Afterword

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A previous collection (*Selected Essays of Jim W. Corder: Pursuing the Personal in Scholarship, Teaching, and Writing*) highlighted Corder's contributions to rhetorical theory and pedagogy. This present volume puts to practice many of the precepts that his more scholarly writing theorizes; at the same time, it highlights the man's literary personality, giving free rein to the *ethos* expressed elsewhere, albeit in more muted tones. From that earlier collection, one might come to know Corder's ways of theorizing; but there's still more of him left over, and the theorist and belletrist need to be kept in close touch, allowing each if not to complete, then at least to soften and ironize and complicate the other.

Corder himself suggests as much in his playfully anti-academic, personal-scholarly essay, "Tribes and Displaced Persons":

> I haven't yet learned how to be myself. . . . I don't want to learn how to be someone else. I can't be Maynard Mack, whose work I admired so much when I was in graduate school, and I probably won't turn out to be Jacques Derrida. I want to try to think my thoughts, which aren't altogether mine. I don't want to write in the languages of the academic communities I have almost

> belonged to for years. . . . I want to do a scholarly sort of work but to write in a personal sort of way. . . . I want to write in my way, . . . and perhaps even stretch out the possibilities of prose.

Corder played the academic game well enough, passing through the *cursus honorum* of professor to department head, college dean, and vice chancellor at Texas Christian University. Yet he often expressed diffidence in the academic priesthood, avowing to hide from his students "how little" he knew. He was never satisfied with his labor, always looking to be more (or, at least, elsewhere) intellectually and artistically. The fact that Corder worked in so many forms, seeking to "stretch out the possibilities of prose," reflects his intellectual and artistic restlessness, as well as his need to harness the nervous/creative energies that spilled over and into his memoirs.

An aim of this present collection, then, is to introduce Corder's appreciative readers to some new territory. He did, in fact, enjoy two distinct audiences, one academic, one belletristic; only his colleagues, students, and most devoted readers will be aware that Jim W. Corder, Professor of English at TCU and co-author of the best-selling *Handbook of Current English*, also authored *Yonder: Life on the Far Side of Change* and *Hunting Lieutenant Chadbourne*, among other works of personal remembrance and creative nonfiction. Professor Corder's readers will be surprised (and, we trust, delighted) to learn of his belle-

tristic side; readers of Corder the personal essayist will not be surprised, but will find themselves in new places still, as this collection gathers together works lesser known or previously unpublished.

In light moments, Corder spoke wistfully of a wish to be acclaimed a minor poet. Whereas poetry is the least practiced of his literary genres, he remained a voracious reader and critic of contemporary verse, stocking his personal library with scores of chapbooks. In "When (Do I/Shall I/May I/Must I/Is It Appropriate for Me to) (Say No to/Deny/Resist/Repudiate/Attack/Alter) Any (Poem/Poet/Other Piece of the World) for My Sake?"—an essay on the ethics of reading and response—Corder reminds us that criticism is "inevitable, inherent, desirable." As he writes,

> The examined life, one of our great aims, is a life of criticism. We need criticism, have a right to criticism, enjoy great hopes for criticism, and exercise it diversely. By criticism we come to know ourselves, to speak for ourselves, to make our intentions known to others, to claim the works of others for ourselves. Criticism is inevitable, inherent, desirable; it is necessary to the free citizen.
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> Criticism is also a peril to all save the critic. It is a displacement of others by the self, a replacement of others with the self. Even the

> most unquestionably benevolent criticism is potent with peril for others. Unmaking others, we make ourselves. . . .

Thus he guides readers toward benevolent criticism of his own work, acknowledging at the same time the author's need to move aside, making room for the reader's response. Since Corder did not always keep copies, his poems remain rare finds, scattered about in mostly small, regional journals. The example we include—on the passing of a famous if flawed sports figure—fits the thematics of this collection.

An accomplished amateur in pen and ink, Corder regularly illustrated his own prose. Though his hands sometimes shook while holding coffee or lighting his pipe, the pen seemed to steady his nerves, yielding some finely detailed line drawings. The art presented here reflects two twining themes: the fleeting images of popular culture (particularly of Hollywood cowboys and ball players) and the ghostly landscape of Depression-era West Texas.

