

## Gilbert Sorrentino: An Introduction

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### 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.

## 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.

### III The Metafictionist

#### “Of and For Itself”: *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*

*Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* marks a clear turn in Sorrentino’s conception both of the formal requirements of a novel—of fiction in general—and of the specific imperatives implied by his own aesthetic inclinations as a writer. Indeed, while this turn is obvious enough to anyone considering Sorrentino’s career in retrospect, it must have been apparent to Sorrentino, even if he did not begin writing this successor to *Steelwork* having explicitly determined to make it. Although the move from Sorrentino’s first two novels to *Imaginative Qualities* could be characterized as the final abandonment of literary realism, the alternative he embraced is even more sweeping. If both *The Sky Changes* and *Steelwork* retained a loose allegiance to realism (the latter even more tenuously), neither novel cast its realism in conventional narrative form. *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* takes its divergence from conventional form to the point that realism becomes simply extraneous.

Before looking more closely at the way in which this radical strategy is carried out in the novel, it is necessary first to consider Sorrentino’s work as a critic prior to writing *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*. Anyone who has read *Something Said*, the 1984 collection of Sorrentino’s reviews and critical essays, knows that he was a very opinionated critic with definite aesthetic preferences and quite willing to pronounce sentence on writers he judged to be guilty of offences against literary art—although in fact most of the writers who receive extended treatment in *Something Said* are those he admires and who give him the opportunity to extol their achievement, but also to delineate the aesthetic principles he wishes to highlight and uphold. Not surprisingly, these are the same principles we find at work in Sorrentino’s own poetry, and ultimately his fiction as well: that the literary work is something made with words, the interplay of language and form producing works of verbal art that is an addition to reality, not its shadow or “reflection”; that the writer does not endeavor to “say something” (an effort that almost always dispenses with art entirely), but in attending to the writing itself, allows the work finally itself to offer the impression of “something said.”

Sorrentino articulated the fundamental principle of his own philosophy of composition in a later 1981 review of a new translation of Raymond Queneau (framing it here as a “heresy”): “form determines content.” As Sorrentino became more and more identified as a novelist, so too

did he switch focus as a critic to reviews of fiction (although he was less active as a critic than he had been in his earlier days when his priority as a reviewer clearly was contemporary poetry). Many of Sorrentino's fiction reviews examine writers he admired—John Hawkes, William Gaddis, Italo Calvino—although he also offered witheringly negative reviews of some he clearly did not—Updike, John Gardner, the latter being a target of one of the most cuttingly critical reviews since Mark Twain took on James Fenimore Cooper—but in both cases he appraises the writers and works under consideration much as he had done with the poets and poems he surveyed at the outset of his career, according to how artfully they integrate style and form. Sorrentino observes of Gaddis's *JR* that it

does not work on the level of meager naturalism but supposes a world that exists of and for itself and in which all the characters are rigidly predestined to play out their roles. It is a claustrophobic world that works within itself, like a syllogism. The author insists on a closed system: that this system plunges, with maniacal precision, toward denouement *within* that greater system that we may label the “real world” makes it no less a creation of supreme effectiveness and fictional truth.

The formal structure of *JR* is reinforced through Gaddis's strategy of presenting the underlying narrative almost entirely through dialogue, which “is not the product of the tape recorder” but “the carefully selected and shaped materials that reveal each character as definitely as physical description.” Gaddis in effect disappears, not behind the characters, but behind the language (the “shaped materials”) that Gaddis has fashioned to be the characters, focusing all attention to “the surfaces of things—what is really there, what people really appear to be to each other and to eavesdroppers (like the reader).” Gaddis provides us a “clean surface” of “real” language (real because impeccably imagined), dispensing completely with the “tawdry and banal ‘psychological’ probing and the ‘hidden motivations’ of characters” that so much mediocre literary fiction features. The primary accomplishment of *JR*, for which Sorrentino concludes it is “a brilliant work—a great novel,” is the way in which it seamlessly unifies style and form, so that each seems a necessary effect of the other.

In accentuating the importance of form, Sorrentino does not demand that all works of fiction create unconventional forms. In “Ross McDonald: Some Remarks on the Limitations of Form,” Sorrentino avers that McDonald “nowhere surpassed or transcended the limitations of the

form in which he chose to work. He worked brilliantly *within* the rigors of the form. That is his strength and valor as a writer.” Sorrentino sees McDonald’s career as a progressive working-out of the possibilities of his chosen form, arriving at a point where his mastery of it is so thorough that he could invoke “the understructure of complex form” almost intuitively, making the most recognizable conventions (including stylistic) of the detective novel effectively superfluous. Like Gaddis, McDonald’s fundamental concern was the aesthetic integrity of created form.

With *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*, Sorrentino’s conviction that fiction is first of all the creation of effectual form decisively becomes the animating assumption of his novels. This novel marks the moment in Gilbert Sorrentino’s career when, despite its conspicuous lack of commercial success, he would be known primarily as a novelist, and a rather notorious one, who could be expected to flaunt novelist conventions, producing “novels” that in some cases departed so completely from those conventions that it might be questionable to even call them novels (at least according to Sorrentino’s harsher critics—and in some cases potential publishers as well). In some ways he became the epitome of the “postmodern” experimental writer—although unfortunately his work was often simply ignored by editors and reviewers as beyond the interest of their “ordinary readers,” perhaps even more resolutely than most writers who became tagged with the “postmodern” label.

