

2 The Realist

The publication of Sorrentino's first novel after he had established himself as a poet—at least in those quarters of the poetry world whose notice would have meant the most to him—perhaps conveys the impression that writing fiction was a kind of literary second thought. Even while Sorrentino continued to write lyric poetry for the remainder of his life, the succession of novels that followed the publication of *The Sky Changes* in 1966 certainly did soon enough foster the perception that he had altered his career course to become primarily a novelist. But a proper appreciation of Sorrentino's whole body of work can be gained only by recognizing that the poetry and the fiction are not divergent practices, that the fiction represents Sorrentino's effort to engage with language for the purpose that also motivates the poet: sounding out the artistic possibilities that can be realized through the imaginative arrangement of words.

The imaginative arrangement of words, of course, results in the achievement of form. For many if not most conventional writers of fiction, "form" corresponds more or less fully to traditional narrative form, with its accompanying elements of "character," "setting," etc. Gilbert Sorrentino, however, is not a conventional writer of fiction, may in fact be the most systematically unconventional writer in all of post-World War II American fiction. Form in Sorrentino's novels is almost always something to be created, not assumed or adopted, and he accomplishes this through an adventurous, uncompromising prose style that fearlessly disregards the presumed restraints of "literary" prose as evidenced in the work of most contemporary novelists, even in the wake of the innovations of modernism. While most novelists (and many readers) continue to presume that the verbal structure of fiction serves primarily to support the construction of narrative—albeit not necessarily limited to its manifestation in a strictly linear plot development, and sometimes partially subordinated to an emphasis on character creation—Sorrentino begins on the assumption that "verbal structure" in fiction is itself a sufficient achievement, existing not to fulfill the preemptory requirements of inherited practices ("storytelling") or to pursue illusory abstractions ("creating "empathy," exploring consciousness) but only to realize its own potential, to seek out that potential when language is allowed to function solely as the source of aesthetic possibility.

Certainly one of the possible aesthetic effects a work of fiction can induce is the semblance of what is broadly called "realism." Familiarity with Sorrentino's most radical work

might strongly suggest that he is a determined anti-realist, but this would be misleading without the proviso that he rejects the simplistic conception of realism as a “window” on reality. If works such as *The Sky Changes* and *Steelwork* (1970) produce their own kind of comprehensive realism, it is a constructed realism, no less a function of the writer’s attention to the arrangements of language as in any of Sorrentino’s even more blatantly artificial fictions following on the publication of *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (1971) his first novel to freely proclaim the artificiality of its own making. Both *The Sky Changes* and *Steelwork* ultimately provide very credible representations of their characters and milieu, but this effect is secondary to their ultimate achievement: making characters and setting not imitations of life but “actual things” in the integrity of their verbal existence.

To say that these books could to some extent be taken as works of realism is not at all to say that they are conventional novels, however. *The Sky Changes* might be variously described as a picaresque narrative, a “road” novel, or just the story of an unhappy marriage, although in each case it complicates expectations of this particular form or mode, if not subverting them altogether. The most familiar type of picaresque narrative, for example, unfolds as an itinerant, episodic journey that, while ostensibly aimless, usually has its culmination in a satisfactory resolution of its protagonist’s dilemma or misfortune. In *The Sky Changes*, Sorrentino’s protagonist, a husband traveling across the country with his wife and the man he suspects is her lover, has a very definite goal in mind—to save his marriage—but the journey’s resolution is an abrupt and unceremonious failure to accomplish this objective, paradoxically leaving the protagonist to truly commence a period wandering in the ruins of both the marriage and his own self-abasement.

Even the framing of the husband’s journey as a linear experience makes the “story” as presented to the reader more sequential than it really is. The novel is composed of episodic fragments, some quite brief, some much longer, but they are not chronologically or geographically continuous. Sections set in the present time of the ongoing car trip generally move forward in serial order—although this primary narrative does occasionally backtrack to a previously occurring episode—but interspersed throughout the journey from Brooklyn to San Francisco are pre-trip vignettes that provide context and help to illuminate the marriage crisis, the final oppressive stage of which the husband is experiencing as he travels across the county.

