

Sorrentino the Craftsman

Aberration of Starlight

To an extent it is understandable that an inexperienced reader of Gilbert Sorrentino's fiction might assume that works like *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* and *Mulligan Stew*, in rejecting the conventional referentiality of realistic fiction, not only question traditional narrative form but also "craft" as the term has come to be associated with the craft of storytelling in particular. However, while both of these books surely do seem to spotlight their apparent formlessness—*Mulligan Stew* explicitly announces it in its title—Sorrentino's ultimate purpose is not to dispense with form in fiction, only the ossified form in which conventional verisimilar narrative was confined. These two books represent his most radical exercises in self-reflexivity, but in undermining the assumptions of narrative transparency in fiction, they substitute structures of language that are just as deliberately crafted as the most "well-made" of conventional stories.

If anything, the disruption in *Imaginative Qualities* and *Mulligan Stew* of the presumed aesthetic order of fiction only emphasizes the centrality of both craft and form more emphatically, not because of their absence but because that order is revealed to be nothing but the craftedness of form, that is, not identical with the customary practices of storytelling. This conception of the malleability of fictional form underlies all of Sorrentino's fiction after *Mulligan Stew*: each new work seems predicated on the belief that a novel (or, in a few instances, a short story) has no fixed form to the demands of which it must comply, and thus "form" is literally reinvented from work to work. Although readers can certainly disagree about how successful these reinventions turn out to be, that every one of these works is composed with an attention to formal patterns and structures that can only be called rigorous: "craft" may actually evoke a practice that is too routine to adequately describe the care with which Sorrentino assembles his structures.

In no other book, however, does Sorrentino apply the precepts of craft according to something like the conventional understanding of the term as in the immediate follow-up to *Mulligan Stew*, *Aberration of Starlight*. While this novel incorporates many of Sorrentino's signature strategies and devices—lists, questions-and-answers substituting for exposition, a high

degree of fragmentation and the inclusion of fashioned documents (in this case mostly letters)—and presents us with overlapping points of view that do not seem to tell a consistent story, the careful reader soon enough can discern that this lack of consistency is actually the ultimate point of the narrative, while the devices are deployed in a very consistent way that binds the discrete versions of the narrative in a tightly wrought structure.

Aberration of Starlight does tell a story, however refracted or contingent on perception, but ultimately it is not really a narrative-driven novel. In fact, it seems more recognizably a novel at all than a work like *Mulligan Stew* not because it has well-defined characters and shows linear development but because finally it attempts—and succeeds—in evoking, more or less visibly and coherently, a time and a place. (Even more directly and palpably than *Steelwork*.) While both character and event are subject to distortion and uncertainty, due to the novel's shifting perspectives, its setting—a summer resort and boardinghouse near the New Jersey shore in the late 1930s—emerges whole and distinct. This is achieved not despite the contingencies of character and the artificial expository devices but through these aesthetic manipulations, through Sorrentino's formal ingenuity.

The shifts in perspective represent the four residents of the boardinghouse, whose differing perception of essentially the same events over the course of the summer provide the novel with its basic formal structure. Sorrentino does not merely relate his characters' thinking through conventional psychological realism ("free indirect" narration) but presents the characters both from without (we are introduced to the first character, the boy, Billy, via a carefully described photograph) and through assorted, but ultimately integrated, means, invokes their experience as filtered from within. The expository devices involved are not deployed casually or haphazardly. Indeed, the novel's structure is strikingly symmetrical: each section is roughly the same length; each contains, in more or less the same order, a brief, objective view of the character, from a neutral narrator's perspective; an episode rendered in dialogue; a question-and-answer passage; a fantasia of sorts; extended passages devoted to the characters' memories or direct third-person narration of the character's current actions.

If the collage-like form we encounter in *Aberration of Starlight* seems less radical than what we find in *Mulligan Stew*, it is more strictly applied, although not necessarily more attentively or deliberately. *Mulligan Stew* may seem like a miscellaneous collection of odds and

ends, shards of discourse and interpolated documents, but this is a constructed illusion, the final effect of Sorrentino's verbal artistry. The greater restriction of formal and rhetorical strategies in *Aberration of Starlight* perhaps makes the appearance of craft more evident to more casual readers, and in this way the novel could most plausibly be taken not so much as Sorrentino's effort to rein in his anarchic impulses (which do exist, but are themselves more purposeful than chaotic), but to make some gesture at being more commercially accessible after the relative success and publicity he gained with *Mulligan Stew*.