Still, readers would not exactly be misguided if their perception of *Imaginative Qualities* led them to wonder in what way the book could comfortably be identified as a novel (especially readers in 1970). In this case, a puzzled reader might insist that it is not so much that this work assumes an unfamiliar or unusual form but that it is formless—no story is told, and while “characters” are ostensibly introduced, they are present mostly as the object of the narrator’s scorn and derision, a narrator who seems to call attention to himself as the main character, although at the same time he is not a character at all and seems more or less identical with the author. There is some continuity among the eight sections of the book, as characters featured in previous sections continue to be mentioned, but what finally unites them all is simply the narrator’s direct discourse, freely acknowledging he has invented both the characters and their actions, encouraging the reader to consider both as artificial excuses for the narrator’s self-reflexive commentary.

To be sure, *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* is not formless, although Sorrentino certainly wants to disrupt the facile equation, “novel = narrative.” Perhaps the dubious reader might inquire, “if a novel isn’t a narrative, then what is it?”, but this is in fact precisely the question Sorrentino wants to raise in the mind of such a reader, as if the first step in providing alternative forms needs to be the suspension of all formal expectations, an implicit acknowledgment that a work of fiction may create its own version of literary form, the principles of which may need to be discovered during the course of reading. This challenge to conventional reading habits would characterize all of Sorrentino’s subsequent books, but a work like *Imaginative Qualities* also participates in a phenomenon that a number of other adventurous writers from this transformative period in American fiction also helped to advance. “Metafiction” was the term coined by William Gass (just a year before the publication of *Imaginative Qualities*) to describe a practice then becoming increasingly common among American writers who later were also called postmodernists (John Barth, Robert Coover, Gass himself). *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*, beyond its role in the development of Gilbert Sorrentino’s career, also occupies a central place in the rise to prominence of metafiction as arguably the most consequential literary manifestation of the general cultural ferment of the 1960s.

While *Imaginative Qualities* cannot be claimed as the first important work of American metafiction (it was preceded most notably by Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* and Coover’s *The Universal Baseball Association*), it could be called the first to develop at the full length of a novel the kind of directly self-reflexive approach found in some of the stories in *Lost in the Funhouse* or in Gass’s *Willie Master’s Lonesome Wife*, in which the artificiality of the text is blatantly announced. (This is not to say that such a gesture was wholly unique to this group of writers, as it can be seen at work in literary history at least as far back as *Tristram Shandy*.) Where Coover’s novel could be regarded as an allegorical metafiction (whereby its narrative can be read on a figurative level as a story *about* literary creation), Sorrentino brings literary creation to the foreground as its narrator confesses it as the act in which he is himself engaged, even as he also creates characters and discusses their behavior in the world he is simultaneously inventing. Barth also called direct attention to the act of fiction-making in some of the stories in *Lost in the Funhouse*, but on a smaller scale and in a book that exercises other literary strategies as well. *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* is an extended experiment in “baring the device.”

“I’m going to make up, based on my experience (plus inventions and lies) an early rendezvous between Lou and Sheila,” writes the narrator in the novel’s second section, “Brooklyn-Paterson Local.” This the narrator proceeds to do, with appropriately “telling details” about these characters: “He’s humming ‘I Think I’m Going Out of My Head.’ Sheila is waiting for him in the apartment of a girl friend whose parents are away in Florida—friend on a date and wouldn’t be home until about three o’clock in the morning. Dream of youth.” (As if simply providing us the song title (a fashionable pop song of the time) leaves too much unexplained, the narrator also offers a supplementary footnote: “I first heard the tune at a party in the Dakota. The rich bastard ran out of ice. I hate the rich—perhaps I lie when I say he ran out of ice.”) Sorrentino does not abandon characterization, scene-setting, dialogue, or, finally, narrative, but when these more traditional elements of fiction are present (however fleetingly), we are always made aware that they are the product of the narrator’s imagination, that we should not consider the characters as “real people” except in that they are the “real” manifestations of the exercise of literary imagination.

Sorrentino frequently expressed his dim view of the notion that fictional characters might “walk off the page,” escaping their actual existence as patterns of words on the page and becoming “real” in the reader’s mind. Indeed, this is often cited as something like a critical standard of sorts for judging a writer’s ability to create “three-dimensional” characters, itself considered one of the necessary talents of the novelist (along with “telling a story.”) All of the narrator’s efforts in *Imaginative Qualities* are designed to remind the reader that, on the contrary, in this novel the characters must remain on the page, as we are witnesses to the process by which they are affixed there. This does not exactly reduce the characters to “puppets on a string” being pulled by the author—although if it does, the effect is not so much to undermine the credibility of the characters as to heighten our awareness of the fact that fictional characters are always the product of the writer’s manipulation, even when the manipulation is in the name of greater “authenticity,” which is, of course, an illusion.