While the novel depicts the actions performed by all of the actors in the denouement of this marriage, it hues very intensely to the husband's perspective, making it perhaps the only one of Sorrentino's novels that uses strategies of "psychological realism." In this case, the fixed attention maintained on the protagonist's obsessed state of mind is necessary to provide a degree of narrative tension, although when his wife announces almost immediately upon their arrival in San Francisco that she is leaving him, most readers no doubt already realize the extent to which the husband's pursuit has largely been the pursuit of self-deception.

Thus *The Sky Changes* is not ultimately so much a story of a failing marriage as it is the chronicle of the final triumph of the husband's apathy. If when the novel begins it has occurred to the husband "after 7 years, that he doesn't know his wife," he also has enough awareness to realize his trip is a desperate attempt to "break out of that cocoon that he carefully wrapped himself in." But even during the trip he cannot manage to verbalize his discontent or suspicions, much less to confront either his wife or his friend about their presumed betrayal. It is certainly the case that the husband emerges from *The Sky Changes* a convincingly drawn, even "well-rounded" (if frustrating) character, although this is not because Sorrentino has first of all set himself the task of contriving such a character, of presenting a character who "leaps off the page" in the manner toward which Sorrentino later expressed great disdain when discussing what he considered the inanities of mainstream fiction. While the protagonist of *The Sky Changes* is not as deliberately flat or comically exaggerated as many of the characters who appear in Sorrentino's later, anti-realist work, the "depth" in his characterization is a fortuitous effect, the necessary consequence of the novel's formal patterning and stylistic choices.

Sorrentino's prose in *The Sky Changes* combines generally expository passages advancing the narrative of the road trip and more freely floating delineations of the husband's mindset as he contemplates the situation or recalls the past. Even the expository passages are inflected by the character's outlook, however: "The beginnings of corn, but the land not seriously involved, concerned. A monotonous, straight superhighway that goes gently on grades, they never heard of a hill here, and the town, off the superhighway over a blacktop, small patches of corn, horse corn probably, Jacktown so-called." The passages more explicitly inscribing the protagonist's course of thought accumulate in their staccato rhythms and irregular sentence structures, but are more likely to also moderate into figurative expressions: "The Midwest is

made up of police and drive-ins. Pinch-faced car hops. Their whole hearts full of alum, secreted into the blood.” But we also encounter regular interludes that seem neither simply exposition or description nor a version of what Henry James called “central consciousness” narration, but originate outside all of the characters and often comment pointedly on the scene at hand:

. . .The courthouse is surrounded by a plot of grass, then a rail, then old men who stand and talk. The streetlights are old-fashioned, there are two movie houses, there are other things equally ugly, the town festers in a kind of fantastic ugliness, a dream landscape. In the very center of town there is a huge hotel, the windows are boarded up, the doors are ripped from their hinges, inside is a smell of must and rat shit and death that oozes out into the street, and people pass by it on their way to the movies as if it is not there. Perhaps it was built that way, for character.

Considering Sorrentino’s move in just a few years (beginning with *Imaginative Qualities*) to a more radically self-reflexive mode of fiction that does not attempt to conceal the writer’s hand in fashioning the artifice behind it, it is tempting to think of such nearly omniscient interjections—which of course might alternatively still be understood as registering the impress of the protagonist’s perceptions—as the direct intervention of a narrator external to the characters and their milieu—a milieu he is in the process of creating even while expressing these judgments. Ultimately the distance between this covert narrator and the novel’s protagonist is thin enough—enough that these passages could plausibly remain attributable to the character’s state of mind—that it would too substantially distort the novel’s purpose to identify it as a kind of proto-metafiction, “baring the device,” but we could regard the slippage between perspectives and variations of voice in *The Sky Changes* as a sign that Sorrentino, if we want to regard his first novel as still within the boundaries of realism, is a restless realist already impatient with the precepts of “craft” as practiced in postwar literary realism.

