



**Gilbert
Sorrentino:
An Introduction**

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Contents

Prologue

Sorrentino the Poet

Sorrentino the Realist

The Sky Changes

Steelwork

Sorrentino the Metafictionist

Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things

Mulligan Stew

Sorrentino the Craftsman

Aberration of Starlight

Crystal Vision

Blue Pastoral

Sorrentino the Anarchist

Pack of Lies trilogy

Odd Number

Misterioso

Rose Theatre

Sorrentino the Formalist

Under the Shadow

A Strange Commonplace

The Abyss of Human Illusion

Sorrentino the Comedian

Gold Fools

Lunar Follies

Sorrentino the Local Colorist

Red the Fiend

Little Casino

Epilogue

Splendide-Hotel

Prologue

This book is not a biographical study of Gilbert Sorrentino's life and work. Although it became more evident to me while trying to write about Sorrentino's whole career as both a poet and a writer of fiction that understanding a writer's intentions can be relevant to a well-grounded interpretation of a literary work (as long as they are not regarded as the final authority), and that the writers' attested experiences can be useful to the critic if they are used to judge how experience has been aesthetically transformed, I have no background as a biographer, and it is Sorrentino's work that needs renewed attention, not his life circumstances. Still, the dearth of biographical information about Sorrentino beyond the most cursory is a significant hurdle for a critic to clear, and a proper biography to mitigate error and certify facts would certainly be welcome.

But neither is this book an exercise in academic criticism—certainly not as currently practiced in what's left of literary study in the academy, and not really even as it existed prior to the advent of theory and its subsequent metamorphosis into various versions of cultural studies. My focus is on explication of text, but my readings of Sorrentino's works are close readings only in the sense that they give unqualified attention to the formal and stylistic qualities of those works. They don't necessarily provide exhaustive analysis that attempts to take the measure of a literary work's aesthetic dynamics in the way some New Critics set out to do. There is attention to context, related both to Sorrentino's work as a whole and to literary practices in general, as well as some citations to external sources when such sources can lead to a further appreciation of the text at hand.

Readers will probably notice, however, that "context" of the kind academic criticism presently emphasizes the most is largely missing here. I do not dwell on the historical, sociological, and political implications of Sorrentino's fiction, nor do I attempt to subordinate that fiction to its utility as historical analysis or cultural diagnosis. Readers expecting that sort of emphasis will surely be disappointed with my approach, and this examination of Gilbert Sorrentino's writing is probably not going to be their sort of thing. What is most "old-fashioned" about my approach is probably its underlying assumption that "literary criticism" names a mode of critical writing that seeks to account for the literary effects of literature, which

it does not view as secondary to the critic's real concerns beyond it. Literary criticism exists to help us understand how a literary work achieves its own integrity, not to direct our attention elsewhere, to something else the critic finds more important (these day, that would usually be politics). We should read Gilbert Sorrentino's books because they offer us a distinctively rewarding reading experience that expands our appreciation of the possibilities of literary form, not because they instruct us about history or might lead to our moral and political improvement.

While the tone of this study is prevailingly analytical, the analysis is "technical" only if you believe that any attempt to disturb the surface purity of the literary text with any critical concepts (perhaps including the characterization of what we are reading as "text") is an undesirable imposition on the pristine act of reading. The terminology I use should be immediately familiar to anyone who takes literature seriously to begin with (or at least its denotation clear from the context of its use) and is always employed to explicate and clarify Sorrentino's strategies. Since Sorrentino is a writer who habitually invokes unconventional strategies, any critical effort to comprehensively cover all of Sorrentino's published work will necessarily venture interpretations requiring extended explication. And that is indeed what is offered here: sustained exposition of a body of work that systematically defies established precepts about the nature of prose fiction accepted in mainstream literary culture. If the reader finishes this short book believing that Sorrentino's project as a writer has been coherently elucidated and that the aesthetic achievement of individual works of his has been cogently described, I would consider my effort a success.

If the scope of that effort does not encompass the biographical particulars of Sorrentino's career as a writer, a thorough reckoning with what he wrote (and to a more limited extent what he said about what he wrote at various times) certainly does leave a vivid enough impression of a writer with very strong opinions and an unequivocal commitment to his understanding of the demands of art. Absent more widely available biographical information about Sorrentino's personal and professional life outside the writing of his books, only idle speculation would have that these somewhat cantankerous traits carried over to his interactions with people, although based on stray reports from scattered sources it seems likely that he was willing to accept the consequences of being faithful to his vision (losing friends over his portrayal of them, for

example). He was certainly willing to bear the consequences of his intransigence in adhering to the principles of aesthetic experimentation that motivated his work as a fiction writer and that resulted in a kind of hand-to-mouth existence in the publishing world, often circulating his manuscripts among numerous publishers before finally securing one willing to take a chance on his latest offbeat offering.

For those of us who think that the urge to trace the features of a writer's work to their source in the writer's life is too often indulged in strained interpretations and ought to be resisted, perhaps we know enough about Gilbert Sorrentino to judge the work efficaciously: born to an Italian father and Irish mother in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn (where he befriended fellow writer Hubert Selby, Jr.) a stint in the Army while attending Brooklyn College, where he returned after his discharge and founded the literary magazine, *Neon*, although did not finish his college degree. After beginning to publish his own poetry, he became associated with the journal, *Kulchur*, which focused on literary criticism and in which Sorrentino published many of his own critical reviews and essays (later collected in *Something Said* (1984). At this time he also began writing his first novel, *The Sky Changes* (1966). (He wrote an earlier, more conventional novel—described by Sorrentino as “very, very long”—that was never published, presumably consigned to oblivion.) After *The Sky Changes* was published, Sorrentino wrote his second novel, *Steelwork*.

In the second half of the 1960s, Sorrentino worked as an editor at Grove Press, which he left in 1970 after completing *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (published in 1971). (Among the books he worked on as editor were Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, as well as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.) During the 1970s he seems to have subsisted mainly on fellowships and occasional teaching jobs. (Unfortunately, his early novels didn't sell so well). In 1979, the publication of *Mulligan Stew* seemed to finally promise a degree of commercial success, but, unfortunately, while this novel did establish Sorrentino's reputation as an important experimental writer (and remains his best-known and best-selling book), that promise wouldn't be fulfilled, as Sorrentino couldn't really adapt his talent to the kind of conventional thinking that writing a “successful” novel would entail. Thus, the most consequential development affecting the course of his subsequent career was the offer to join the creative writing faculty at Stanford University in 1982, an appointment that ended only with Sorrentino's retirement in 1999. This

job may have restricted his ability to pursue writing full-time, but it also allowed him to write the sort of fiction he wanted to write without concern for publishers' disapproval or financial uncertainty.

This condensed biography shows that Sorrentino was more or less able to live an outwardly literary life, despite being from a working-class neighborhood in Depression-era Brooklyn. But the "literary" assumptions accompanying Sorrentino's career were always heterodox and antipathetic to the prevailing consensus about acceptable literary practice; in his reviews he was often openly hostile toward the writers who he believed profited from this consensus. Perhaps what we can most readily take from surveying Sorrentino's life as a writer is that his primary commitment was to the integrity of literature itself—to its reclamation as a vibrant art that doesn't just repeat the inherited formulas and lifeless gestures that dominated a literary culture characterized more by the pretense to seriousness than to its actual pursuit.