If Sorrentino does not seek to liberate his characters from the prison-house of language, that does not mean the characters in *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* do not engage our interest. They are actually quite memorable, although for reasons that might at first seem to be in conflict with Sorrentino’s disdain for fiction that “says something.” All of the characters are

people with whom the narrator professes to be acquainted (too closely, perhaps). They are all “creative” types, writers and artists, and they are all finally failures as what they do. One could call the novel a satire of the artistic pretensions endemic to the New York cultural scene, except that there is little indication in the various character portraits that the flaws on display—both personal and artistic—are of the sort that might be subject to revision or amelioration, traditionally the ultimate goal of literary satire. At times it can seem that the narrator has utter contempt for the characters, as in this comment about “Anton Harley”:

One of my great problems with Anton Harley is that I can’t make up enough terrible stories about him to make him totally unreal, absolutely fleshless and one-dimensional, lifeless, as my other characters are. I’m afraid that the reader may get the idea that some monster like this actually walks the earth.

Ultimately, however, what bothers the narrator most about such characters as Anton is not that he behaves badly (although he does), but that their interest in the art they pretend to care about is so clearly counterfeit. About “Lou Henry,” a poet, the narrator remarks: “Lou was one of those men who confused passing happiness or misery with the sources of art. The world is full of them. When one disaster is over, they turn to another. . . They think their rage and impotence will make the poem.” Lou likes being a poet, fancies that his dedication to the vocation is genuine, but his understanding of where the true sources of art lie is hopelessly superficial. Other characters, such as Lou’s wife, Sheila, enjoy living the life of the bohemian artist (or think they do), but simply have no clue what it really takes to create art. The succession of abject figures invoked by the narrator of *Imaginative Qualities* is not used to ridicule these figures for their moral deficiencies, but they are instead mocked for their offences against poetry or painting (although the narrator may seem to value these with a kind of moral fervor), so that the novel might be taken as an anatomy of the requisites of art, using the cast of characters and their attitudes and actions as cautionary tales of a sort, not a satire of social and cultural practices.

In a chapter on *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* in his book *Satirizing Modernism* (Bloomsbury, 2017), Emmett Stinson argues that Sorrentino’s approach does indeed qualify as satire, although it is not of the regenerative sort usually associated with literary satire, at least until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and still characteristic of most popular satire. According to Stinson, *Imaginative Qualities* should be regarded as an example of what he calls “avant-garde satires of

the avant-garde,” works that satirize “avant-garde” art, as well as the cultural milieu in which such art arises. But, since these are works that themselves can be described as avant-garde—in literature, describing an emphasis on formal and stylistic heterodoxy and experiment—their mockery can’t really be directed at themselves or they would censure themselves out of existence, their authority to satirize in the first place lost. Thus Stinson argues that a writer like Sorrentino instead creates a different kind of satire, so that in *Imaginative Qualities* “its undermining of its own authority and its articulation of a notion of art as radically separate from life forms the means by which it can claim to reconfigure, critically and imaginatively, the relationship between fiction and the actual.”

Stinson’s analysis of the qualities shared by these satires of the avant-garde (which also include Wyndham Lewis’s *The Apes of God*, Gaddis’s *The Recognitions*, and Evan Dara’s *The Easy Chain*) is meticulous and frequently illuminating, but while I might agree that in, say, Gaddis’s case, *The Recognitions* manages to elude its own satiric gestures and preserve a kind of modernist autonomy (and therefore might become something other than satire), I would maintain that in *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*, the satire actually does mock its own existence. If the narrator of *Imaginative Qualities* consistently speaks disdainfully of his own characters, we should not fail to notice that just as often he casts scorn upon himself, inviting us to find “Gilbert Sorrentino” a rather obnoxious fellow indeed.

In the chapter devoted to Lou Henry, that narrator imagines a future meeting with Lou at Max’s Kansas City (“or some other brothel of success”) in which Lou shows him a new poem. “Sitting among the aroma of lobster and the dimwitted conversation of up-and-coming molders of stainless steel and styrofoam,” the narrator muses, “I’ll suddenly realize that I am a middle-aged and unsuccessful writer. Lou will know this and so talk to me as if he is my peer. An oaf.” While the narrator continues to express his usual dismissive attitude, toward both Lou and their surroundings (“dimwitted conversations”), he also, and not for the only time in the novel, draws attention to his own lack of success, his own marginality in the artistic/literary world he is examining. Perhaps the prevailing tone is petulant rather than self-critical, a move to provoke some degree of sympathy for the narrator’s plight. But this makes the narrator seem pathetic at least as much as it might confirm the narrator’s grievance: that he would need to establish his superiority—the superiority of his art—in the presence of a character he has himself invented is

palpably absurd, as is the more general idea that a writer would create a whole cast of characters primarily to assert his own preeminence over them.