That *Aberration of Starlight* is a blatant stab at commercial appeal is probably belied by the fact that Sorrentino had begun writing it before the publication of *Mulligan Stew*. (*Crystal Vision* as well.) And of course it would only be expected that the novel's publisher (Random House) would attempt to capitalize on Sorrentino's unexpected recent success through more aggressive marketing and publicity. But *Aberration of Starlight* does seem, fortuitously timed or not, an effort to reach readers without previous exposure to Sorrentino's work with a novel employing his alternative methods in a more readily comprehensible way, even in the service of relatively traditional literary goals—the creation of character and setting, the evocation of a fictional world that ultimately seems recognizable as a version of ordinary reality. Readers seeking linear narrative might still balk at the effort, but those amenable to something other than the most conventional sort of plot-driven novel indeed ought to find *Aberration of Starlight* approachable enough.

Some critics have indeed found the novel rather too approachable, or at least that on the heels of *Mulligan Stew* it is (or was) a disappointingly restrained exercise, if not exactly conventional in its strategies then venturing to use only the sorts of unorthodox methods Sorrentino had already used in his previous work, methods that, according to one such critic (John Morse) merely suggest the “techniques of modernism” and thus finally “are just as dated as the characters” in the story. Although *Aberration of Starlight* by no means received uniformly negative reviews, it did not really fulfill hopes that Sorrentino might reach an even wider audience, and the critical response suggested that a significant number of admirers of *Mulligan Stew* expected Sorrentino not to broaden his appeal by adopting a more conservative manner but to extend the radical formal experiments of *Mulligan Stew* even more intensively.

Perhaps the critic expressing the greatest disappointment with *Aberration of Starlight* was Paul West, who in the *Washington Post* reproved Sorrentino for essentially writing a realist novel, and who further accused him of being “uninventive” and of lacking the “virtuosity” a truly experimental writer should exhibit. Douglas Messerli partially agreed with West’s criticisms, although as an admirer of Sorrentino’s fiction (later a publisher) Messerli ultimately attempts to redeem the novel from “its sense of ironic nostalgia that Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren—those doyens of modern narrative theory—might applaud.” (I am myself not convinced that Brooks and Warren would necessarily deplore even Sorrentino’s more audacious narrative experiments, nor that satisfying the exigencies of these critics’ “narrative theory” would be undesirable or inappropriate for a writer like Sorrentino.) “It becomes apparent that what was first perceived as a bittersweet presentation of post-World War II America,” Messerli concludes in his review, “is, in the end, an indictment of the modern novel and the vision inherent in its structures” through Sorrentino’s exaggerations and distortions of these structures even as he seems to be using them.

It is of course only a measure of how thoroughly the formal innovations of *Mulligan Stew* and *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* had prepared someone like Messerli to anticipate more of the same that he would be almost obliged to find something more radical in *Aberration of Starlight* that would explain (or explain away) its apparently more modest ambitions. But it seems to me that Messerli (not to mention West) was holding to an overly stringent commitment to literary experimentation of a certain kind—the kind that critics such as Messerli and West would acknowledge—that at best would be difficult for any writer to always satisfy. At worst, such an inherently prescriptive view of the acceptable scope of experimentation in works of literature seems to actually restrict the writer’s creative freedom to pursue fresh approaches to his/her art, even when this effort might seem to be an aesthetic step backward—for the writer such a step might not seem a retrenchment at all but in fact an experiment with an approach that writer has not previously adopted, and therefore quite literally “new.”

None of this is to say that critics were wrong in noting the less emphatic formal daring of *Aberration of Starlight*, but the relevant question is whether this scaled-back quality should be attributed to a diminished interest in formal innovation (perhaps in favor of exploring more traditional narrative strategies) or is indeed simply an outright commercial gambit, an attempt at

channeling Sorrentino's iconoclastic impulses for a possibly wider audience. (A less charitable view would be to call it "selling out," a charge Messerli comes close to making even as he attempts to recuperate the novel as a further expression of Sorrentino's iconoclasm.) It is most likely that for Sorrentino the answer was something closer to the former, since while a larger audience would no doubt be an appealing prospect for any writer, there is little evidence in Sorrentino's writing career before or after *Aberration of Starlight* that he would have been willing to seek such an audience on anything but his own challenging terms.