Such impatience extends as well to the less conventional variant of realism represented by Kerouac’s *On the Road*. As a “road novel” itself, *The Sky Changes* superficially shares the picaresque mode with Kerouac’s novel, but stylistically and thematically it stands in stark contrast to *On the Road*, almost as if intended to satirize its Beat ebullience and ecstatic lyricism by providing its negative image. If *On the Road* is open-ended and spontaneous, *The Sky Changes* relates a journey with an all-too-fixed destination pursued with little joy. If *On the Road*

(and other of Kerouac's books as well) is about a quest for human fulfillment, *The Sky Changes* shows that quest just as likely to lead to bitter failure and futility, culminating not in self-transcendence but in disillusion and self-hatred. One could say that in this novel Sorrentino proves himself to be a realist in this larger sense of vision or outlook: *The Sky Changes* presents a more accurate account of human motives and behavior than the overly romanticized, even perhaps sentimental, celebration of existential possibility that characterizes a Beat novel such as *On the Road* (and, to a degree, Beat writing in general).

The Sky Changes also shares with *On the Road*, however, its source in what must be presumed to be the author's direct autobiographical experience (in this case the dissolution of Sorrentino's first marriage). While his next novel, *Steelwork*, obviously draws on Sorrentino's experience growing up in the Bay Ridge neighborhood of Brooklyn, *The Sky Changes* is the first and last Sorrentino novel to feature a protagonist so transparently an author surrogate around whose experience a narrative arises, a narrative that is itself the primary source of interest, both thematic and aesthetic. It is not unusual for a writer to produce a generally autobiographical first novel but to afterward turn to subjects and stories less narrowly derived from specific personal experiences. In Sorrentino's case the rejection of author-centered "expression," whether indirectly through the sublimation of narrative or directly through confessional or declamatory verse, is ultimately so radical, especially in his fiction, that it is fair to characterize it as an almost complete repudiation of one of the fundamental assumptions of literature since the Romantic poets—almost complete because Sorrentino does not reject the expressive possibilities of the work itself, the created effects or the work's achieved form, but the idea that literary works exist in fixed forms already prepared to give shape to the writer's symbolic utterance.

Steelwork ultimately provides an intensely realistic depiction of the Brooklyn quarter on which it focuses, a neighborhood whose characters and environment are inspired by Sorrentino's formative experiences in Bay Ridge. However, it would not be exactly accurate to call it a representation or "portrait" of Bay Ridge. Sorrentino does not ask us to read this novel as a metaphorical invocation of the "real" Bay Ridge, a shadow version of the actual place, which then implicitly becomes the true subject, our attention deflected to the representational efficiency with which the novel can transport us there. Instead, consistent with his notion that literature

itself embodies the “real,” that it is not a reflection of reality but its augmentation, Sorrentino offers in *Steelwork* a discrete construction of words manifesting an imagined version of Bay Ridge in the years between the middle 1930s and early 1950s that can claim its own sovereign reality because imagination is real, because Gilbert Sorrentino’s imagination knows the right words to summon it to the page. No doubt inhabitants of the real Bay Ridge in those years would have found Sorrentino’s verbally assembled city to evoke much about the actually existing place that they recognized, but leaving them (or any other readers) with such an impression is far from being his central artistic goal, even if we could say that evoking “place” is the novel’s most immediate concern.

