

I The Poet

There is no question that Gilbert Sorrentino considered himself first of all to be a poet. He began his writing career not just writing but also reviewing and publishing poetry, most prominently in the little magazines he edited, *Neon* and *Kulchur*. While it now seems almost certain that Sorrentino will be remembered primarily as a writer of fiction, certainly that fiction is sufficiently unconditional in its rejection of the traditional core elements of fiction—plot, character, setting, theme—and so unmistakably focused instead on creating alternative formal arrangements of language that it is considerably more than a fancy to say that essentially Sorrentino remained a poet throughout his whole body of work, whose key aesthetic assumptions are recognizably embodied in the poetry as well as the fiction.

This is not to say that we should view Sorrentino's novels as poems writ large. He did not so much turn from writing lyric poetry to writing a form of narrative poetry that he chose to call fiction as apply a poet's sensibility to both forms, although a poet who does not settle for inherited definitions of either poetry or fiction, who takes the poet's responsibility to language and form as a resolution to push both beyond their established limits, to refresh literary language and literary form by always forcing them into new contexts and configurations. If anything, Sorrentino's fiction is even more successful at this, more firmly focused, than the poetry itself. Although his poems are generally quite preoccupied with form (very few of them could be described as in "free verse"), the manipulations of form are usually of a fairly modest sort (stanza type, constraints on or variations in line length, etc.) or occur across poems. (*The Perfect Fiction* is a collection of 52 poems, one for each day of the year, putting it somewhere between a collection of individual poems and a single "long poem.") The novels, on the other hand, are among the most formally adventurous works ever produced by an American writer.

Still, since so much of Sorrentino's later practice as writer of fiction is presaged in one way or another in his early poetry, as well as his critical writing about poetry, it seems only appropriate to begin a critical appreciation of Sorrentino's work by considering how Sorrentino the poet initially evinced aesthetic principles and thematic concerns he would continue to refine throughout his further career as one of the most radically unconventional writers of his time—a time that itself featured more than its share of provocatively unconventional writers (of both fiction and poetry). Although Sorrentino continued writing poetry after he became identified

primarily as a novelist (and arguably wrote some of his best poetry then), it seems pretty clear that his “poetics,” applicable to all forms of serious imaginative writing, developed as part of his initial effort to establish himself as a poet and was most explicitly articulated in the criticism he also wrote while working to realize this ambition.

Sorrentino the poet is frequently described as belonging to all three of the rebellious, countercultural schools of poetry that arose in the 1950s and 1960s, the Beats, the Black Mountain poets, and the New York School. At best, however, Sorrentino’s affinity with the Beats was more cultural than artistic, a shared disaffection from postwar American society and mainstream literary values. His own poems, usually self-enclosed, formally controlled lyrics, do not have much in common with the Whitman-influenced Ginsburg and Corso, although a poet such as Gary Snyder has more in common with Sorrentino in the inspiration they both take from Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, and Amiri Baraka, with whom Sorrentino was closely associated (when Baraka was LeRoi Jones) provided a connection to the Beats, even if he is no longer considered primarily a Beat writer. And while Sorrentino probably does have something in common with the New York poets in their greater allusiveness and indirection (later on, his fiction would also evoke their irony and audaciousness), his poetry, at least at first, is more serious-minded (although certainly not humorless), more straightforwardly earnest in its invocation of recognizably poetic images, themes, and devices.

The character of Sorrentino’s poetry was most significantly affected by the poetics espoused by the Black Mountain group, especially as these poets were themselves profoundly influenced by Williams (clearly Sorrentino’s most important early influence). They are the poets who received the most attention from Sorrentino the critic, and of all his contemporaries he most often lauded Robert Creeley as an influence, not just on his own poetry but on the work of a whole generation of poets: “It becomes even clearer to me that Creeley has been the bridge from Williams to us. . . He has made that work accessible to us, he has made it usable. It is Creeley who has made the forms and structures of Williams’s poems available to us in terms of our own necessities and desires.” We can see the direct influence of Creeley in numerous of the poems in *The Darkness That Surrounds Us*, Sorrentino’s first book, in their use of “breath” (something Creeley took from Charles Olson, the leader of the Black Mountain school) to determine line length and stanza, as in “3 Quatrains”:

When I say, love, it has
a meaning to it, not

a thing, that is an untruth, a
state, certainly,

“it was hot, fishing,”
proclaimed in December

is next to nothing to the
hearer, how can he comprehend

July, yet certainly it
was July, and was hot, as

much as love is when I say
it, hot, that is, but no thing.