A superficial reading of Sorrentino's work might suggest that he is essentially an iconoclast, a writer who overturns existing literary forms simply for the sake of doing so. Although there is truth to the claim that Sorrentino's fiction is iconoclastic, his approach is not to flagrantly ignore the demands of form, or to reject outright the influence of literary history. Sorrentino wishes to replace traditional narrative structure as the default formal principle of fiction with new forms invented or adapted for the work at hand. In this way, he actually pays more attention to form than most novelists, either conventional or "transgressive." Similarly, Sorrentino does not dismiss the literary past, although the writers he invokes may not always be the most obviously canonized. That Sorrentino takes preceding literary achievements seriously is made explicit in his criticism, but it is equally clear in much of his fiction that his writing originates in a far-ranging familiarity with the forms and tropes supplied by literature itself and by particular writers he admired (even if Sorrentino's use of them often tended to parody and burlesque). Sorrentino was "alt lit" only in that he offered alternative strategies beyond simple storytelling, not because he disdained the appeal to aesthetic order altogether.

Sorrentino's iconoclasm is perhaps more apparent in the "content" of his work, not just in his lampooning of bohemian attitudes or academic pretension or middle-class sexual mores but in his radical skepticism about human nature and the crass sensibilities that dominate American culture. Sorrentino is an iconoclast most clearly in his criticism, which on the one hand

champions writers Sorrentino believes are undervalued, but on the other also unleashes some uninhibited attacks on those he thinks are not just overrated but degrade the artistic standards of literature. These strong opinions, which can seem peevishly dismissive, along with his portrayals of unredeemed human degradation, no doubt for some readers conveyed the impression Sorrentino's work was even more formidable than his unfamiliar formal strategies already suggested it must be.

But idol-smashing was not in itself the primary goal motivating Sorrentino's work. It is the necessary initial gesture implicit in his larger project of reorienting the aesthetic expectations of readers who assume that narrative form is the only form that might give shape to a work of fiction. To rebuild the formal structures of fiction, the old structures must first be razed, but Gilbert Sorrentino's fiction is ultimately more about what can replace the structure that was leveled than the mere act of subverting existing arrangements. It doesn't go too far to say that Sorrentino would like us to take delight in the formal variations he offers in each of his novels. In this sense, Sorrentino's fiction has an affirmative purpose, but it is an affirmation of the capacity of art—specifically literary art—to renew itself through the exercise of imagination.

This was certainly what most captivated me when I began reading Sorrentino's fiction. I found Sorrentino after I had already discovered other postmodern innovators such as John Barth and Robert Coover, but encountering *Mulligan Stew* made me think I had come upon a writer who upped the metafictional ante over even Barth and Coover and had dazzling comedic skills that encompassed satire but went beyond the merely satirical to create a kind of absolute comedy that takes nothing seriously, including itself. (Later, upon reading M.M. Bakhtin, I found the critical perspective that would accurately describe this kind of comedy as “carnavalesque.”) While none of Sorrentino's post-*Mulligan Stew* novels quite attempted to replicate its audacious structural complexity, nor to repeat its outrageous devices in the same encyclopedic way (although the latent comic attitude would always remain), Sorrentino's subsequent work continued consistently to challenge literary convention, each new release promising its own sort of originality and surprise.

What I also discovered is that most mainstream reviewers did not really know how to account for Sorrentino's literary project. Most seemed to expect that a Sorrentino novel would violate the established norms with which they were familiar, but, while critics would usually

acknowledge Sorrentino's writing skills in general, the typical response to the formal provocations encountered in his work was that he was engaged in "playing games," that he seemed disdainful of the imperative to be accessible to ordinary readers. Although there were certainly critics who appreciated Sorrentino's adventurous ambitions, very little effort was made in the prevailing outlets of literary journalism to ponder his alternative literary strategies more deeply or to consider seriously the notion that the norms observed by most writers of fiction might be deficient and in need of revision. Sorrentino was left to assume the reputation of an incorrigibly eccentric writer little interested in appealing to the general reader, and his later novels, although in some ways indeed more accessible to the average reader, were not really much reviewed in the most popular mainstream publications at all.,

Sorrentino had his champions, and he did rather better among academic critics, at least in depth of analysis, if not in the amount of attention paid to his work in comparison to other writers perceived as "postmodern." Indeed, only one book by an academic critic, Louis Mackey's *Fact, Fiction, and Representation*, has been devoted entirely to Sorrentino's work (and it examines only *Crystal Vision* and the three novels comprising the *Pack of Lies* trilogy). William McPherson's *Gilbert Sorrentino: A Descriptive Bibliography* usefully lists critical essays written about Sorrentino (as well as reviews of Sorrentino's books), but this book was published in 1993 and has not been updated to cover all of Sorrentino's career. Many of the critical considerations by academic critics are more interested in using Sorrentino's work to exemplify broader philosophical issues that his inveterate self-reflexivity and breaking of form (especially in *Mulligan Stew*) tangentially raise, or in placing Sorrentino's fiction in a taxonomy of postmodernism, so that neither the full range of Sorrentino's aesthetic strategies nor the distinct progression of his work as a whole are as well-appreciated as they should be for a writer of Sorrentino's accomplishments.

My current effort here, then, is to contribute in some small way to advancing this more complete view of Sorrentino's career as a writer. It isn't as expansive as a critical biography might be, or as detailed in its close readings as a more focused analysis of an individual work can be, but it attempts both to survey all of Sorrentino's published writing from his beginnings as mostly a poet through to his final, posthumous, novel, *The Abyss of Human Illusion*, and to consider the various aesthetic objectives informing Sorrentino's approach to the creation of

literary art. Although Sorrentino is most often described as an “experimental” writer (and this is the category in which I myself initially placed him), the longer view of Sorrentino’s body of work reveals that his aesthetic purposes are in fact multifarious, if ultimately all unified in an effort to discover the still unrealized potential of fiction as a form of verbal art. Sorrentino is indeed an experimental writer, but that word in itself does not describe the specific strategies, accentuated to different degrees in different works, by which he effects his distinctive manner of experiment.

Thus this book is organized more or less chronologically (some slippage with the final books), but also according to an analysis of these multifarious purposes as they are manifested in particular works. I have identified what I believe are the separable but ultimately integrated aesthetic modes that are prominent in Sorrentino’s practice, each of which is more predominant in some of the novels but are also present in many of the others. This allows the opportunity to emphasize the panoply of strategies Sorrentino employs, while acknowledging his underlying commitment to formal innovation and the self-sufficiency of literary language. These commitments are what unites all of Sorrentino’s fiction and mark it as among the most distinctive in postwar American literature, but they do not determine the specific narrative devices—or whether narrative is even present—that Sorrentino chooses to use, or preclude the possibility that an individual work might pursue specific kinds of effects that Sorrentino’s formal designs also make possible, as I hope my discussions of each of Sorrentino’s published novels will show.

Some of Sorrentino’s works, of course, have been more widely discussed than others, and while I give ample attention to books such as *Mulligan Stew* and *Crystal Vision*, I also try to give extended consideration to all of his books, in some cases more extended than is generally available through extant critical commentary on Sorrentino, especially the later ones (after the *Pack of Lies* novels). While *Mulligan Stew* will no doubt remain the Sorrentino novel most likely to find its way onto reading lists dedicated to postmodern fiction, and his early work up through *Crystal Vision* will likely attract most new readers, familiarity with the shape of his whole career can only enhance appreciation of Sorrentino’s strategies in those novels, as well as perhaps encourage interest in the lesser-known titles (some of which are out of print). The subtitle of this book promises an “introduction” to Sorrentino’s work, but it is really more accurately an attempt

to re-introduce a writer whose work arguably most purely embodies the practice of “experimental fiction” in postwar American writing.

Sorrentino the Poet

Given the trajectory of his career, it seems likely that Gilbert Sorrentino always considered himself first of all to be a poet. He began his professional writing life 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, the key aesthetic assumptions of which 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 the fiction he began to write later 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.

Sorrentino 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 produce 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

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 impressions 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 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 defeat and isolation, 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.