That Sorrentino might have adopted a more recognizable form of "novel" only to undermine it as an "indictment" of that form seems a labored analysis of *Aberration of Starlight*, mostly because *all* of Sorrentino's fiction can be seen as a subversion of the traditional novel as an entrenched literary form, and, relative to many of his other novels (and not just *Mulligan Stew*), *Aberration of Starlight* is a "normal" enough novel to indeed seem like an aberration in Sorrentino's work. Perhaps, however, such an impression is inevitable when the writer wishes to emphasize traditional elements of fiction—character, setting—even if using untraditional means of doing so. (In this way, even *Mulligan Stew* is surely still describable as a novel, one that ultimately builds a compelling representation of the fictional character Antony Lamont.) *Aberration of Starlight* emphasizes both character and setting, so the impression that it is recognizably a novel becomes even harder to avoid,

Yet *Aberration of Starlight* is not just a novel that evokes a time and place through other than conventional methods. Those methods themselves alter our perception of both time and place (as starlight is altered due to the velocity of earth's orbit): the slippages in memory and attention manifest among the four characters portrayed in the novel attest to the unreliability of both when considering the past, and while the setting itself emerges intact in its historical detail, clearly, for each of the characters it takes on a different aspect. For 10 year-old Billy, the summer resort near Hackettstown is a place where he can temporarily reside in his still innocent hope that the man Tom Thebus, who is keeping company with Billy's mother this summer, might be the replacement for the absent father for which he clearly longs. For Billy's mother, Marie, it is an opportunity for love and a late sexual awakening as she responds with increasing favor to Tom's advances. For Tom, it is the scene of his obviously habitual philandering and self-aggrandizement, although his behavior arguably is less hypocritical than that of Marie's father,

John. For him, the summer vacation is a time when he can fully assert his prerogatives as family patriarch, puritanically controlling his daughter's life by obstructing her nascent romance (while himself pursuing one of the ladies frequenting the resort after the relatively recent death of his wife).

Each character is given equal time to reveal and act on these attitudes, but that also further fragments the narrative perspective by reinforcing incommensurate versions of the events and interactions the novel recounts. Our view of each character is modified as one rendition succeeds another, and the ultimate juxtaposition of accounts, while it does provide the general contours of a discernible story, does not finally reconcile the four variants of the story so that the ultimate "truth" is made known. Is Tom Thebus a thwarted suitor, or simply a cad? Has Marie been denied the right to determine her own fate, or is she simply naïve? (Or both?) Should John be condemned as a self-righteous autocrat, or has he also to some extent been damaged by a wife who appears to have been even more monstrous? If the reader is asked to, in effect, hold all of these possibilities in suspension, is this a "creative" suspension whereby we arrive at a more complex awareness of reality, or is reality itself something that is always elusive?

Perhaps the answer to each of the last two questions is "yes," so that *Aberration of Starlight* is a novel that both offers a kind of realism by other means and subjects "reality" to a skepticism that is associated with postmodernism. Those expressing surprise or disappointment with the supposed conventionality of the novel were likely registering their doubts about the value of the former while overlooking the way the latter complicates the representational gesture. (Messerli chooses to cancel out that gesture.) Judging by the fact that *Starlight* did not sell out its original print run, it seems accurate to say that whatever effort was indeed involved to make Sorrentino more commercially successful did not really succeed (although sales were not disastrous), so that one could conclude—perhaps Sorrentino did—that readers still found the postmodern features in *Aberration of Starlight* to be more prominent than the realist novel bracketed within. (Even a muted challenge to readers' expectations is still a challenge.) Arguably the period in Sorrentino's career encompassing the release of *Mulligan Stew* and then the publication of his next few books represents the apogee of Sorrentino's literary "fame," but given the reluctance of American readers to countenance difference and difficulty in the fiction

they read, that fame was inherently limited unless he was willing to even more fully trim his adventurous sails.

The trajectory of the rest of Sorrentino's career surely shows how unlikely this was always going to be. Sorrentino was a writer committed to formal invention and alternative orderings of language. To the extent that he would remain first of all a poet, such an orientation seems only proper, but a work like *Aberration of Starlight* does demonstrate, I would maintain, that Sorrentino is able to realize these aesthetic imperatives just as skillfully in a work of fiction that retains a recognizable structural façade of a novel (a more difficult move to pull off in a novel than it would be through a similar effort in a poem). Sorrentino does this as an exercise in craft, not to nullify the novel, as Messerli would have it, but to reanimate it, to exploit what John Barth called the "used up-ness" of literary form for the writer's own artful purposes.