Of course, it was not as a poet or artist, nor as a rhetorician or writing teacher, but as a practicing essayist that Corder sought himself and fashioned himself most intensely. Those readers who knew him personally will hear his living voice intoned throughout the pieces gathered here. They will hear the chesty though whispery speech, the slow, carefully shaped cadences (often classical, often Scriptural in their formal patterning), the scholarly diction intermixed with the colloquial, all brought

into harmony by a West Texas accent. Those who knew him cannot help but hear him in the prose. While reading (as Roland Barthes suggests) demands the "death of the author," reading can also be a necromancy, a raising of the once-living voice that continues, in some real if indeterminable sense, to resound in the writing. Of course those new to his writing will need, as Corder would say, to hunt the author down, bearing witness to his *ethos.*

That hunt begins in West Texas. Corder's many scattered autobiographical writings attest that his blue-collar family struggled to outlast the Great Depression, which hammered everyone in and around Jayton, "a town of 700 souls," as he describes it. At age ten, Corder moved with his family from rural Jayton to Fort Worth, an unimaginably large city, where steady work beckoned his father. He later attended TCU, where he would return to teach after a stint in the army (drafted, he served with the American occupation forces in Mannheim, Germany) and doctoral study at the University of Oklahoma.

The persona Corder creates in these works left Jayton, and yet never left. Again and again—in and throughout this collection—Corder revisits his childhood, wherein fundamentalist church services, racy comic books, local sports pages, and radio broadcasts (particularly of football games from then-distant Fort Worth) fired a young boy's imagination, shaping his beliefs and aspirations while linking him to the world beyond his otherwise self-enclosed community.

For Corder, moving into the university meant escaping from

manual labor, financial hardship, and brimstone Protestantism into a life of teaching, bookishness, and religious tolerance. While his considerable writerly achievements earned him a national reputation, they also alienated him from that early self-image, rooted firmly in Jayton. Though the doctorate raised him out of geographical isolation, the pain of his uprooting never diminished; nor, indeed, was the uprooting ever complete. In his mature writings, Jayton remains both psychologically distant and hauntingly present. The distance and tension between town and gown helped structure the complex, adult self.

The mature Corder's yearning to revisit old haunts, to remember his family and heal the wounds of uprooting, proved at least as strong as his yearning for escape into academia. Comparatively meager educational and cultural opportunities did not destroy the jaw-dropping wonder of childhood; and while the task of recovering that wonder could not be completed, it remained forever urgent.

Recovering the early years was, for Corder, never an entirely nostalgic enterprise. Recovery of the openness and joy of childhood entailed also a recovery *from* childhood—from its deceptions and delusions. For Corder, one's difficult yet necessary task remains to reawaken the somnolent adult self from smothering routine and incessant obligations; one must shed the illusions fostered by one's early upbringing, even as one expresses respect and love for the flawed adults responsible for that upbringing.

Through it all, baseball provided a precious thread of continuity, linking child and adult versions of self. In a world otherwise marked by change and loss, baseball offered the promise of an eternal present, wherein everyone bats "and no one dies." As a child, Corder played baseball—of course. Eagerly, he read of Joe DiMaggio and Charlie Gehringer, whose feats in distant, mythic ballpark-cathedrals he would himself ritually, imaginatively reenact in his own Dust Bowl schoolyard. He stood marvelling when his older brother, a high-school athlete of modest talent, went off to war. DiMaggio, Ted Williams, and other of his baseball heroes left for war as well. In so doing, they identified the athlete with the soldier or pilot and confirmed the young Corder's belief in a Romantic, masculinist moral code, wherein athletic prowess and warrior manhood became mirror images and warfare, like sport, would be fought "by the rules," in gentlemanly manner.