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, he 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 depredations 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 skeptical view of 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.

Sorrentino 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 he 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 established 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 at 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 20th 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 the 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 thoroughly 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 more comprehensively take the iconoclastic impulse of metafiction and direct it toward creating the most all-encompassing kind of subversive humor.

"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 or 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 polygossic 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 inobtaineable 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 their 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.

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, 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 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 yearning 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 is then to inspect each episode for its connection to the relevant Tarot card, to extract the secret “meaning” of the novel and 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 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, adds 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 ones.

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.

Sorrentino the Anarchist

A common complaint lodged against Gilbert Sorrentino's fiction by some unsympathetic critics is that it is so resistant to conventional narrative form, it often seems not merely formless, but brandishes a kind of deliberate aesthetic anarchy. Sometimes this charge is expressed in the trivializing allegation that Sorrentino is "playing games," but even this conceit ultimately seems a defensive gesture aimed at the implicit demand in all of Sorrentino's fiction that the reader hold previous assumptions about the formal requirements of fiction in abeyance, that the reader be prepared, in fact, to participate in its reordering, at least as exemplified in the work at hand. Most reviewers in the mainstream literary press expect to apply the usual critical bromides to the works that come before them, and are decidedly not prepared to engage in good-faith critical analysis of unfamiliar methods..

Regarding Sorrentino as a literary anarchist can thus be a way of avoiding an encounter with work that threatens settled reading habits while still also seeming to maintain some putatively principled critical position: fiction like Sorrentino's represents a wanton assault on fundamental literary values it blithely abandons. Such a move is often enough manifestly disingenuous, an irresponsible refusal to engage. And yet, it is not altogether inaccurate to describe Sorrentino's fiction as anarchical in spirit. It does indeed want to dispense with the unwritten but still mostly binding rules writers are expected to follow if they want to be considered proper novelists. He doesn't suggest that the current formal expectations should be replaced by others just as unitary but proposes that form is achieved organically through the work's ultimate realization, not imposed from without, and that form needs to be reinvented in each subsequent work. He would seem to agree with John Hawkes that "the true enemies of the novel [are] plot, character, setting, and theme," which should be avoided in favor of "totality of vision or structure," although Sorrentino is perhaps less insistent on "totality" and more willing to tolerate a certain effect of untidiness in his formal structures.

Certainly it would seem that if Sorrentino's vision of the free play of aesthetic invention were actually to become the reigning approach taken by all serious writers of fiction, a kind of anarchy would indeed hold sway. Sorrentino himself may well have taken delight in such a situation, although even if it could be sustained in America's hyper-commercial culture, one

wonders how many writers would be prepared to seize the opportunity to embrace true aesthetic freedom, which is ultimately the ambition animating all of Gilbert Sorrentino's work. Nor is it at all likely that this dispensation would suit very many readers, the biggest majority of which (among those who actually read at all) currently express a preference for the highly formulaic, whether in the sort of popular fiction mostly designed to be made into movies or in genre fiction (not to mention YA, often read by a surprisingly large number of adults) or what is called "fan fiction." Literary fiction, a category encompassing the most "artistic" fiction that mainstream publishing and bookselling are willing to recognize as commercially viable, is perhaps less formulaic in plot and character type than the rest of what is supported by the book business, but it hardly escapes its own kind of uniformity, dominated by the notion of "craft" that even Sorrentino attempted to approximate in *Aberrations of Starlight*.

But Sorrentino was finally most contemptuous of this sort of influence in American writing. Much of his work mercilessly travesties literary fiction (even if it didn't exactly go by this name during most of Sorrentino's career), both the practice itself and those who assume the artistic pretensions and bohemian decadence they associate with the "literary." Writers concerned to write true literary fiction ought not, it would seem, conflate bloated ambitions with actual writing, nor construe "the writing life" to mean dissolute behavior rather than commitment to literary art. Thus we find the unsparing treatment of most of the characters in *Imaginary Qualities of Actual Things*, followed by the equally acerbic *Mulligan Stew*. To call these novels "satirical" in their comic intent would not accurately measure the extremity of their caustic humor. Their radical burlesque of literary pretenders and their bohemian affectations comes closer to Bakhtin's "absolute comedy," humor so all-encompassing that it implies there can be no reclamation for such characters, that they are simply deserving of laughter.

Since Sorrentino himself is such a thoroughly unconventional writer, we might assume that his comedy is actually targeted at conventional writers and writing (as much of his criticism in the reviews collected in *Something Said* is so directed), but of course the main object of comic deflation in *Mulligan Stew* is its ostensible protagonist, Antony Lamont, a self-styled "experimental" writer whose work is held up to withering ridicule. One could say that Lamont is ridiculed for not understanding what makes a work of fiction experimental in the first place, but if so, there is no normative alternative to a writer like Lamont offered in any of Sorrentino's

novels, only tacitly, by those very novels, and it could plausibly be argued that the characteristics of Lamont's novels as described in *Mulligan Stew* are not so obviously different than Sorrentino's in the extent of their formal heterodoxy. If *Mulligan Stew* can at all be regarded as a satire, arguably it is a Menippean satire, the sort of comedy that is directed more broadly at ways of thinking and entrenched perspectives than at individual fools and phonies, in a manner and mode so excessive that the work risks seeming ridiculous in itself. Sorrentino seems in a novel like *Mulligan Stew* to court anarchy even in its own conception.

The characters in the trilogy of novels *Odd Number*, *Rose Theatre*, and *Misterioso* return us to characters similar to those in *Imaginative Qualities* and *Mulligan Stew*—in fact, the cast of characters in these three novels is a virtual reprise of that featured in the earlier books, especially *Imaginative Qualities*. Although characters other than those introduced in the previous novels are featured in the trilogy, they are nevertheless fully resonant with those precursors, inhabitants of the same dilettante-ish milieu (to which the narrator of *Imaginative Qualities* himself also belongs). However, while it might be said that we learn more about these characters, and are steeped more fully in that milieu (of the three, *Odd Number* provides the most sustained depiction of it), any reader expecting these three novels to finally come to a fully focused, internally consistent portrayal of this bohemian demimonde, or even a mostly intelligible account of the actions and behavior in which the characters are engaged (or are alleged to be engaged), will inevitably be disappointed. *Odd Number* is explicitly an attempt to determine what actions were or were not taken by various characters in various circumstances (an attempt that does not succeed), while *Rose Theatre* and *Misterioso* at times undermines or contradicts what we seemed to be told about characters or events, both in *Odd Number* and each other.

Taken as a whole, the trilogy is in part an exercise in negation, a denial of fiction's capacity to disclose the "truth" about what it represents as reality. It can only represent, but it is not "real life" that is the object of representation. In his book, *Fact, Fiction, and Representation: Four Novels by Gilbert Sorrentino*, Louis Mackey contends that the novels in the trilogy represent only "representationality," the act of transformation into language that is ultimately their subject. "Fiction," writes Mackey, "as the determinate representation of the indeterminate representationality of language—fiction conceived as the principle of language—generates a potential infinitude of figurations." Sorrentino celebrates this potential, according to Mackey,

making Sorrentino's novels, exemplified most directly in the trilogy, perhaps the most iconoclastic works of fiction in American postmodernism, an approach known for its skepticism of inherited assumptions about the writing of fiction to begin with. Although Sorrentino clearly began to contest these assumptions as early as *Steelwork* (and did so with particular vigor in *Mulligan Stew*), *Odd Number*, *Rose Theatre*, and *Misterioso* in Mackey's analysis not merely explore alternatives to conventional methods of representation in fiction but in effect declare representation to be a mirage, finally an obstacle to the full liberation of language as the writer's focus of concern.