Crystal Vision

Crystal Vision resembles a conventional novel less readily than *Aberration of Starlight*, although it is comparable to a novel such as William Gaddis's *JR* (albeit less sweeping in scope), as well as to Sorrentino's own *Steelwork*. Indeed, it shares with *Steelwork* a setting in Bay Ridge and the use of a large cast of characters representative of that neighborhood's working-class inhabitants during the World War II era. Still, while the neighborhood itself is to some extent a center of attention in *Crystal Vision*, the focus of this novel is less on setting as a free-standing subject of interest but instead invokes it as an almost mythical place inhabited entirely by voices—not a "real" place at all but one rising from both memory and imagination.

The characters in *Crystal Vision* do create a vivid enough impression of their Brooklyn community as they interact with each other, but they are also aware that it is actually their own creation, that they are literally bringing the neighborhood to life through their talk. Thus, unlike either *Aberration of Starlight* or *Steelwork*, *Crystal Vision* could not really be called a novel providing realism by other, nontraditional means. (Which is not to say it lacks authenticity, however.) Its subject is the process of its own representation, not the characters and milieu represented. Both character and setting emerge with the kind of particularity and detail that makes them memorable, but that is finally an incidental effect. Their credibility is the kind of

credibility that the artistic imagination bestows, the kind that Sorrentino pursues in all of his work rather than creating the illusion that fictional characters “walk off the page” in their fidelity to life.

Although the novel is composed almost entirely of talk (“dialogue” doesn’t really seem to accurately describe what the characters are up to), there are no quotation marks to emphasize the tangible presence of their talk. Stripped of the simulated immediacy induced by quotation, the novel’s scenes seem more like emanations from the past, voices finding themselves disembodied from their actual surroundings (although not really quite aware of this) and able to not just ignore the constraints of time and physical space (able to project themselves into manifestations of both), but to in fact summon characters and locations in the course of speaking about them. (Occasionally it is as if they are standing somewhere above and outside the scene that is the object of their observations.)

The episodes of conversation and repartee are generally brief and self-enclosed, featuring voices that vary from episode to episode, but the scenes are ultimately comprised of a fixed, if extensive, cast of local characters. A few of them establish themselves quickly as distinctive voices—most prominently “the Arab,” who has an opinion about everything and expresses it in his semi-elevated but mostly maladroit English—but inevitably not all of the multiple voices become so individually delineated (although surely they are all singular to Sorrentino). But individuation of character in *Crystal Vision* is less important than their collective power to bring the neighborhood to life with their assertions and rejoinders, their descriptions of behavior among their friends and acquaintances, their sarcasm, exaggerations, and braggadocio.

“Isabel and Berta? the drummer says” begins one chapter. “Oh God, a couple of honeys.” But this doesn’t just initiate a conversation about the two girls thus identified. It becomes clear the speaker is “seeing” them, although they are in fact not in the drummer’s presence:

Restrict and prescribe them from your mind and its fantasies, the Arab says. They are not for you.

I didn’t say they were. But God, how I hate to see them headed for dopey marriages with cars out on Long Island.

Maybe Teaneck, Irish Billy says. There’s always a chance they’ll go to Jersey.

Indeed, the Arab says. If they marry stout hearts whose noble and yearful eyes glint and flash forever westward!

Jokes can't disguise those sour grapes, Arab, Irish Billy says.

But hearken! And hark! The Arab says. What have we here?

Willie Wapner dances and struts about in front of Isabel and Berta. Suddenly he executes a brilliant series of cartwheels and comes to rest directly before them.

What a bore, Berta says.

And a boor as well, Isabel says.

Is that Willie Wapner showing off some of his stuff for the luscious lasses? the Arab says.

It is Willie Wapner, the Drummer says. How he's grown. The last time I saw him or even thought about him was, I can't even remember when.