The humor in *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*—and a full appreciation of the novel must finally acknowledge it is a very funny book—comes from way Sorrentino exploits this absurdity, on the one hand maintaining the censorious tone the narrator can't seem to help himself from taking, and on the other making the expression of such contempt risible in its excess. Some of the characters in the book are no doubt in part based on people with whom Sorrentino was acquainted (reportedly several of them claimed to recognize themselves in Sorrentino's caricatures), but finally *Imaginative Qualities* is not about literary or artistic personalities, but about art. It is the attitudes about art, and the way these attitudes are manifested in the art (especially the poetry) created by—perhaps in some cases not created by—the characters portrayed that the narrator abhors. However much the characters are ridiculed for their jejune and opportunistic behavior, it is their failure to understand the real requirements of art, their willingness to pose and posture as artists and poets, that is the true target of the narrator's ire.

That the narrator believes he does know true demands of art is certainly the case, but his willingness to display his own arrogance is equally obvious, and if he wants us to regard him as real artist, the “novel” he is ostensibly composing assuredly does not seem to demonstrate his skills in writing a proper one. And indeed, he is deliberately trying to resist doing so. If we could say that *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* comically undermines the assumption that a novelist creates well-rounded, objectively conceived characters with a “life of their own,” this is not the only traditional element of fiction that Sorrentino travesties. The notion that a novel offers a plot is of course most directly abandoned. While there is overlap among the characters and actions across the eight sections of the book, no linear narrative ever emerges. (Sorrentino's rejection of a unifying “story” in all of his fiction after *The Sky Changes* is perhaps the most radical such rejection among all of the notable postmodern writers.) It would not be accurate even to call these sections episodes or scenes, since the narrator ranges freely in chronology and circumstance, at times giving us the impression that he is randomly recording his thoughts about the characters as they occur to him. And while the novel is loosely set in the bohemian New

York art scene, little effort is given to providing us with “vivid” descriptions of this setting beyond its common influence on each of the characters depicted.

Thus at least as much as the novel satirizes this bohemian enclave and its failures of ambition and purpose, we could say that it indeed satirizes itself (or comes as close to this as it is possible for a literary work to do without simply negating itself). *Imaginative Qualities* embodies what the Russian theorist M.M. Bakhtin called “absolute comedy,” a comedy dedicated to taking nothing seriously, to applying a “radical skepticism” to everything it considers. For such comedy to maintain the integrity of this ambition, it must also refuse to take its own expression (in whatever form) as anything other than itself vulnerable to the same skepticism, the source of its expression just as subject to possible mockery as the ostensibly targeted subject. The qualities imagined in *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* are thoroughgoingly comic: The “autonomous” space created by Sorrentino’s comedic art is one in which the satiric mockery—if we wish to continue calling it satire—is directed at the novel’s own aesthetic order, rather than the “actual things” to be found outside the novel’s transfiguring of them. It is a comedy of the “closed system.”

This sort of radical, absolute comedy is certainly not a new development in literary history. (Bakhtin himself cites examples going back to Rabelais), but it is the kind of comedy characterizing much American postmodern fiction, and it will be the approach Sorrentino takes (with modifications and variations) in the fiction to follow on his initial use of the strategy *in Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*. In this novel, he employs the strategy arguably more insistently than any previous postmodern novels did (than even Pynchon, for example), but in *Mulligan Stew* he will even more comprehensively take the iconoclastic impulse of metafiction and direct it toward creating the most all-encompassing kind of subversive humor.

## 2) "Walking Around Inside": *Mulligan Stew*

In many ways, the publication of a novel like *Mulligan Stew* in 1979 should not have seemed especially startling. Not only had it been preceded by Sorrentino's own *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*, perhaps the most radical work of postmodern metafiction to have yet appeared, but the entire period in American fiction from the early 1960s to the late 70s was notable for the number of writers employing a kind of iconoclastic, "carnavalesque" comedy--the term used by Bakhtin to describe a spirit of comedic abandon that subjects everything in its purview to parody and mockery. The black humor of Heller and Vonnegut explicitly adopts this attitude, while the equally mordant if less readily categorizable comedy of writers such as Stanley Elkin or Thomas Pynchon participate in this spirit as well. Although not indulging in quite the sort of outrageous self-parody characterizing *Mulligan Stew*, novels like William Gaddis's *JR*, Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, and John Barth's *Letters* nevertheless were equally ambitious, comedically extravagant novels published in the mid and late 1970s (*Letters* the same year as *Mulligan Stew*).

Yet *Mulligan Stew* clearly exceeds even these works in its formal antics and metafictional burlesque. Indeed, so extreme is its rejection of even the vestiges of linear coherence and unitary storytelling remaining in *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* that the novel itself famously begins with a series of rejection letters (invented by Sorrentino but generally corresponding to editorial reactions the manuscript of *Mulligan Stew* actually received from publishers) turning down the novel because of its obvious failures to observe novel-writing proprieties. One editor, "Alan Hobson," observes: "The book is far too long and exhausts one's patience. Its various worlds seem to us to lack the breadth and depth and width as well to sustain so many pages." According to "Horace Rosette,"

Not the least compelling aspect of this book is that it has, far beneath the tortured story told by the author. . . a dry, subtle, and deliberate humor, a humor so fragile and evanescent that one reads it while almost literally holding one's breath that too gross an appreciation of it should make it scatter to the black winds that sweep and roar through the "fiction." For some reason, I kept thinking of the question that Dickens had his old mad gentleman pose in *Nicholas Nickleby*: "The young prince of China. Is he reconciled

to his father-in-law, the great potato salesman?" Sorrentino's gentle humor is of the same tenor as this angst-laden query.

