge. That Bach later rose to the challenge is a matter of history. For Corn, however, his own "Musical Sacrifice" becomes an answer to a challenge from the muse.

But the poem does not center on Corn except in the way that he, as an artist, becomes Bach and Kafka. Despite some similarities, the lives of the composer and the prose writer are treated separately in each section. Both Bach and Kafka, however, seek through art "a sense of ineluctable will accomplishing its ends in a world of mute suffering." In the penultimate section (the crucifixion station?), the composer and the writer merge in a monologue spoken by Kafka to his sister:

What made me turn away from those images?
Who knows, but they were replaced in thought by a music—
frightening, yet one that I, who always avoided music,
didn't choose not to hear. The figure running across
the keyboard was myself, my footfalls
sounding the notes; and others were running,
fleeing from the catastrophe, each foot
landing on a key as, unawares, we all cooperated.
Was it a fugue of death, a human counterpoint
made by fugitives?

The Nazi Holocaust assumes a terrifying if implicit presence in this poem (Kafka escaped the Holocaust only through death by tuberculosis, but his sister died at Auschwitz); and because Corn mentions his own Jewish grandmother in "A Goya Reproduction," that presence becomes especially menacing for the poet. But the title of this section—*Die Verwandlung*, meaning "metamorphosis" as well as "transfiguration"—leads us to expect a personal spiritual change here. Kafka (and now, by extension, Bach) and the nothing of nihilism are indeed transformed:

Having so much to say meant we could say nothing,
and nothing inhabited the space between us,
a nothing that bloomed full and golden.
Then I felt myself being taken up; yet didn't tear
my gaze from yours until its silent music
had been translated into darkness,
all my nothing consenting to be absent from the world.
The Holy of Holies opened and nothing was in it.

Because, according to Corn's note for this poem, the Holy of Holies is an empty room in the Second Temple of Jerusalem, the nothingness of nihilism has metamorphosed into "pure, sacred space."

Although *Present* is in many ways an essential collection, it finally does not convince me that Corn is a poet with obsessions or a poet of passion. I see his devotion to music, art, history, travel, and literature as a deep appreciation rather than as an irresistible urge driving him to write about them. Corn himself describes his attachment to art in similarly serene terms: "I've never

myself been able to get over that loyalty to music, art, and literature first formed in childhood" ("A Goya Reproduction"). Even his expressions of erotic love seem neatly packaged, with craft prevailing over drama or emotion. The hell-bent self-exploration of Berryman and Lowell, that peculiar urgency of Merrill are absent here. In a poetry driven by no obsessions and where the concept of loyalty has replaced passion, the craft or the inventiveness of the language becomes its most salient feature. This is the route most poets—being relatively stable, educated people—must pursue. Because few poets possess these kinds of obsessions and because even fewer can match obsession with technical mastery and linguistic genius, we should not hastily dismiss an intelligent poet for being more devoted than demonized. As it stands, Corn's poetry is accomplished and sophisticated. But if he wishes to reach the apogee of language and emotion in order to join the ranks of major poets, he must divine a more powerful wellspring for his poetry. While we benefit from his ambition, earnestness, learnedness, and metrical adroitness, I suspect that we are left wanting the concentrated and singular vision we find only in our greatest poets.