The episode continues on to depict Willie Wapner's rather abject attempts to gain the attention of Isabel and Berta, with ongoing remarks on the effort by the Drummer, the Arab, and Irish Billy. If at times it almost seems they are watching a film about which the characters provide a running commentary, at other times the characters simply assert they are "looking into the past" or react to a bit of narrative exposition as if actually hearing or reading it themselves. "Perhaps," a disembodied narrative voice announces about a subsidiary character, "he is searching for a rare species of the *Culex* mosquito in Brooklyn and duly reported to the Bureau of Diptera Studies," responding to which "The bureau of what? Big Duck says, shiny black bits of Nibs flying from his mouth." It is as if Big Duck is attuned to the narrative discourse as it is created, as are all of the characters, whose role in the novel is not merely to act (or not even to act) but in discoursing about the neighborhood to awaken it into life. Perhaps this is ultimately what Sorrentino himself has to say about the gatherings at the candy stores and taverns in a place like Bay Ridge—that the essential reality of life in such places is given substance there, at least in retrospect. And *Crystal Vision* is, of course, very much a retrospective novel.

The only way to represent this phenomenon is thus to enact it. The characters in *Crystal Vision* are not designed as "colorful" characters themselves but as conduits for the colorful

attributes of the neighborhood—which do indeed include some pretty colorful characters who are talked about rather than being sources of the talk. Perhaps at least in this way *Crystal Vision* is comparable to *Aberration of Starlight* and *Steelwork* as an attempt to evoke both character and place via other than traditionally realistic means, but it is a reality that is subject to contingency and mutation, assembled in multiple versions so that it is the process of assembly that becomes the novel's focus of attention. Some of Sorrentino's fiction is more explicitly metafictional than others (generally speaking the most metafictional are the earliest works, with progressively fewer directly self-reflexive gestures thereafter), but almost all of his novels are implicitly metafictional in the way they so palpably employ methods of arrangement and assemblage as an alternative formal strategy.

Crystal Vision employs such a method even more immediately (if not at first altogether noticeably) in its own selection and arrangement of episodes: the scenes in the novel each represent one of the 78 cards in the Tarot deck (both major and minor), giving what might otherwise seem a random assortment of such scenes an underlying formal structure that begins in a semi-Oulipian enactment of restraint that proves less constraining than conventional storytelling in allowing the development of character and situation through metaphorical elaborations that freely break from narrative continuity and surface realism. The reader already familiar with the Tarot deck and its symbology could certainly begin to see the correspondences between that symbology and the characters and situations presented in *Crystal Vision* quickly enough, but they are often subtle, and a reader could plausibly finish reading the book without really noticing them.

Once alerted to the presence of this formal device, however, the reader's appreciation of Sorrentino's skill—which again seems an expression of craft reconstructed—is surely enhanced, although a danger lurks: the temptation to then inspect each episode for its connection to the relevant Tarot card to extract the secret “meaning” of the novel, to reduce *Crystal Vision* to an exercise in symbol-hunting verifying its fidelity to the Tarot deck instead of simply allowing Sorrentino poetic license to creatively adapt Tarot imagery for his own literary purpose. It seems to me that Louis Mackey, author of the most often cited scholarly consideration of the novel, “Representation and Reflection in *Crystal Vision*,” unfortunately succumbs to this temptation, preferring to register the correspondences between episodes and cards as a substitute for more

comprehensive literary analysis, focusing his attention on the interaction of literature and philosophy in a way that really fails to consider *Crystal Vision* in the context of Sorrentino's other fiction, in particular the earlier, more conspicuously metafictional works that even more radically destabilize the boundary between fact and fiction that most interests Mackey.

Like most of Sorrentino's fiction, *Crystal Vision* certainly does call attention to its own fictionality, yet this gesture seems less central in and of itself to Sorrentino's aesthetic goals than it does in, say, *Mulligan Stew*. *Crystal Vision* less blatantly challenges readers' expectations of narrative transparency, even if it does not attempt to disguise its inherent artifice. *Crystal Vision* is not a crystalline representation of "reality," but it does develop a surrogate reality that as imaginative projection is a concrete achievement. It does not merely subvert mimetic fidelity (although it does do that); it stands as an aesthetic creation that doesn't just confuse fact and fiction: by asserting and cultivating its own fictionality, it becomes a new fact in the world, a work of literary art that knows itself as such. Its relevance is first of all to literature, not philosophy.

Arguably the animating purpose of metafiction as it manifested itself in American fiction during the 1960s and 70s was not simply to expose the ultimate artifice of narrative fiction but in doing so to in effect free the writer (and reader) to the possibility of alternate strategies, to expand the range of possibilities for "art" in the art of fiction. Gilbert Sorrentino's career could be seen as his effort to redeem these possibilities. In a sense, that fiction is an artificial construction (that narrative itself is an artificial construction) is something that is taken for granted in his work as Sorrentino tries out other devices (some more familiar, others entirely invented) that may renounce the claims to untroubled verisimilitude assumed by narrative realism but at the same time attempt to renew the potential for literary art to provoke and delight.