Beyond the non-sequiturs offered by Mr. Rosette in this passage, his most egregious misreading of *Mulligan Stew* is his perception of its "gentle humor." The humor in this novel is far from gentle, is in fact of the most thorough and caustic kind, although it is directed less at the publishing machinery satirized in the preface (which turns out to be a kind of satiric collateral damage, representing the kind of incomprehension of his novel Sorrentino surely expected to encounter) and more at the generic and aesthetic assumptions that are thought to govern the writing of novels. Those generic assumptions include both those associated with "experimental" fiction and those that make a work of prose even recognizable as a novel. In undermining its own pretensions (as represented by the novels' protagonist, Antony Lamont, an experimental novelist who takes himself very seriously indeed), *Mulligan Stew* as well potentially undermines the whole enterprise of novel-writing. Indeed, its profound questioning of all of the fundamental conventions of fiction as a literary form can ultimately be credible only if the avant-garde or experimental novel, the form in which *Mulligan Stew* ostensibly presents itself, is also subject to the same questioning.

Few literary works exhibit the degree of "radical skepticism" described by Bakhtin as comprehensively as *Mulligan Stew*. The novel portrays Lamont as a hopelessly inept writer who nevertheless fancies himself on the cutting-edge. Excerpts from his previous novels--he is in the process of writing a new novel in the present time--show him to be a writer of very pedestrian and finally very conventional tastes who wishes to be taken as an original. These excerpts are among many other documents that proliferate throughout the novel: passages from Lamont's work-in-progress, from his journal and scrapbook, letters, magazine ads, as well as the most outrageous of the novel's devices, a journal kept by one of Lamont's characters, Martin Halpin (himself stolen from *Finnegans Wake*). Within this journal, still more "documents" are introduced, including a 40-page "masque," whose characters include Susan B. Anthony, the Marquis de Sade, and James Joyce himself. The "story" of *Mulligan Stew* chronicles Lamont's disintegration, both professional and personal, through a combination of egregious bad luck and his own poor decisions; the nadir is reached when the second of his novel's characters, Ned

Beaumont (stolen from a Dashiell Hammett novel) simply walks away from the book, followed shortly thereafter by Martin Halpin.

The collapse of Lamont's life and career is more than the story's "content," however. In a very real sense, *Mulligan Stew* itself is "about" its own disintegration. What begins as a stock situation of self-reflexive fiction, a writer writing a novel, becomes a comic anatomy of that situation, a travesty of the kind of superficial experimentation to which this situation often leads. Of all the major metafictional works by American writers, *Mulligan Stew* could most literally be called a "deconstructed" text. Not only does the book question all of the assumptions about the novel to which most readers are accustomed, but it refuses to substitute the assumptions commonly associated with the avant-garde. *Mulligan Stew* almost seems to have no stable structure at all. It falls apart before the reader's eyes.

But finally this impression is a result of Sorrentino's carefully created *illusion*, an illusion based primarily on the removal of all signs of authorial and narrative presence. As Sorrentino described it in an interview with John O'Brien, "there was a conscious attempt to refrain from using a narrator who could allow us to look at the characters from the outside, to look at the situation, to look at the movement of lack of movement in the book in terms of Lamont and his hopeless life. The book is sealed. The book is artificial and is meant to be artificial." Unlike Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* or Robert Coover's "The Magic Poker," *Mulligan Stew* does not reflect back on the manipulating author; as Sorrentino says, all vestiges of such an author have been deliberately erased. The novel provides no rhetorical anchor, not even the disclosed narrator of Barth and Coover's stories. But, again, the apparent lack of such a presence is an illusion. *Mulligan Stew* is not a work of random chaos, but of controlled and, as Sorrentino admits, intentional chaos.

Sorrentino says further of the design of his novel and its probable effect on the reader that

A narrator who exists outside of written documents would have given the reader a way of getting a handle on the book, but I didn't want the reader to be able to get a handle outside the terms of the book itself. If you want to understand this book, you have to be able to walk around inside of it and understand it in the sense that one understands the real world: that is, you're in it, and whatever data and phenomenon impinge upon you, you understand them insofar as you are able to.

In evoking a world the reader can "walk around inside," Sorrentino brings to perhaps its purest fruition his conception of the literary text as "real" in its linguistic artifice, standing autonomously as an addition to reality, not its reflection. The reader must indeed essentially leave the real world outside the text behind, not to indulge in fantasy or make-believe (Sorrentino is not a fabulist), but to "walk around" in language, or, more precisely, to closely register not the "action" or the "content" offered but the multitude of language effects the novel produces.