While Mackey is no doubt correct in his assessment that this trilogy seeks to undermine the belief that fiction might rest on some solid pedestal of epistemic certainty, this effort does not act to undermine the novels' own authority as a work of literary art (as Mackey himself points out), just as Bakhtinian comedy retains its value while loudly broadcasting that nothing can be taken seriously. If figuration is all, then figuration it shall be, for all its worth (which is a lot). But in Sorrentino's fiction, figuration is not merely the stylistic "troping" of language it extends to the creation of form and structure that has already featured so prominently in Sorrentino's previous novels and that in the works subsequent to the trilogy will only occupy even more of his aesthetic attention. Indeed, it is figuration thus understood that establishes fiction as an aesthetic medium in the first place, however much language is also freighted with the expectation of immediate communication as well. Sorrentino wants us to know that fiction is figuration, all the way down—not just Sorrentino's brand of unfettered experimental fiction but all works of fiction so conceived—and that the measure of achievement (not to mention simple competency) in a work of fiction is the degree to which the writer acknowledges this fact and seeks to realize its potential.

Nevertheless, "figuration" is likely to predominantly suggest the sort of figurative language to which writers are expected to appeal in producing "fine writing"—a kind of prose Sorrentino regarded with particular disdain. The novels in the trilogy are in fact quite conspicuously free of this affectation of "poetic" language, except when self-consciously employed for comic effect. *Odd Number* is so far removed from this kind of language that the reader might at first hesitate to call the writing "prose" as we would expect to find it in most novels. The first section of the novel presents us with an interrogator questioning a second

person about a party attended by, among others, Guy Lewis and Lou and Sheila Henry. The interrogator is represented only by the questions he is asking, but the person questioned addresses the questioner as if he is present and soliciting answers. The first few questions elicit information about Guy, Lou, and Sheila's drive to the party, although we don't yet know why these three should be the focus of our attention, or why the image of the three of them together in a car is significant. The party, we learn, is held at the home of Horace Rosette, and soon enough the attendees—we are helpfully provided a complete list of the partygoers (35 in all) at the beginning of the interview—and their various adventures—many of them rather sordid—become the more general subject of the interviewer's questions.

The second section of *Odd Number* is also in the form of question-and-answer, but this time the interviewee is less grudging in his answers and his responses seem to come from direct experience with the various characters introduced in part one, as opposed to the second-hand information the original interlocutor was able to provide from the assorted documents he claimed to be examining. (How he came into the possession of these documents is never made clear—one could venture an interpretation of the novel by which the first speaker is acting as a kind of third-person narrator attempting to portray his characters from the outside, while the second is a first-person narrator drawing on his own putative involvement with the characters.) The tone of part two is more personal, more forthcoming, his account livelier (and at times) more judgmental. Unfortunately, his account does not entirely square with the one we have just read. We might expect this from a subjective, first-person recital of events, except that the first narrator-respondent is not always entirely sure how to interpret his sources, frequently asserting there are things he doesn't know. We do, however, find out from the second narrator the relevance of the initial description of Guy, Sheila, and Lou and their drive to the party: At the end of the second section we return to Lou and Sheila Henry in their car, but now the other passengers are a mysterious informant and—the second narrator-respondent himself! More importantly, the end of this trip finds Sheila, apparently, dead, run over by Lou.

If this potentially makes *Odd Number* into, if not a whodunit (since we seem to know the perpetrator) then at least a whydunit (what drove Lou to such an act?), the third section of the novel brings the whole incident into further uncertainty, a perplexity that continues to be reinforced in *Rose Theatre* and *Misterioso*. Shortly into part three, we read this, from yet another

apparent interview, between, presumably, the same questioner and a new, but inconclusively identified, respondent:

Are the accounts that I've been given of [these characters'] deaths and disappearances substantially correct?

No.

None of these people has either died or disappeared.

A few lines later, we are told: "Sheila Henry has just published her first book of poems, *Fretwork*." To make things even more confusing, later we learn that Sheila "has her own Certificate of Death in a frame on her dresser." How she can have received her own death certificate is, of course, unexplained.

(Sheila Henry is revived even more thoroughly in *Rose Theatre*, although both here and in *Misterioso* it continues to be suggested that Sheila is alive while at other times she is presumed to be dead. Like most other material facts asserted or implied about the cast of characters appearing first in *Odd Number* and present again in the two subsequent novels, Sheila Henry's death is a kind of free-floating signifier, seeming to name a state of affairs that has immediate reference, but eventually emptied of significance, other than as an extended conceit.)

Part three of *Odd Number* promises to dispel the confusion the first two sections have introduced, but this third section is disappointingly brief, the answers provided by the somewhat mysterious respondent terse and often restricted to unhelpful affirmations and denials: "Can you tell me why I was directed to ask my fifth informant the same questions, in reverse order, that I asked my third informant?" "No." (Exactly who might be giving such directions is also left opaque.) One response actually seems to tell us something undeniably truthful about events depicted in *Odd Number*:

What *about* the quality of the information given me by my other informants?

It is somewhat distorted by omissions, exaggerations, inventions, fantasies, confusions, prejudices, egoism, faulty memories, contradictions, and outright lies.

“Somewhat” seems an overnice qualification, but otherwise this is an accurate characterization of what the novel’s informants have related, one that no careful reader of *Odd Number* will find surprising or revelatory.

At the same time, we might acknowledge that we are, after all, reading fiction, and that therefore these distortions of literal truth should not be unforeseen—should in fact be inherent in our presumptions about a work of fiction. Sorrentino attempts to reinforce the rampant ambiguities and artificiality of *Odd Number* literally by equating the “real story” the questioner is trying to uncover and works of fiction: At the end of their exchange, the questioner asks the first interviewee why the information the latter has provided is so similar to what is to be found in a novel (called *Isolate Flecks*), written by the character Leo Kaufman. (The respondent protests he is only working with the “papers” he has available.) But this novel is not the only fictional work-within-the-work to which the events depicted in *Odd Number* might potentially be subsumed. The main scenes in *Odd Number* take place at the party so many of the characters attend, but it also turns out that many of these characters are associated with a film called *The Party*, whose incidents are very reminiscent of those being related by the narrator-correspondent. So whatever underlying reality is presumed to be the source of the accounts given to us in *Odd Number* is openly declared to be possibly fictional in the first place, making the “suspension of disbelief” all but superfluous: whether the events chronicled in the novel actually come from *Isolate Flecks* or *The Party* or any other act of imagination doesn’t really matter because it is all an act of imagination and “what really happened” is a meaningless question.

Rose Theatre adopts an explicitly artificial framework that calls attention to its status as an imaginative construct, in this case through a theatrical allusion that explains the novel’s title. Sorrentino had this device in mind even before writing the book, or even before deciding that it would be a direct follow-up to *Odd Number*. In a letter to John O’Brien (quoted in McPheron’s *Gilbert Sorrentino: A Descriptive Bibliography*), Sorrentino mused that he would like to use “an inventory made by Philip Henslowe of the Rose Theatre’s props in London, when he moved the company to a new location.” This inventory satisfied Sorrentino’s desire to write a novel “made of lists,” one of Sorrentino’s favorite forms of artifice. Ultimately the list of props (“chayne of dragons,” “tree of golden apples”) came to act as the novel’s chapter titles. It is tempting to seek out in the chapters themselves some association with Elizabethan theater, but really the titles

work to organize the book on a principle just as arbitrary as that governing *Odd Number* and that will work to structure *Misterioso*. *Rose Theatre* is “theatrical” in signaling to us that the novel is ultimately a contrivance, a fate that is not only unavoidable but ultimately is one to be embraced.