Ultimately, however, Creeley was indeed most important to Sorrentino for providing that “bridge” to William Carlos Williams, whose innovative practice, in both poetry and fiction, looms the largest as background to Sorrentino’s own commitment to the aesthetic integrity of literature as he understood it, even if it was Creeley who first adapted Williams’s “forms and structures” to a postwar idiom that a younger poet in the 1950s and early 1960s could appreciate. In Sorrentino’s critical writing, he distinguishes two strands in modern American poetry, one perhaps best exemplified by T.S. Eliot, who encouraged a kind of academic artificiality in the poetry of his followers, which resembled “crossword puzzles and literary anagrams,” while the other was initiated by Williams (helped along, perhaps by Pound), “who grappled with the problems of his own language, its cadences and barbarisms” in a way that created something entirely new in American poetry.

While the effects of Williams’s ear for demotic, idiomatic speech—filtered through the “open field” practices of Olson and his followers—certainly registers in Sorrentino’s poetry, in

fact the influence of Williams's effort to make poetry out of the "cadences and barbarisms" of American English informs all of Sorrentino's writing, fiction and poetry alike. Although the formal adventurousness of the fiction is surely evident to all readers encountering Sorrentino's novels for the first time, what those readers surely notice as well (if more intangibly) is that his prose is equally heterodox. We find none of the usual stylistic gestures we are accustomed to seeing in most "literary fiction," no flourishes of figurative language as the sign of the writer's specious "art." This kind of superficial ornamentation is precisely what William Carlos Williams stripped from his poems (his own fiction as well), and Sorrentino follows Williams in seeking a different kind of relationship with language, one that is paradoxically both more artificial and more "real."

Although Williams is to some extent associated with imagism, Sorrentino maintains that his work actually signaled the death of imagism. Instead in his poems Williams "demonstrated that if one writes the word 'glass' or 'sky' or 'rose,' one has made an 'image.'" Thus in Sorrentino's own poems we find the predominance of this kind of "image," the concrete names rather than the figurative expressions that direct attention away from the poem to the writer's own affectation of "poetic" writing.

In a fantastic light:

blue of hydrangeas, white

and pink. That light

before the evening starts

to come fast. The sweet smell

of rye and grasses, the

sounds of animals from

the barns, red, of course,

the hand up against

light touching the blossom.

Blue. It must be blue, the

other hand falling

away in casual gesture.

Innocent. The fantastic light.

Caught. Stiff. Concrete.

--*The Perfect Fiction*

Sorrentino wants a poetry of “things,” but these things are not the insipid “reflections” of real world things but the distillation of the poet’s imagination, “a manifestation of the poet’s imagination,” as he puts it in “Black Mountaineering,” that “is absolutely real.” The poet does not depict or comment on reality but adds something to it, adds the work of verbal art, which manifests the reality of imagination. The “blue of hydrangeas” exists in the poem, even if the speaker is not sure that it exists in the light glowing as “the evening starts to come fast.” It may be “white and pink” (as may hydrangeas themselves), but those colors as well pigment the poem, as does the red of the barn, even if it is unlikely the poem refers to an actual barn. (The barn itself is there as well, nevertheless.) To reinforce the reality of “blue,” it is named two more times, just after the poet’s hand has attempted to touch it. The blue of hydrangeas is not an abstraction, a quality that might attach to specific objects, but is “concrete,” itself the poetic object around which the poem is formed.

Sorrentino includes in *Something Said*, the collection of his critical writings published in 1984, more discussions of Williams than any other writer, but perhaps his most revealing commentary concerns Williams’s fiction. Williams was in fact a rather prolific writer of fiction, both novels and short stories, and Sorrentino sees a close connection between Williams’s practice as poet and as novelist in that he continues in the fiction to be dedicated to incorporating the “real,” which Sorrentino reads as a rejection of depth:

It was the long period of trial and error in the composition of his verse that brought to Williams his prose style, style that . . . defies mining; i.e., there is *nothing* beneath the surface of the words. Williams specifically applied himself to the composition of a prose that functions only as paint functions in a canvas. A conventional narrative is also avoided, so that one has not even a progression of events to deal with; there are no climaxes, no denouement, no tragedy. . . .