The biggest inspiration *Mulligan Stew* takes from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (and Sorrentino freely acknowledges the influence) can be found in its multifarious styles and modes, incorporating, simulating, and parodying many different kinds of writing. Although it might initially be categorized as a kind of epistolary novel, its title more adequately evokes its basic structural trope. Lamont himself is a literary chameleon of sorts, albeit an unwitting one. The first few chapters of *Guinea Red*, Lamont's novel-in-progress, are first-person accounts, in the style of a crime novel or detective story, of the murder of Ned Beaumont--except that the narrator, Halpin, believes he might be the murderer:

You must believe me when I tell that I honestly don't know if I killed Ned Beaumont or not. I know that he lies on the floor in the den, his face contorted in rage, that rage that had become so much a part of his life when he was among the quick. I "know" that he has been shot. I know that I still feel deeply for him, for the remarkable partnership that he and I had for so many years. But I don't know whether or not I shot him. But was he shot.

Halpin's loopy tone, combined with Lamont's hopeless "comic" touches and inept attempts at suspense, often produce genuine, if unintended (by Lamont) humor, humor that mocks Lamont's incompetence but also unavoidably mocks the very endeavor in which *Mulligan Stew* itself participates--if Antony Lamont is quite obviously a terrible experimental writer, it is to say the least far from clear what "correct" practice could instead be presumed from the novel's gleeful heterogeneity.

Indeed, it seems to me that Sorrentino would quite readily agree with the criticisms of *Mulligan Stew* made by M. Keith Booker in his book, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature* ("The Dynamics of Literary Transgression in Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*"), all of which point to flaws in the novel that impede its ability to fulfill a traditional satirical function

(which for Booker is always specifically political). With its borrowed characters (from Flann O'Brien's *At-Swim-Two-Birds*), the novel is too artificial to disrupt the reader's sense of reality, to "question his/her own identity." The characters "are mainly linguistic constructs" who are "hopelessly intertwined in the linguistic texture of the book." "It is simply too easy to recuperate Sorrentino's characters as amusing artifacts of textual play," writes Booker, "his characterization is not troubling and therefore not ultimately subversive," since the most immediate response to the characters and their machinations is simply to laugh.

It is hard to imagine Sorrentino taking exception to any of this. *Mulligan Stew* does not seek to provoke the reader to question his/her identity; it wants the reader to reject comparisons with a reality external to the text and to instead affirm the aesthetic reality of the work itself. It wants to be taken precisely as a linguistic construct, textual play that is the novel's addition to reality, not its attempt to "capture" the real. That the reader might find the characters "hopelessly intertwined in the linguistic texture of the book" would surely be to the author a sign of its success, as would, of course, the reader's laughter, although this would be the carnivalesque laughter invoked by Bakhtin, not the mere amusement that Booker seems to find in the "pure farce" of Sorrentino's methods.

Booker further contends that *Mulligan Stew* lacks originality ("Books about the writing of books have become extremely common in the 20th century"), that in particular it reprises too many of the moves initiated by Joyce. Joyce is certainly a presence in *Mulligan Stew*, both in direct allusions and through Joyce's influence not just on Sorrentino but also on O'Brien, but when he asserts that "Sorrentino writes against a background that has already been substantially modified by predecessors such as Joyce, in a sense depriving him of a target," Booker assumes the relationship between Sorrentino's novel and the modernist works of Joyce is essentially satirical. *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake* ought to be "targets" of Sorrentino's mockery. He can't be lampooning traditional novel-writing, since the inheritance of this tradition has already been "modified" by Joyce's previous departures from convention. But this would cast Joyce and other modernists as the representatives of a practice that Sorrentino wants himself to modify, to replace its now approved procedures with new procedures of his own, when in fact the overwhelming impression left by *Mulligan Stew* is that there are no fixed procedures that

determine the formal features of fiction, an assumption that ratifies and extends the modernist subversion of norms, not, as Booker would have it, simply repeating them.

Moreover, the claim that *Mulligan Stew* is not especially original is not very consistent with Booker's additional accusation that its radical self-reflexivity "goes too far," as well that it relies too much on "rule breaking for the sake of rule breaking." Finally it is not so much that, for Booker, *Mulligan Stew* doesn't sufficiently "transgress" established literary methods but that it doesn't do so in quite the right way:

A work that includes radical formal innovation, or even radical content. . . is likely to seem "transgressive" to many and to have a powerful effect on some. But the question remains whether such individual subjective effects are truly transgressive in a genuine political sense (i.e., challenging existing dominant ideologies in a way that contributes to the process of social change).

Suffice it to say that Gilbert Sorrentino would most likely express contempt for the notion he should be writing novels to help enact social change, even through the exquisitely ineffable processes M. Keith Booker discerns in formally unorthodox fiction. Booker elevates putative political effect above all other qualities, and neither Sorrentino's commitment to the integrity of art nor his acerbic comic sense would have allowed him to privilege politics--or any other version of "saying something"--over those "individual subjective effects," a characterization no doubt mean implicitly to disparage a "merely literary" reading, that for most readers are the primary object of the reading experience--although no doubt Sorrentino would maintain that the effects produced by his fiction are not inescapably subjective. They are the result of the very palpable and emphatic formal and stylistic devices the writer has used that allow the reader to "walk around inside" the novel's verbal space.