The skill and consistency with which Sorrentino is able to continue fulfilling this aspiration surely must be attributed to both inspiration and craft. If Sorrentino's work, including *Crystal Vision*, can plausibly be called "well-made," it is by affirming the "made." In Sorrentino's works of fiction, language is not the storytelling medium but the form-producing medium. In some of Sorrentino's later novels a story develops, but it is a story that emerges from the application of form, a secondary effect of the writer's primary commitment to language and linguistic ingenuity. Craft of this kind is not the sort of thing to be learned from following

guidelines or enrolling in a creative writing class. It requires that we regard fiction as a practice without fixed forms and approach the literary work as an opportunity to re-create form with each performance. What an aspiring writer can learn from reading Gilbert Sorrentino is that “experimental fiction” is not the opposite of craft, the rejection of “skills,” but is in fact the purest embodiment of craft as artistry.

Sorrentino’s artistry aims not merely for proficiency but for transformation. The first character we encounter in *Crystal Vision* is a magician who has disguised himself as one of the characters and who returns throughout the novel, both as cloaked character and in his own guise. He is Sorrentino’s surrogate, the emblem of the writer’s role. The writer, like a magician, bends reality, add to it the potential for wonder and surprise. It is an illusion, but at its best is created by the magician-writer’s adept invocation of the tricks of the trade. Sorrentino’s tricks as a writer of fiction are more abundant and more unorthodox than what most writers have to offer, but his facility with them is no less complete

Blue Pastoral

“Craft” in *Blue Pastoral* manifests itself in Sorrentino’s skills as a parodist. The novel might seem at first to be something like a return to the invoked anarchy of *Mulligan Stew*, but its apparent formal heterogeneity ultimately reveals a carefully considered purpose. “Pastoral” is not just a loose designation identifying the novel’s atmosphere or setting: *Blue Pastoral* is a sustained burlesque of the pastoral as literary form and aesthetic ideal. But Sorrentino doesn’t parody any one particular pastoral form or work, instead using the pastoral tradition to create his own hybrid form that transposes the imagery and conventions of pastoral to a very American setting.

The novel follows the peregrinations of Serge Gavotte (known as Blue) and his wife, Helene, as they journey across the United States in pursuit of Serge’s dream of becoming a renowned musician by discovering the “perfect musical phrase.” Instead of playing the traditional shepherd’s pipe, however, Serge fancies himself a pianist, and he and Helene haul his piano with them in a pushcart Serge finds and refurbishes (later it has to be repaired by a pushcart repairman who just happens to show up when it breaks down). Unlike the two

immediately preceding novels, in *Blue Pastoral* there seems to be no effort to invoke realism, either unconventionally or otherwise. Indeed, the characters are deliberate caricatures, the plot an extended farce. This novel is artifice all the way down, but while we are just as aware of its ubiquitous presence as in *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* or *Mulligan Stew*, the artifice of *Blue Pastoral* includes storytelling as a more central feature of the novel's aesthetic strategy.

If *Blue Pastoral* does want to tell us a story, it is obviously not of the "well-made" variety adapted from Gustav Freytag that has come to be regarded as identical with narrative itself. Sorrentino gives his narrative a picaresque structure, but this doesn't mean it is simply a loose sequence of adventitious events (The picaresque form is not just a depiction of aimless wandering, although the best examples of the form might provide the illusion of such.) The most persistent pastoral motif in American literature (and American culture in general) is the idealization of the American countryside, its "virgin soil" and "untamed spaces," an impulse that Sorrentino subjects to merciless mockery in tracking Serge Gavotte's experiences as he treks across the country. (It's hard not to think of Kerouac's *On the Road* as an additional object of Sorrentino's parody, this time more explicitly than in *The Sky Changes*.) One could say the center of interest in a picaresque novel has never actually been the resolution of the picaresque tale, or even the ultimate fate of the ostensible protagonist. The journey itself, and the sorts of people who show up and the kinds of behavior they exhibit, is what makes the work compelling, and *Blue Pastoral* if anything accentuates this quality.