In Williams's fiction, this emphasis on "surface" results not in the sort of traditional realism in which "story" reinforces attempted verisimilitude to communicate a larger theme about ordinary life but the poetic equivalent of ordinary life, a text that can be read but not interpreted because "the signals are missing." Like life, fiction such as Williams's "Strecher trilogy," according to Sorrentino, doesn't *mean* something; it simply *is*. It presents itself as an experience, not the opportunity to communicate something. It embodies American life in its very prose, a radical kind of realism indeed.

Except that ultimately it isn't exactly realism at all. Sorrentino reads Williams's fiction as pure imagination, literary compositions that begin in "life"—where else would they begin?—but that transforms lived experience into ordered language, in Williams's case ordered through the systematic absence of affect ("the signals are missing") and deliberate deflections of the reader's normal expectations of how a story will proceed. This strategy doesn't so much mimic reality as reproduce its aimless drift through a kind of prose that manages to be artful in the way it simulates that drift. The realism provided in most fiction putatively dedicated to it leaves us merely with a "pseudo-reality," content to be merely "accurate." Williams is a writer "whose imagination comprises. . . those facets of reality that bring what we do not know—or do not wish to know—about ourselves into the light."

The influence of William Carlos Williams on Sorrentino's work will be most profound in the way both his fiction and his poetry affirm the integrity of the language in which they are composed. Although to an extent Sorrentino shares Williams's determination to avoid "literary language" in favor of a more vernacular American English, in his later fiction he abandoned Williams's goal of employing it to create a more radical kind of realism. If Sorrentino still seeks to create arrangements of language that are themselves unavoidably "real," in his fiction after *The Sky Changes* and perhaps *Steelwork*, it is the arrangements that are real, as they break down form and then remake it, asking the reader to be most attentive to the words themselves (the "images" made by the words), as well as the verbal patterns and devices that work to produce the alternative formal structures. Sorrentino's fiction certainly can be read through the clarifying lens provided by his most important influences, but it, arguably more than the poetry itself, can't be reduced merely to the sum of those influences. As a poet, Sorrentino brought a more craft-like approach to a mode of midcentury poetry that as a whole could be called innovative and

audacious. As a writer of fiction, Sorrentino's work is, if not literally without precedent, as close to entirely original as any body of work in all of American literature.

We can perhaps get a provisional but more focused appreciation of the nature of Sorrentino's achievement as a poet by considering more closely one of his poems, in this case "Empty Rooms" from his second collection, *Black and White*. The reasons for choosing this poem will no doubt become obvious enough, as it both illustrates Sorrentino's typical poetic strategies and reveals his core aesthetic principles.

EMPTY ROOMS

the constant is vision

--Olson

What we see is really there,
whether it be there
or not, or a heaped image
of the mind, the focus brings it

to reality, we see. Then
what is the shape of love?
Or what is its color? Is it really there,
to be conquered, to be maintained
in a shudder of exertion? What eyes

does it look from into ours, does
it exist

in the place it has lately been?

It leaves
a skinny, bewildered
perfume, that is its

terror, that and the
fact
of the odor, the pitiful

sound of old laughter

We are cursed

in the need to stare
at it, break it open to
reality, turn the shifting
and hapless thing that it is

into a picture of some old
emotion: a beach, a fire, hot
summer nights, what

was the name of the person we
talked with? And the curse is squared

as we invent, make real, it is
real, we will it so.

This poem is very attentive to form, although it is not in one of the fixed forms traditionally associated with lyric poetry. It seems very much aligned with the “projectivist verse” advocated by Charles Olson (whose admonition to a holistic “vision” serves as the poem’s epigraph). At first glance, the poem might be described as “free verse,” except what may seem an irregular structure is actually organized through measuring the length of line as a unit of thought, or what Olson called “breath,” a line or phrase that might be as “musical” or as “lyrical” as traditional verse but is not a lyricism enforced by the demands of orthodox “closed form” prosody. That this leads to lines that are of conventional length, that are much truncated (one or two words), or that contain conspicuous caesuras (lines 11-12, and 19-20, most obviously) does

not mean the poem observes no particular formal procedure: each expression receives the emphasis it requires, complete in itself, to achieve its intended effect. The poem's form thus becomes the reflection of its content, or, as Sorrentino himself put it in an essay on Olson, "it takes the shape that the thought of the poem demands."