Booker's reluctance to be amused by *Mulligan Stew* seems profound, and it is made even more peculiar by his frequent citations of Bakhtin and his insistence that Bakhtin's ideas entail a requirement that carnivalesque comedy be directed toward political goals. (The "breaking of traditional rules" in Bakhtin's analysis, according to Booker, "can be subversive only if it has a troubling effect on the reader that results in his reexamining the hierarchies normally accepted by his society.") Although it is certainly possible to gloss Bakhtin's notion of "absolute comedy" as valorizing the subversion of authority in a general sense, his analysis of the novel in particular

celebrates the "polyglossia" that defines this form in contrast to those forms of writing that convey a more monologic sense of rhetorical control--a questioning, if not subversion, of specifically discursive authority and norms. Bakhtin's emphasis in such essays as "Discourse in the Novel" is on showing the novel to be the most capacious and supple of literary forms, qualities that *Mulligan Stew* illustrates as forcefully as any modern novel.

It is, in fact, hard to imagine a more polyglossic novel than *Mulligan Stew*, consisting as it does of a multitude of letters, notebook entries, and interpolated texts of various sorts, composed by a dizzying assortment of characters. It consistently brings the reader back to *writing* as both its vehicle and its subject, perhaps more dauntlessly than any other work of American fiction at a time when American writers had already become remarkably adventurous in their use of self-reflexive strategies. Booker avers that "*Mulligan Stew* is so obviously metafictional that one is never tempted to recuperate it as a conventional unified narrative with theme, plot, character, and so on" (although ultimately he considers this to be another of the novel's flaws). But what is finally most impressive (as well as most important) about *Mulligan Stew* is in the way Sorrentino invalidates the need for "recuperation," through the ostensibly excessive metafictional devices he employs finding ample substitutes--in terms of the reader's ability to enjoy his novel (albeit in unexpected ways)--for "plot, character, and so on."

We could call Antony Lamont's ongoing novel itself an entertaining read, but not for any reasons Lamont himself might have for considering it such. After a few chapters trying to flesh out his hilariously puerile idea--did Halpin kill Ned Beaumont or not--Lamont begins to indulge in stylistic "experiment." Most of this experimentation consists of varying degrees of "poetic" prose, ranging from a relatively sober chapter of dramatic monologue in which Halpin imagines what may be happening to the police as they close in on the murder scene, to the absurd Chapter 12, "Like Blowing Flowers Stilled," which begins: "How now, Master Halpin! What? Can it be fear that thrones itself in those bright orbs that were wont on a day to flash as bright as those of a gentleman in pleasant surfeit o' the good Rhenish or a gen'rous flagon o' sack?" For all of his desperate stylizing, Lamont's prose is never more than an imitation of stereotyped, dimly understood notions of literary style. He never sees style as more than an excuse for outrageously inept similes and metaphors, laughably skewed clichés, and other bloated and incompetent rhetorical flourishes.

Parts of Lamont's novel do come to life, however. In several chapters that suggest his true preoccupation, Lamont introduces the characters of Corrie Corriendo and Berthe Delamode, owners of a "service" they describe in a letter to Ned Beaumont:

We have decide to offer direct to a selected numbers of perceptive customers our exceptional, UNUSUAL, and extensive stocks of really truly HEMANS' HOT PHOTOS.--They are available only from us--and exclusive! SATISFACTION GARANTEED. We offer, only hard-to-get sizzling items inobtainable in any other parts at whatever price you can pay.

Soon enough Corriendo and Delamode begin to dominate Lamont's narrative, including a pornographic encounter between the ladies, Halpin, Beaumont, and the shared woman of the men's dreams, Daisy Buchanan. These passages demonstrate that Lamont would likely be no more successful as a pornographer than as an avant-garde novelist, but actually Sorrentino is able to evoke more reader sympathy for Lamont in such pages, as we suspect that this material is more the result of the author's desperation--in this case sexual--than a concerted attempt to integrate pornography and innovative fiction. While compelled to laugh at Lamont's general incompetence, the reader can also understand his need to express himself. More crucially, Sorrentino's creation of Lamont's misshapen prose is itself an aesthetic triumph, replacing traditional notions of characterization and reader identification and producing a center of interest rooted in the use (or misuse) of language.

Lamont's notebooks give us direct access to his strategy as he composes his novel, as well as excerpts from his previous novels, which show that the current project is clearly not an unfortunate aberration. Lamont's scrapbook is itself a kind of mulligan stew, containing everything from advertisements (including one from *Writer's Helper Monthly*) and other clippings to a collection of question-and-answer exercises presumably written by Lamont. Some of these show rather more imagination (or at least more humor) than *Guinea Red*:

*Are the stars out tonight?*

They are. But before dawn some of them will have found places in various eyes, some settle on flags and banners, still others will take up residence in Hollywood and other film capitals of the world, many will be wished upon, one will be born, a handful

will shimmer, gleam, shiver, glitter, tumble, or shine, a few will either shoot or fall, dozens will cluster together, dozens more give off dust, one will be steadfast and constant, another lucky, some few will have a stairway built to them, one serve as a cocktail ingredient, many will wander, one have a wagon hitched to it, another team with a garter, some form a crowd, scores remain chaste, most look down, and a group fall on Alabama.