Arguably the picaresque form is inherently a satirical form, at least as it has been practiced by mostly comic writers who use the picaresque hero (or antihero) as an opportunity to expose the protagonist to a range of human folly and to the unavoidable contingency of all human affairs. Yet the comedy this produces is not primarily an expression of mockery but an inevitable effect of the protagonist's encounters with the world he inhabits. Serge Gavotte is perhaps an even more hapless "hero" than most such characters, so that his own actions are hardly less deserving of ridicule than any of the characters he meets—although his desire to find the perfect musical phrase is not in itself an unworthy pursuit—and thus his is not a perspective from which to register a satirical take of American culture more broadly. At best Serge himself is implicated in the novel's mockery but finally if *Blue Pastoral* does inevitably lampoon some

recognizable attributes of American culture, it is not in an effort to improve or renovate that culture but to nullify it.

As in most of Sorrentino's fiction, the comedy he employs in *Blue Pastoral* is a version of Bakhtin's "absolute comedy," which takes nothing seriously, provoking laughter even at its own procedures. Indeed, *Blue Pastoral* farcically disassembles not just the conventions of the pastoral genre, but the enabling conventions of the novel form in general (even more directly than *Mulligan Stew*). In deemphasizing plot in favor of the linear succession favored by the picaresque, Sorrentino begins by radically reducing the novel's narrative structure to its most elemental form, but most of the other expectations we might have of narrative fiction are likewise ostensibly satisfied but ultimately subverted in the comic deflation of the novel's parody and pastiche. The hero's journey is neither a rogue's adventures nor an epic quest but an absurdist exercise in futility. Serge Gavotte as protagonist is mostly a cipher, more acted upon than acting (as when he is cuckolded by Helene), and the Gavottes' trip across the continent is radically digressive, even by the standards of the picaresque novel (and Sorrentino's previous novels). Unsurprisingly, Serge does not end his quest with the discovery of the perfect phrase, but instead when he and Helene complete their cross-country journey at the California coastline, they . . . tumble into the Pacific Ocean.

Probably the most conspicuous challenge to novel-writing and -reading strategies in the novel is literally its language. Serge Gavotte's story is told in a polyglot, mock-heroic, quasi-Elizabethan pastorate, while its episodes are interspersed with various exercises in verbal invention that draw attention to such scenes as performances of language, routines that appear to suspend Serge's quest narrative even as they act as the sort of lateral digressions characteristic of the picaresque novel. A politician's wife ("Lesbia Glubut") is profiled in a news feature written in the unctuous, sycophantic tone typical of such "journalism," while her husband, Rep. "Hal" Glubut, gives a cliché-ridden speech defending himself against charges of "moral turpitude" (having sex with sheep). Several chapters clearly enough signal in their titles the sort of discourse we are going to encounter: "Blarney Spalpeen Gives Speech on St. Patrick's Day," "Father Donald Debris, S.J., Gives Talk on Sex." The most prominent display of linguistic jape is "La Musique et les mauvaises herbes," a lightly pornographic book Serge brings along on the journey, but which is actually a translation from French—a literal translation of French into

English, preserving the French idioms, word order, etc., producing a hilarious mishmash of translation malaprops: “If I could make a sex act on this gorgeous lady for five moments, I will permit my groinal region to have a bad for a week! She is some tootsie!”

Although such passages in *Blue Pastoral* surely convey a kind of mockery, they register very weakly as satirical, since the humor, although abundant, is ultimately so unsparing that its mockery seems especially caustic. All satire comes as an inherent expression of scorn, but the mockery of a novel like *Blue Pastoral* does not emerge from an underlying impulse of anger or sorrow; Sorrentino in his comedic routines comes as close to expressing sheer, unalloyed contempt as it is possible for a novelist to come and still justify writing novels. If all a novelist has to offer is repetitive exercises in negation, the novel form has been reduced just as much to a vehicle for “saying something” as any conventional literary novel. But of course Sorrentino explicitly rejects this conception of the writer’s task. The objects of Sorrentino’s ridicule are generally already caricatures of themselves, so in choosing such easy targets he takes advantage of their used-upness to call attention instead to the language game itself: Sorrentino has little interest in figures such as Lesbia Glubut or Father Debris (or even Serge Gavotte) as “characters,” but uses them as material for the verbal treatments that are the true measure of Sorrentino’s intentions as an artist, not the “commentary” we might want to find in his unremitting burlesque.