Rose Theatre does accentuate its artifice (at least its formal artifice) less insistently than *Odd Number*, and it leaves an impression that arguably has more to do with its matter than its manner of execution. While most of the characters featured in *Odd Number* make an appearance in *Rose Theatre*, the primary emphasis is on the women characters, who act as the focus of separate episodes ostensibly elaborating on or supplementing what we know (or think we know) about them from the previous novel (as well as *Imaginative Qualities*). *Odd Number* perhaps has suggested that most of these women are sexually profligate, dispensing sexual favors with some abandon. But the more expanded portrayal of them provided by *Rose Theatre* gives them an agency that’s more circumscribed in *Odd Number*. Women characters actually play a substantial role in Sorrentino’s fiction, although admittedly novels like *Steelwork* and *Crystal Vision* consign them to subsidiary roles in support of the cast of mostly male figures in Sorrentino’s evocation of the Brooklyn neighborhood of his youth. In other of the books, the women characters seem adjacent to the male characters, but usually such a status merely reflects the status they assume in the eyes of the men, who as often as not are portrayed as clueless, not just about their relationships with women but about their own emotional impulses,

This dynamic in Sorrentino’s fiction is perhaps most readily apparent in *Odd Number*, *Rose Theatre*, and *Misterioso* taken together. Almost all of the male characters are, to one degree or another, depicted as self-important but irretrievably shallow, although there is inevitably a thin line between the shallowness exhibited by a particularly obtuse character and the inherent shallowness of characterization that results from Sorrentino’s thoroughgoingly comic vision: No characters in Sorrentino’s novels could be called “complex” in the way that term is generally applied to characters that seem impressively “lifelike.” In this context, the women characters presented in *Rose Theatre* are not exactly more “rounded.” but their dilemma as intellectually ambitious women in a milieu not designed for them is more fully revealed. They are still subject to the sort of caricature entailed by Sorrentino’s humor, but in no other of his novels do they feature so exclusively or prominently, nor are their difficulties negotiating a male dominated world emphasized as explicitly, as in *Rose Theatre*.

Beyond the larger structure imposed by the list of props, the formal design of *Rose Theatre* is looser than in either *Odd Number* or *Misterioso*. The episodes depicting each of the characters vary in length and perspective, but with the question-answer restraint—and its restriction of style to the manner adopted by the interlocutor—removed, the language of *Rose Theatre* is freer, one of the reasons these women seem more amply evoked, less subject to second-hand insinuation. Of course, Sorrentino does not provide us with “fine writing.” From loosely punctuated blocks of expository prose to the hilarious use of idioms and clichés to streams of non-sequiturs and faux academic jargon, and, to be sure, Sorrentino’s habitual use of lists, the writing in *Rose Theatre* is lively but far from conventional, as one would expect from Sorrentino as a stylist. (One chapter anticipates *Gold Fools* in being composed entirely in interrogatives.) If form in *Odd Number* largely determines the reader’s dominant impression of the novel, in *Rose Theatre* it is style—more broadly, the extension of language’s artistic potential beyond the usual “poetic” effects—that prevails.

It might be said that *Misterioso* has the virtue of combining these approaches in a move that seems entirely appropriate to the third and final offering in a trilogy. This novel is again stylistically varied, although here the overriding effect of Sorrentino’s disport with language is one of broad humor, bordering on farce. *Misterioso* is the funniest of the three novels, if only because the humor in *Odd Number* and *Rose Theatre* is more an aftereffect of the outrageous situations depicted. The extreme fragmentation of *Misterioso* imposed by the novel’s organizing conceit among other things prompts Sorrentino to proceed instead through self-enclosed “bits” that in manner and structure resemble jokes and other comic routines. The scenes and episodes in much of Sorrentino’s fiction often seem not far from the joke in their execution, and it would not be inappropriate to regard Sorrentino as a literary comedian, as long as the comedy of his work is understood in the Bakhtinian sense as a kind of radical skepticism, with the assumptions and pretensions of the “literary” as its prime target. The goal, however, is not to assert Sorrentino’s version of the literary as the proper substitute; it is to assert the self-sufficiency of laughter.

As with *Odd Number*, however, the most consequential feature of *Misterioso* is its formal design, although a reader might not become fully aware of it at first. The non-sequential, episodic fragments that comprise the novel are presented through a form of alphabetical order, according to the characters’ names and other proper nouns, around which the episodes are built.

While most of the characters from *Odd Number* and *Rose Theatre* again return, other characters and circumstances appear as well, beginning with a woman standing in an A & P, who discovers on top of a bin of apples a copy of *Absalom, Absalom*. (She hopes it is better than the most recent novel she tried to read, *Acquisitions*.) She also finds copies of *Action*, *Action at Sea*, *Actions Monthly*, and *Actionworld* on the magazine rack. The novel continues with numerous entries per letter, all the way to the end of the alphabet. (It ends with a character nicknamed “Zooz,” or “ZuZu.”) All of the actions taking place in these episodes are set in a single day, but whatever narrative stability this latter device might promise to provide is undermined by the subsequent irrelevance of chronology per se (the “story” of the day is decidedly beside the point), and the otherwise random constraint introduced by alphabetical order further makes the temporal conceit itself purely arbitrary.

Thus, similar to Sorrentino’s self-enclosed mode of comedy, the apparent formal intricacy of his design is both illusory (it’s all arbitrary) and serves no larger aesthetic purpose beyond itself. We are invited to enjoy *Misterioso* because it is very funny, and because it is formally and stylistically inventive, both of which are implicitly put forward as self-sustaining sources of interest in a work of fiction. This is a gesture relevant to almost all of Sorrentino’s novels, but this trilogy concluding with *Misterioso* reinforces his core aesthetic assumptions in an especially emphatic way by embedding them in a series of novels that continually promises to clear up the uncertainties in their depictions of characters and events, only to make those uncertainties even more apparent, in effect denying that a work of fiction can be “about” something beyond its own processes in the first place.

To some readers and more than a few critics, this literary project threatens to trivialize fiction’s aesthetic ambitions, undermining its credibility as a “serious” medium able to “say something” about the human condition, to “intervene” in real world affairs outside its own world of make-believe. It reduces to absurdity the notion that fiction might concern itself with issues beyond the “merely literary.” But of course the belief that fiction exists to be in service to some rhetorical purpose transcending the achievement of artistic integrity is to deny the value of that integrity in the first place: why turn the form primarily useful for reinscribing meaning indirectly into a kind of secondary confirmation of what you already know (in some cases an affirmation that the author thinks as you do)? Much of the dismissive criticism Sorrentino received

throughout his career (each new book was usually greeted to a few exasperated and sometimes choleric reviews) can be attributed to an expectation that the writing in a work of fiction will not interfere with the reader's ability to "get the point."

Sorrentino's fiction is not pointless. But if the point of the trilogy is that there is no point (not of the kind readers want), this is not something that is directly stated as a "theme" across the three novels, communicated to the reader as the ultimate subject. Arguably, in fact, it is a point the novel makes at all only when the reader expects it to have one, even after *Odd Number* has exposed the inability of fiction to escape the restrictions created by the unavoidable artifice to which the writer must resort, artifice that is finally the enabling condition of the form (fiction is fiction, after all.) Of course, there are readers who do not expect a work of fiction to advance ideas or transmit messages, who want it to be itself by entertaining. And while Sorrentino's disinclination to invoke the usual elements of character and narrative would itself be frustrating to many of these readers, the more adventurous of them might actually have more sympathy with Sorrentino's approach than more nominally "serious" critics: Once we grant Sorrentino's insistence on the self-sufficiency of the writer's performance of language and style, the ingenuities and sheer outrageousness of some of his moves can very entertaining indeed.