Lamont's letters are perhaps even more engaging. Many of them, especially those addressed to his sister Sheila (previously encountered in *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*) are full of ill-concealed sarcasm and outright invective, the latter of which really seems to be Lamont's *métier*. The letters to one "Professor Roche," who is planning a course in the "American experimental novel" and is thinking of including Lamont, are particularly scabrous. The early letters to Roche, written when Lamont believes that the exposure his work would receive from the course justifies currying favor, are relatively obsequious; gradually, as it becomes apparent that Roche does not intend to include him, Lamont loses his fragile composure, culminating in an impressive tirade near the end of the book:

Not to mince words, your truly and quintessentially shithead decision not to use any selections from any of my works is not surprising, now that I check back through your last few letters. The scrawl was, even then, on the wall. But how can you, a man who, by your own admission, thought of *The Centaur* as a "breakthrough" in the American novel (surely you meant a "breakdown"), say that my work, while displaying many of the "gestes" of the avant-garde, is not truly "avant-garde," and lacks a consistent "engagement" with those subjects most germane to "the contemporary." My dear old bumbling Roche, I suspect that you would not know an avant-garde work were it to grasp you by your academic tool. . . .

The reader might feel a kind of support for Antony Lamont at this point, perhaps because, for once at least, he seems to be acting as a mouthpiece for his creator, as Sorrentino's dim view of John Updike's work is well known. Here, however, Sorrentino especially subjects his own views to the radical skepticism his comic view expresses, as of course Antony Lamont is otherwise depicted as an experimental writer of dubious ability and discernment. At the same time, Professor Roche, as a representative of the academic class, is even more profoundly obtuse,

his notion of "experimental" sufficiently empty that it could include both Updike and Lamont. The perceptiveness of critics is sampled further in a series of excerpts of reviews of Lamont's previous books, most of which are unsparing in the opprobrium: "Sometimes awkward, always banal"; "Makes Mickey Spillane's noisiest trash read like Thomas Mann"; "Yet another third-rate novel sure to be remaindered for forty-nine cents in a few months." Yet some come close to echoing the criticisms of *Mulligan Stew* made in the novel's appended preface:

. . .the attempt to create a "poetic novel" is pathetic, although Mr. Lamont has learned all the superficial tricks of the modernistic poetry canon. . .Tiring story of the age-old search for meaning in life. . .alas, such meaning escapes Mr. Lamont's trite, one-dimensional characters as it escapes the author himself.

Other interpolated texts seem to have less less connection to Lamont, the most prominent of which is "Flawless Play Restored: The Masque of Fungo," a phantasmagoria set in "a major league baseball park, the home of a team of disconcerting ineptitude." Perhaps this "masque" is consonant with the story of Antony Lamont in the shared theme of incompetence (loosely reflected in the "failure of "Flawless Play Restored" to apparently cohere with Lamont's story, as well as the failure of *Mulligan Stew* itself to cohere in the expected ways), but it is otherwise an outrageous farrago of voices shouting, declaiming, and apostrophizing on a multitude of subjects from baseball to feminism in multifarious styles and idioms. FPR follows on another inserted literary work by other than Antony Lamont, a collection of erotic verse entitled "The Sweat of Love," by "Lorna Flambeaux," who has sent the poems to Lamont, soliciting his opinion. The writing, like Lamont's, is unintentionally hilarious, although Lamont, indulging in yet another misconception about literature, takes Ms. Flambeaux's verse as a mirror to her own presumed behavior and clumsily attempts a rendezvous with the poet, with a disagreeable result for both.

Paradoxically perhaps, the aesthetic strategy that arguably draws most attention to *Mulligan Stew* as an artifact of writing is one that initially almost seems to represent an abandonment of writing altogether. Although Sorrentino makes use of lists in *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*, *Mulligan Stew* really marks the emergence in Sorrentino's work of the list as an alternative expository device, one that would continue to be identified with Sorrentino for the rest of his career. Not only are the lists longer (two longer than four pages), but they are used insistently enough that they become a kind of substitute for conventional prose,

no doubt prompting some readers to ask whether Sorrentino hasn't finally discarded "writing" completely. As Sorrentino himself said of his lists, they are attempts "to clear the ground and dump all the impedimenta that narrative clings to, that narrative pulls to itself, like a magnet and iron filings." What is left is language, shorn of even the final impediment of syntax or figuration. But most of them are also funny and inventive, even if their audacity can be extreme--the very long list of books and periodicals belonging to Lamont, for instance, catalogued by Martin Halpin in his journal as he plots his escape from *Guinea Red*, itself one of the most uproarious tropes in the novel, as Lamont's character literally "walks off the page."

What makes *Mulligan Stew* not just the most radically experimental American novel of its time and perhaps the signature work of American metafiction, but one of the truly great novels of the postwar era is that Sorrentino employs his heterodox strategies to create a literary work that fulfills the traditional expectation that a work of literature will *entertain*, even as it seeks to reconfigure the requirements for "entertainment" in fiction. Readers willing to find delight in the riotous, relentless upending of unexamined presumptions and threadbare conventions surely would find it in *Mulligan Stew*. More than anything else, it provides a unique, dynamic, and ultimately transforming reading experience.