Like many of Sorrentino's poems, especially those written early in his career when he considered himself most exclusively a poet, "Empty Rooms" is a poem characterized by its "thought." Obviously it could be considered a kind of love poem, but as such it actually represents a significant tendency in Sorrentino's poetry. Indeed, a number of the poems in *Black and White* could be characterized as love poems, albeit love filtered through Sorrentino's withering and always clear-eyed appraisal of its burdens and its fragile endurance:

. . .the boundaries
of love are unknown, they are what
we wish to make of them, see, they
run to the edge of the windows
and fall out, splintered, each

fragment holding love and suddenly
lost in the enormous sun that covers
the brilliant world it dreams.

--"What I Mean Is"

"Empty Rooms" is not so much a love poem per se, however, as it is a meditation on our efforts to make an abstraction concrete, to "see" love as a reality: "We are cursed/in the need to stare/at it, break it open to/reality. . . ." Even if "reality" in this case begins as a "heaped image of the mind," our "focus" in effect makes the image real. Inevitably it becomes tangible through connection to sensory details, details of sight ("what is its color?"), smell ("a skinny, bewildered perfume") and sound ("the pitiful sound of old laughter"). But "the curse is squared/as we invent, make real." Finally, then, this is an assertion of the power of a poem to "make real." Poetry provides that "focus" that allows the poet to invoke color and scent as the imagination makes these real—"we invent"—through the materiality of the poet's words.

In “Empty Rooms” Sorrentino’s language is occasionally “poetic” in its use of figurative expressions, but these expressions are not attempts to conjure the kinds of arresting (and often isolated) images that are frequently offered up as “fine writing” in much American poetry. In Sorrentino’s poems these tropes are not its primary interest, the poetry that the poem supports, so to speak, but are themselves in support of the cumulative image the poem as a whole manifests as a completed utterance. If “love” is ultimately an abstraction that becomes “real” through its association with palpable sensory experience, the poem makes it concrete as the poet reimagines it in the exactitude of his language.

Such exactitude—a due regard for words as the source of the writer’s art—characterizes all of Sorrentino’s poetry, which does not convey the impression of loosely organized speech or offhand jokiness, although his poems can often be very funny indeed. Thus while Sorrentino’s poetry exhibits a more controlled approach to form, including occasional resort to traditional forms such as the sonnet, than some other poets of his generation, it is his attention to the specific effects of language, his strategic disposition of words within the poem’s verbal structure, that most defines Sorrentino’s poetic sensibility. Perhaps an especially visible example of such an approach can be found in *The Orangery* (1978), which uses it not just as a method of fashioning individual poems but as the informing principle uniting all of the poems included in this volume.

The Orangery is a collection of sonnets—or at least of predominantly 14-line poems (in some cases longer but in multiples of 14), since the poems are structured in vast array of stanzaic forms, line lengths, and other particular devices—each of which employs the word “orange” at least one time. Ultimately the word appears in all of its significations—color, fruit (also orangeade and orange ice), tree, blossom, place name, and in some cases turned into conceits (“sunny orange sound,” “orange love,” “oranged”). In addition to enacting a multitude of specific instances of “orange,” the poems are almost inevitably saturated with it and other colors, the complements and contrasts of orange, although of course it is the word itself, its repetition, that forces the impression. As shades and variations of orange give individual poems their immediate verbal hue, ultimately as well the poems as a whole are pervaded by a kind of impalpable coloration—as if the poems could internally materialize the image—that indeed transforms them collectively into a poetically invoked “orangery.”

Sorrentino's fiction is even more resolutely dedicated to the principle that a literary work is something that is made, a construction of language, not a discursive form meant to "communicate" or "reflect" an externally perceived reality. If anything, he observes this principle even more radically: where his poetry could be described as an adaptation of an existing mode or method of midcentury American poetry, however purposeful and adroit, the novels are really like nothing that came before them in the way they replace the direct representation of presumed reality with a devised reality of their own—not as a fantasy or illusion, but a quite corporeal reality their singular orderings of language produce. The underlying beliefs about the nature of language as an aesthetic medium are those Sorrentino developed as a poet, but it turned out that for these beliefs to be most abundantly realized, he would need to focus his efforts on fiction instead.