Later, having been drafted and witnessing the effects of Allied saturation bombing, Corder questioned his childhood idealization of the male warrior-athlete; he would not, however, forget baseball and its promise of individual heroic action. He searched for new heroes to replace DiMaggio and Gehringer. As a graduate student, when tired of reading Maynard Mack, he practiced pitching. As a middle-aged professor, he joined softball teams. He tracked the career of Mickey Mantle, who succeeded DiMaggio in centerfield and (despite his alcoholism) achieved an equally fabled place in the lineup of Yankee mythology. As a father, Corder marvelled at his son's pitching

victories, which included two no-hitters. For him, it seemed possible to retrieve baseball as an innocent, purely sportive pursuit; for, despite the examples of DiMaggio and Williams, baseball did not require athletes to go to war.

As Yi-Fu Tuan has argued, geography shapes cosmology, contributing to cultural formation and self-formation. For Corder as for Tuan, the human creature remains an incurable topophiliac. And Corder-the-scholar fully supported the belletrist's fascination with self-making and one's home-places. As he would teach students, all writing remains personal at its expressive core, the word "I" lurking within every utterance, however dry or apparently impersonal, appealing to the Other for a witness and, if possible, for assent. Through the last two decades of an academic career that spanned from the 1950s to the late 1990s, Corder's writing—regardless of genre, topic, or audience, and despite his intense engagement with postmodernist theory—remained a continuous personal essay.

Since his passing in 1998, the profession of English has seen an explosion of interest and activity in the so-called "fourth genre" of creative nonfiction; had Corder lived to polish the several book-length manuscripts that he left behind, we suspect that he would be acknowledged a leading voice in this emergent genre. But these manuscripts—on sport and popular culture, on travel and the psychology of place (including *nostalgia* or one's mourning over lost place), on the multeity of rhetorics—remain imperfect: remnants and leftovers as it were, occasionally brilliant and always suggestive, typically a revision

shy of completion.

The materials gathered here prove an exception. A chapter from the unpublished *Places in the Mind: Essays on Rhetorical Sites*, "Making Las Vegas" is a carefully researched, stylistically nuanced, topophiliac exploration of a specific city and of image-making in postmodern popular culture. Such work shows Corder at the height of his powers. We are also pleased to include *The Glove* in its near-entirety. (The title has been taken from its first chapter, the manuscript remaining otherwise unnamed.) Sections of two chapters that we have excised appear elsewhere in our collection: previously published, "The Rock-Kicking Championship of the Whole World" and "The Heroes Have Gone from the Grocery Store" speak, we believe, more strongly on their own. In separating these essays from the larger, later manuscript, we have left a few brief redundancies and inconsistencies unedited. (For example: "Rock-Kicking Championship" describes Jayton as a town of "700 souls," a figure that shrinks in *The Glove* to "about 650." Such is the mark of a twice-told tale.)

If a word might suffice to describe projects of his final years, it would be *tentative*: and paradoxically so, since Corder fought mightily against time to complete his life's work. The fact that his work remains forever in-progress, unsettled and apparently incompletable, remains a distinctively Corderian touch. In this respect, too, Corder's writing confirms postmodern notions of *bricolage*. In an essay that one of us was honored to co-author with him, Corder reflects upon qualities of the bricoleur's

trade, known in West Texas as "jackleg carpentry":

> Jackleg carpentry (and one can practice anything, certainly writing, in the jackleg way) may be defined as that mode in which, upon completion of a job, the carpenter backs off, surveys the work, and says, "Well, there it is by God,—it ain't much, but it'll hold us until we can think of something better."

Out of such *bricolage* arises Corder's philosophy of writing, his philosophy of living and of being-in-the-world:

> It seems that discourse must always be jacklegged. It must, for its own health, never be fixed, never perfect or complete, never, really, a product to be judged as complete or (worse) owned and sold. It must only (and always) be good enough, capable of change, always in motion. Discourse, when we think it is perfected (and perfection means completion) is a dead thing to the writer, incapable of allowing growth. We must always, for this reason, jackleg our discourse, in the same way we jackleg so many other things in our lives. . . . Other things we can own, even admire; only the jacklegged things can be continually

> present and involved in our being. . . . We may often have despaired of jackleg carpentry, yearning for the well-crafted, the finished, the definitive. We should have known better, or as well: there is no sadness in jackleg carpentry, only wonder.

So it is with the jackleggery of Corder's literary remains: there is no sadness . . . only wonder.