This is true for novels like *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* and, most notably, *Mulligan Stew*, and of the novels in this trilogy it may be most true of *Misterioso*. Although the cast familiar from the first two novels does appear in the third novel, *Misterioso* offers an even broader array of characters, some appearing only once in self-contained vignettes, others making multiple appearances the needs and constraints of the alphabetical method make possible or necessary. It would be hard to describe most of these characters as conventionally well-developed (two of them, Buddy and Dick, are allowed to develop over the course of several inserted chapters of *Buddy and the Boys on Mystery Mountain*, a parody of a boys' adventure novel), not only because of the relative brevity of the sketches but also because of the freely indulged absurdity of their speech and actions, augmented by the frequently preposterous juxtapositions and deliberate pomposity offered by the narrative voice in most of the episodes. But these very absurdities and exaggerations are consistently hilarious, irresistibly entertaining to those readers who elect not to resist.

Among the characters introduced in *Misterioso* are a selection of demons taken from the *Ars Goetica*. (The first to be named is Agares, “Master of Tongues and Crocodiles.”) Some of these demons appear as well in *Odd Number* and *Rose Theatre*, although in *Misterioso* there are more of them and they are given greater roles, mostly as causes of disruption and mischief-making in relation to the other, human, characters. We might regard these demons as collective stand-ins for the author of *Misterioso*, the ultimate source of the disruptions of standard literary practice, not just in this novel but all of Sorrentino’s work. But it is unlikely that Sorrentino incorporated these figures into the discursive fabric of his novel simply as the opportunity to insert symbols of the usual kind, although enticing the reader to suspect this sort of gesture surely would satisfy Sorrentino’s strategy of promising conventional meaning while ultimately denying it. But these demon characters do provide a device from within the fictional world the novel evokes that contributes to our sense that it is a capricious world, characterized by a kind of perpetual farce.

As Mackey has it, “*Misterioso* is the joint product of the English alphabet and the demons. . .collaborating as efficiently as possible to generate as efficiently as possible something like maximum pandemonium” (*Fact, Fiction, and Representation*). The noise and tumult is perhaps most pronounced in *Misterioso*, but one could say that together the novels in the trilogy bring a kind of pandemonium to the novel as a form (rivalled in its intensity only by *Mulligan Stew*), upsetting conventional expectations about what works of fiction should do. While on the one hand, the three novels seem to suggest that they are limited in what they can do if the assumption is that in fiction we will find closure, truth, certainty; on the other, they also reveal what fiction could do if we dropped these assumptions and allowed it to create its own forms and embody them fully. Sorrentino’s project is not to unleash anarchy but to renew the art of fiction.

Sorrentino the Formalist

Under the Shadow

There are some ways of characterizing Gilbert Sorrentino's fiction that of course apply to all of the work. As disparate and singular as his novels can be, they still possess certain qualities that make them unmistakably the creations of the same writer, a writer who fashions a distinctive version of human reality through strategies that produce a recognizable tone, restlessly question the dictates of form, and persistently return to a particular milieu that serves as a composite subject. The novels that Sorrentino published during the last phase of his career, perhaps because they seem less exorbitant in conception and more restrained in their execution, present us with an opportunity to appreciate these features of Sorrentino's fiction more adequately, avoiding the critical incomprehension and mischaracterization sometimes provoked by the earlier, more openly confrontational books.

It was always obvious that Sorrentino was a writer interested in exploding conventional notions of form in fiction— notions tied to narrative realism—but only later in his career, and especially in respect to his final series of shorter novels, was it really noted how purposefully and often intricately Sorrentino endeavored to create form, even if this might be a form that was suitable only for this particular work by Gilbert Sorrentino. The critical complaint most frequently voiced about Sorrentino's books by those most confounded by his apparent rejection of familiar narrative forms was some version of the accusation that the author was "playing games" (also the most persistent criticism of other writers perceived to writing metafiction), implying that at best he was simply messing around with form, upsetting expectations for the fun of it but not reestablishing our equilibrium with a reassuringly steady perspective on the possibilities of fictional form.

It is the case that Sorrentino's most notorious book, *Mulligan Stew*, could plausibly be described as playing games, although the novel's title and the extremity of its comedy and formal fragmentation should alert the reader that a kind of game-playing, one emphasizing variety and excess, is precisely the point and should be enjoyed for its own sake. Its positive reception by some critics (John Leonard, for example) suggested that Sorrentino's aesthetic intentions were

clear enough, but the shadow of this novel's radical disruption of conventional practice continued to loom heavily over Sorrentino's further, undeterred insistence on formal experiment, experiments that critics too often inferred were mostly negations of form in the service of a self-indulgent imagination. And while it is true that Sorrentino's work draws the reader's attention to the role of imagination in fiction—not through the kind of narrative fantasy often associated with flights of “imagination” but through the exploration of form as it is shaped by the devices of language that Sorrentino invents and develops—this is because for Sorrentino the work of imagination *is* fiction. not the perfunctory invocation of “story” in its sundry tacitly approved versions.

Certainly Sorrentino's fiction doesn't always completely abandon recognizable narrative form. In his first novel he incorporated a version of picaresque, as he does as well in *Blue Pastoral* (in a more explicitly comic mode), and to an extent as well in *Gold Fools*. All of Sorrentino's other novels do indeed avoid direct storytelling as the default strategy of presentation, but many of them wind up offering a “story” of sorts nonetheless. Even *Mulligan Stew* tells us the story, however obliquely, of its protagonist, Antony Lamont. The most common organizing principle in the novels is a form of collage or episodic fragmentation. Sometimes this fragmentation is employed to create a larger kind of unity of theme or design: in *Steelwork* to portray a neighborhood while shuffling through time, in *Aberration of Starlight* to provide multiple perspectives on a fixed time and place, in *Red the Fiend* to create character while also departing from strict chronology. In all of these books, far from renouncing the benefits of form, Sorrentino uses form to bring the work's “content” into being.

Beginning with *Under the Shadow* (1991), most of Sorrentino's books (*Gold Fools* is a notable exception) use the collage method, although there is variety in the ways he applies the method in each of them—in some cases the prose fragments are briefer and more impressionistic, in others longer and more continuous, more anecdotal and storylike. The impressionistic works are generally the more intricate, as their formal arrangement is not at all random, but through pre-determined organizational schemes, including the use of Oulipo-like constraints. For the most part, the individual entries and episodes can stand on their own as prose compositions, but the ultimate effect is cumulative, achieved through repetition, association, and juxtaposition, as well as through tone and style (similar to the approach taken in *Misterioso* and

Rose Theatre) The broader formal strategies found in these works are consistent with the fundamental strategy Sorrentino follows in most of his fiction—fashioning a larger artistic whole out of the unorthodox assembly of smaller parts—but here the effect is to even more intensely accentuate the reader’s role in helping to construct the text by closely attending to its formal and stylistic dynamism.

In the section of *Under the Shadow* called “Novel,” we learn that “Archibald Fuxer” (a recurring figure in the book) served as the model for a character named “Theodore Rose-Rose” in a novel written by “Strom Owns” (another recurring figure). Rose-Rose, we are told, “discovers that the secrets of form are buried in the *absence of form*.” Of course, both Fuxer and Rose-Rose are caricatures of the kind that populated *Under the Shadow* (as well as many other Sorrentino novels) and Rose-Rose has just been discovered “naked and in carnal enjoyment of the snow, his phallus buried ‘up to its throbbing hilt’ in a virgin drift,” so we perhaps can’t comfortably take this epiphany as free of Sorrentino’s usual sort of caustic irony, but it seems to allude to the implicit formal principle that does in fact underlie the aesthetic structure of *Under the Shadow*. In a 1994 interview, Sorrentino confirmed that the formal strategy uniting the 59 self-enclosed vignettes comprising the novel is their loose correspondence to the 59 illustrations provided by the artist H.A. Zo to accompany the text of Raymond Roussel’s poem, *Nouvelle Impressions d’Afrique*. As Sorrentino says, Zo’s illustrations “have nothing to do with [Roussel’s] text” but Sorrentino inventively converts them into a collection of discreet but interlocking prose compositions featuring his signature brand of absurdist farce.