This may be the most fruitful way to understand Sorrentino’s appropriation of the pastoral form as well. If *Blue Pastoral* is most immediately a travesty of pastoral motifs and conventions, it does not discredit those conventions themselves but invokes them for the formal and stylistic turns they make possible. Sorrentino’s approach in this novel strongly recalls John Barth’s formulation of the “literature of exhaustion,” as it attempts to create something new out of timeworn practices by conspicuously brandishing these practices so that their very loss of continued relevance can be used to direct the reader’s attention to the adaptation of them for the writer’s own unorthodox purposes. In most of the novels following *Blue Pastoral*, Sorrentino is more likely to treat the novel form itself as something that is used-up—unlike Barth, who adopted the strategies of “exhaustion” precisely in order to continue writing novels (albeit unconventional ones)—resulting in books still identified as novels but otherwise little resembling conventionally-written novels.

Blue Pastoral hangs on to the vestiges of literary tradition through its incorporation of pastoral elements and a picaresque narrative structure, but they are merely the pretext for Sorrentino's transfiguration of such conventional devices into the source of verbal vignettes in which language creates its own self-sufficient effects. Through the way Sorrentino links these vignettes in an extended exercise in parody we can identify the craft of this novel, although some readers might think its verbal display to be too self-consciously performative to be regarded as craft. Indeed it might be said that Sorrentino makes *language* perform, but the goal is to make language visible, not the author staging the performance. Language must be made visible as the focus of aesthetic attention (not "story" or "character" or "theme") so that an enhanced variety of formal and stylistic possibilities might present themselves to the adventurous writer (and reader). Sorrentino himself would experiment with such possibilities in all of his fiction subsequent to *Blue Pastoral*.

None of this is to deny that Sorrentino's work, taken as a whole, expresses a jaundiced view of human nature, as well as the customs and institutions human beings create. But his fiction does not exist first of all as the means for Sorrentino to impart this view. If it does communicate a satirical message (to some readers), it is a wholly contingent sort of communication, a "something said" fortuitously produced by the writer's full commitment to the aesthetic shaping of language. This commitment, along with Sorrentino's innate comic vision, surely does give Sorrentino's novels a pervasively irreverent tone (both toward the novel as a form and toward human affairs in general). But this irreverence works to, in effect, clear the ground for a fresh aesthetic space in which Sorrentino the literary artist can exercise his verbal ingenuity without obeisance to the demands of "subject."

One could of course say that the subject of most of Sorrentino's fiction is the nature of fiction itself. Certainly *Mulligan Stew* is the fullest (and perhaps greatest) realization of this subject in Sorrentino's career as a writer of fiction, but after the relative success of *Mulligan Stew* led Sorrentino to offer modified versions of the subject in an effort to widen his reach among readers, *Blue Pastoral* marks a return to the more radical exploration of form introduced in the metafiction of both *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* and *Mulligan Stew*. The novels after *Blue Pastoral* will be, if anything, even more resolutely unconventional, as if the fairly tepid sales of *Aberration of Starlight* and *Crystal Vision* convinced Sorrentino that

gesturing to the literary mainstream was a wasted effort and decided to ignore its requirements altogether.

But this does not mean that Sorrentino would abandon “craft” as redefined in all of the fiction he had written to this point, perhaps most palpably in the three novels succeeding *Mulligan Stew*. If *Blue Pastoral* shows Sorrentino to be a skilled parodist able to make from parody a formally intricate and stylistically audacious work of fiction, the work to follow, while it might be called implicitly parodic (of the novel’s formal conventions, of “normal” reading practices), mostly seeks to replace storytelling with the artful arrangement of language as the assumed purpose of fiction. To the reader accustomed to the narrative assumptions controlling most novels, these works likely seem arbitrary, even anarchic, although they are in fact scrupulously composed. Perhaps not all of the “experiments” in form Sorrentino offers in the later novels can be counted as successful, but any failures come from flaws in conception, not lack of discipline.

Beyond what it might tell us about the direction of Gilbert Sorrentino’s career, *Blue Pastoral* itself stands as one of his most deftly executed works of fiction. In addition to the dexterity of its craft, however, it is also a greatly entertaining novel, an experimental fiction that finds in its stylistic agility and its outrageous humor a self-adequate substitute for the expected diversions of “plot” and “character.” In its own way, *Blue Pastoral* is a pleasure to read, although these pleasures cannot simply be passively consumed as a “rollicking tale.” *Blue Pastoral* is a picaresque novel that takes the reader on a journey into the refashioning of its own telling.