But finally the impression most reinforced by Sorrentino’s fragmented, collage-like narrative structure in *Steelwork* is less of the continuity of place and more the discontinuity of time—a discontinuity that ultimately produces a larger continuity, although the reader must be alert to both the specific context of individual episodes (implicit or made more explicit through telling details) and the broader context these episodes themselves generate. The period encompassing the mid-Depression, World War II, and the immediate postwar years (the time of Gilbert Sorrentino’s youth, but here also marking crucial years of development and change—not just in the neighborhood but in the country as a whole) as manifested in the lives of the inhabitants of Bay Ridge is the novel’s essential subject, although of course Sorrentino does not simply present it to us as an ordinary historical chronicle. Indeed, Sorrentino seems intent on disrupting our expectation of chronological coherence in a work of fiction.

We might take the novel’s title, however, as a sign directing us toward the novel’s alternative form of aesthetic coherence. If *Steelwork* finally does tell a story of sorts, the story of how this Brooklyn neighborhood survived the Depression but did not so readily survive the deprivations brought about by the ostensible recovery—first the war and its often violent alteration of lives and expectations (illustrated in individual vignettes briefly depicting variously specified characters), and then the years between the end of World War II and the Korean War, which are shown to bring greater prosperity but also a difficult adjustment to the new postwar reality—it is a story that is assembled rather than narrated and that in a sense can be discerned as a story at all only in retrospect. Only after the last piece of the structural framework—the discrete sketches with which Sorrentino builds his literary edifice—has been put in place can we

really finally appreciate that the verbal “steelwork” Sorrentino has completed provides an integrated account, even if it is disclosed to us obliquely and is characterized by its strategically employed lacunae and elisions.

If, despite the narrative gaps and deliberate omissions, a rather vivid impression of what mid-century Bay Ridge, Brooklyn must have been like certainly accompanies the experience of reading *Steelwork*, this effect is produced both by the recognizably realistic texture of the book’s individual episodes and the less conventional formal configuration into which these episodes arrange themselves, which offers the more encompassing perspective on the story as a whole. This perspective is a changing one, of course, entailing shifts in both time and space as we accommodate ourselves to the cast of characters (no one of which comes to dominate) and to the alterations the novel’s elastic chronology effects. For this reason, reading *Steelwork* is a dynamic experience, or at least so Gilbert Sorrentino intends it to be. Indeed, however closely the novel approaches a form of representational realism, its ultimate achievement is not the creation through its verisimilitude of an aesthetic “object” to be admired—a vivid rendering of a working-class neighborhood, admirably complete—but the opportunity it affords the reader to imaginatively participate in the process by which Sorrentino forges his alternative mode of representation. In this way, *Steelwork*, although a more conventionally recognizable sort of novel than the truly revolutionary works to follow, could still be taken as a kind of forecast of their more brazen displays of unconcealed artifice.

One feature very visible across all of Sorrentino’s fiction is a clearly disabused outlook on human nature, a consistently foreshortened view of human possibility and social improvement. Bad behavior abounds in Sorrentino’s novels, as characters exhibit cruelty both casual and designed, fail to recognize their own self-interest or prize it above all else, stifle their own best instincts or indulge their worst, allow the coarseness of American cultural influences to deaden their awareness of themselves and the world around them. Most of these failings are on display in various of the characters in *Steelwork*, although in this novel, as well as later, Brooklyn-based books such as *Crystal Vision*, or *Little Casino*, the portrayal of the characters inescapably seems tinged with some lingering sympathy for their plight. These fictional versions of figures from the old neighborhood are no less capable of self-deception and moral blindness than any of the more loathsome characters in Sorrentino’s fiction, but the comic anatomy of their

behavior and its context that Sorrentino performs in *Steelwork* still leaves us feeling it has been carried out in sorrow as much as scorn. It is as if in each of the author's first two novels he has turned the novelist's traditional obligation to observe the world closely and report on it honestly first of all on his own most pressing experience; in *The Sky Changes* this produced a caustic portrayal of his stand-in's failure in marriage, while in *Steelwork*, it results in a portrayal of his native roots that often casts the natives in harsh light but also shows them to be fully human.

In his next novel, Sorrentino would turn his skeptical gaze on his own practice as a writer, and on the fundamental presuppositions of the novel as a literary form.