There are no direct allusions to Zo’s illustrations in Sorrentino’s reimagined text (aside from references to the “Zo Mountains”), and while the Dalkey Archive back cover copy does invoke Roussel in a general way, the reader unfamiliar with *Nouvelle Impressions* would most likely remain unaware of the formal procedure from which the novel is constructed. Without knowledge of the way it has arisen from the conceit with which the writer has begun, readers could indeed perceive *Under the Shadow* to be characterized by an “absence of form.” If the “secrets of form” are thus “buried,” the “secret” concealed represents the actual formal achievement of the novel, one willing to sacrifice the recognizable continuity of linear narrative for a subtler principle of association, to substitute variety and surprise for dramatic development,

to trust that wit and laughter can effectively maintain the reader's engagement as readily as the gratifications provided by story. If some readers and critics persist in regarding such devices simply as measures taken to compensate for "absence of form," this is because, despite the formal innovations introduced by modernism (most of which do not displace narrative but expand or modify the potential means of its realization), the operative assumption shared by a majority of the audience for fiction remains that "form" is irrevocably coterminous with "narrative."

The "proceduralism" of a novel like *Under the Shadow* certainly bears comparison with the concept of "constraint" developed by the writers associated with Oulipo, except that for Sorrentino his constraints and procedures are not per se challenges to a writer's ingenuity in negotiating the constraint but provide the foundation on which Sorrentino's verbal artistry can then be exercised. Form makes manifest the "content" of that artistry. If Sorrentino did not always entirely renounce storytelling (his next novel, *Red the Fiend*, tells the rather affecting story of the title character's brutalization at the hands of a terrorizing grandmother), his efforts to show that form in fiction can be separated from story also works to illustrate how art in fiction floats free of story into language and form.

For readers to register the effects of form, they must be willing to accept that the absence of story does not mean the absence of form. They must also be willing to actively discern the elements of form and the means of their interaction in a way that departs from the customary reading strategies for which most conventional fiction encourages us to settle. Similarly, Sorrentino seldom if ever furnishes us with the kind of simile-lade descriptive prose that reflexively ornaments the narrative presents in so-called "literary fiction," announcing itself as "style" (nor even the sort of language one might expect in writer who was first of all a poet). Much of his prose is straightforwardly expository and descriptive, but at a very high level of generality, so as to allow for the absurd situations he invokes, the bizarre juxtapositions that so often edge his descriptions into the surreal, the outright jokes and non-sequiturs. Sorrentino's prose notoriously disappears at times into lists of various sorts (in *Under the Shadow* the narrator frequently notes the contents of diverse documents, to which he and the characters are privy), while one of Sorrentino's stylistic devices is the deliberate use of cliché (again often reflecting the perspective or understanding of a character). Sorrentino's language can thus create the

illusion of an absence of style in the same way his anti-narrative strategies can suggest absence of form. In both cases, however, he offers us the opportunity to examine our assumptions about what defines form and style in fiction.

There is character creation and development in *Under the Shadow*, as characters appearing in individual vignettes return in others (thus departing from Zo's illustrations, which do not obviously seem to feature recurring figures). Some of the characters, such as "Donald Chainville," mostly seem to function simply as names, as their identities and activities are modified with each appearance. Others have more continuous identities: "Robert Redu" is invoked as an inventor of sorts, although the inventions with which he is credited vary widely and share only their farcical nature: a "harmonica inspissator: which transposes "instantly any score for any instrument or combination of instruments to a score for any other instrument or combination of instruments," the Symptomatic Referent Equalizer" which is a "disarmingly simple microchip search-functioned dublend." Perhaps the most memorable of the reappearing characters is the "maniac," Jonathan Tancred, who is introduced as an arsonist who sets fire to a book warehouse in an attempt to destroy "official memories" because "there are too many memories already." He is sent to an insane asylum, where he is treated by "Sydelle Lelgach," who unwittingly winds up sending Tancred even farther into his lunacy because her crossed legs send "depraved and perverted messages" through a device under her skirt that "attempt to corrupt him with lust so as to force him to give up his solitary crusade to destroy all the evidence and official memories that threaten Christian America."

Sorrentino uses other motivic reiterations in *Under the Shadow*, principally the use of interpolated sources of information such as letters and postcards and numerous recurring images. The narrator of each of the vignettes (who seems consistent in tone and perspective throughout) often restricts the narrative discourse to a kind of reporting, sticking to what is generally known, what others have said, or what can be discerned from examining documents—letters, reports, the contents of books. At times we are simply given a letter or note the characters have written or received. Objects and images are also recycled: snow (particularly a snowman), trees, a mysterious set of "spheroids," all referenced frequently enough to suggest some more portentous significance (which seasoned readers of Sorrentino will know is feigned), especially the recurrent image of three women dressed in white, usually standing by a lake. But significance is

lost in the essential absurdity of the situations Sorrentino sets up, although that does not mean these devices have no function at all in the novel.

Such motives serve as elements of form, helping to bind together the 59 sketches that might otherwise seem random into a work of fiction that can be discussed as a novel—not a conventional novel but one in which the concept of what counts as appropriate form has been reimagined by a ceaselessly adventurous writer. It is a project realized in its own right in *Under the Shadow*, but also inspires his work as a whole.

A Strange Commonplace

In Barry Alpert's 1974 interview with him, Sorrentino declares that he is "an episodic and synthetic writer. . . I don't like to take a subject and break it down into parts, I like to take disparate parts and put them all together and see what happens." In many if not most of his later works following on *Under the Shadow*, Sorrentino continues to pursue his "synthetic" approach to the writing of fiction, if anything to even more deliberate and concentrated effect. So dedicated are these books to the juxtaposing of "disparate parts," they seem to have brought Sorrentino to a point where all conventional expectations of continuity and development in character or story are simply irrelevant, vestiges of a prior conception of fiction that no longer has much force. The creation of form, which the reader implicitly is invited to witness, itself becomes the immediate subject of interest.

Readers whose assumptions about the novel still depend on notions of plot and character development are likely to have trouble identifying *A Strange Commonplace*, the last novel published in Sorrentino's lifetime, as a novel at all. Some might think of it as a collection of sketches and short tales, but even if we were to take the "episodic" nature of the book as far as this, we would, of course, be privileging the "disparate parts" over the effort "to put them all together" and would be missing the aesthetic point altogether. This is a unified work of fiction, however much Sorrentino makes us participate in the act of synthesizing its elements so that, along with the author, we readers can "see what happens."

The contents page of *A Strange Commonplace* signals to us that we should be alert to the novel's structural patterns, to whatever relationships might be revealed through the arrangement

of its parts. “Book One” and “Book Two” each consist of twenty-six sections, the titles of which are identical across both books, although presented in a different order. Thus, we can read a pair of “chapters” called “In the Bedroom,” “Success,” “Born Again,” etc., although, as we discover, in the second set of episodes the cast of characters changes and the stories related are different—except insofar as all of the separate tales depict a post-World War II America of faded dreams, dysfunctional families, adultery-ridden marriages, and often wanton cruelty. Inevitably, this device tempts us actively to seek out correspondences between these episodes; perhaps such correspondences can indeed be found, but one suspects that Sorrentino himself would be less interested in leading his readers to the “meaning” that might be gleaned from this approach than in the process—unconventional and unorthodox—by which they are led there.

This process is intensified by Sorrentino’s use of a few recurring names for his characters, as well as recurring images and motifs. Two stories are called “Claire,” but the characters involved are, for all we can tell, not the same Claire, and other characters in other stories also bear the name. The same is true of stories whose characters are named “Warren,” “Ray,” “Janet,” and “Inez.” A pearl gray homburg hat appears in numerous stories, frequently we find ourselves at Rockefeller Center, and Meryl Streep is the subject of several conversations. Surely at least here we might regard the homburg as a symbol of the recognizable sort, the other repeated elements similarly placed to provoke us into reflecting on the deeper meaning to which they point? Experienced readers of Sorrentino’s fiction know that such symbol-hunting leads us down a blind alley, that this approach to reading fiction is relentlessly mocked in many of his books, the very notion of “deeper meaning” made the subject of some of his best jokes.

Such avoidance of obvious symbolic meaning does not, however, preclude the novel’s formal variations from contributing something like a thematic coherence to the novel. As playful or seemingly anarchic as Sorrentino’s fiction can sometimes seem, his work at some level almost always represents a reckoning with reality. Some of the books (*Steelwork*, *Red the Fiend*) perhaps address hard-bitten realities somewhat more directly (but only somewhat) than others, but realities are unavoidable, nevertheless. *A Strange Commonplace* is, in fact, more steeped in the grimmer realities of ordinary life than most of Sorrentino’s fiction. The characters share in the common dysfunctions of modern American life, and actual happiness is nowhere to be found.

These features of American reality are reinforced by the formal distribution of the novel's vignettes (twenty-six in each "book," fifty-two in all). We are perhaps tempted to think first of the deck of cards as the novel's formal analogue, as the arrangement of parts to correspond with card decks is prominent in previous books. But we might also consider the weeks of the year as the novel's underlying conceit, which underscores the normality and sameness (reinforced by the repeated names and titles) of the behaviors exemplified by the novel's assorted characters. The novel cannot really be called satire, given the bleakness of the various depictions of the weaknesses displayed by these characters; the view of human deficiency expressed in *A Strange Commonplace* is entirely consistent with the pessimistic vision of human behavior pervasive in Sorrentino's work as a whole.

If this vision is thus commonplace in Sorrentino's fiction, its strangeness in most cases arises from the uncommon way it is manifested in a particular work's formal structure. The characters and situations evoked are often recognizably drawn from ordinary life—the novels focusing on writers, artists, and intellectual types are perhaps an exception—but their treatment is far from ordinary. Discontinuity and fragmentation are characteristics to be found in many of the novels, but while, like them, *A Strange Commonplace* challenges the reader to set aside conventional expectations of fictional form, its realization of Sorrentino's pessimistic take on human nature is comprehensive enough that this outlook provides the novel with an additional kind of unity, however insistent is its utter abjection. It seems unlikely that Sorrentino gave the novel its design in order specifically to create this effect—it is, rather, the inevitable consequence of the application of this design to Sorrentino's bleak perspective.

Less bleak is the way in which the formal design of *A Strange Commonplace* gives increased prominence to language, prompting us to note more closely the characteristic features of Sorrentino's prose style. For a writer who began as and continued to be a poet, the prose in his fiction is entirely free of "poetic" affectation and ornamental flourishes (flights of figurative language are seldom if ever to be found), although the devices he does use keep the writing energetic and often audacious.

The tunnel in the snow leads to a warm kitchen, vinegary salad, ham and baloney and American cheese, white bread from Bohack's and tomato-rice soup and bottles of

ketchup and Worcestershire sauce, coffee. It leads to heaven. Who is the strange and beautiful man at the far end of the tunnel he has just dug from the black Packard sedan to the white door of the little frame house? And who is the woman, who smells of winter and wool and perfume, of spearmint and whiskey and love? He gets out of the car and the woman holds his arm as he starts down the thrilling tunnel, through the snow banked above him on both sides, to the man in the navy blue overcoat and pearl gray homburg who waits, down on one knee, his arms held out to him. This will never happen again, nothing like it will ever happen again. The child begins to laugh joyously in the crepuscular gray light of the magical tunnel, laughing in the middle of the knifing cold of the January day, laughing since he does not know, nor do his mother and father, in their youth and beauty and strength, that this will never happen again, and that the family is almost finished and done. His father wears a white silk scarf with blue polka dots.

Even this brief passage exhibits some of Sorrentino's signature stylistic traits: the first sentence with its list (although less absurd than his lists sometimes are), exposition-through-questions, the mock lyricism, in this instance leading us to the sudden reckoning with reality: ". . .the family is almost finished and done with. His father wears a white silk scarf with blue polka dots."

Many of the vignettes, while mainly in the third-person, are fixed closely to a character's perspective, and display a ready facility with demotic, vernacular (frequently coarse) speech, exemplified in the novel's very first, very brief sketch:

After her husband left her for some floozie who was supposed to be an executive secretary at the crummy half-assed company he'd worked at for years without a raise or even so much as a bottle of cheap whiskey at Christmas, she packed up a few things, took the girl, and moved in with her cousin Janet on Gerritsen Avenue. She'd got the rest of her things after her father had spoken with the rat about his plans for taking his clothes out of the house: she didn't ever want to see his face again. She should have known that something was going on when he took to wearing a ridiculous homburg instead of his usual fedora. She'd laughed at the hat and he'd blushed and then got angry. Now that she thought back on this she realized that the tramp must have said something about how distinguished he'd look in a homburg, and the damn fool went to the haberdashery,

probably the Owl Men's Shop, where the kike told him he could be a banker in a hat like that. Happy as a clam. . . .

The clichés and pat expressions to which the characters (or the narrator in their stead) often resort seem to accurately reflect their level of thought, and thus the language itself contributes to the impression the novel leaves of a whole cast of characters defeated by their conventional thinking and other self-imposed limitations. This integration of language and form in a novel like *A Strange Commonplace* provides an alternative to plot and character development. It is, in fact, an approach that is truer to the potential of prose fiction to authentically claim the status of art, not just another mode of "storytelling" or an effort to create an illusion of "real life": it is a direct engagement with the medium the literary artist must work with in order to shape that medium in new and unforeseen ways.

The Abyss of Human Illusion

Like *A Strange Commonplace*, *The Abyss of Human Illusion* (the first and so far the last posthumously published work by Sorrentino) is a notably condensed work that offers a ready illustration of Sorrentino's synthetic approach to the formal construction of fiction. In common with both the previous novel and *Under the Shadow*, *The Abyss of Human Illusion* proceeds through extreme fragmentation and the juxtaposition of disparate brief narratives and character sketches, although it does not include the same sort of direct repetition and echoing (except through the invocation of "types"). As Christopher Sorrentino points out in his introductory note, the most obvious features of the novel's formal structure are its division into fifty numbered sections that gradually increase in length, from sections comprised of only a paragraph or so to the final sections extending to three or four pages. *The Abyss of Human Illusion* also follows Sorrentino's 2002 novel *Little Casino* in its inclusion of textual notes, in this case labeled "commentaries" and appended to the "main" text.

It is again tempting to look for clues to the significance of the novel's formal patterning, which might ultimately provide the key to interpreting it, in these immediate characteristics of the text. Why fifty sections? Do the sections increase in length according to some identifiable principle governing the "rules and procedures" that Christopher Sorrentino reminds us have always been partly determinative of the formal qualities of his father's fiction? If in *Little Casino* the notes discretely follow each section while in *The Abyss of Human Illusion* they are listed together at the end of the text, does this mean we should read the two novels differently, in the latter case first reading the main entries and then moving on

to the commentaries as a whole? Would this make for a significantly different reading experience, adding or altering meaning in the process?

One is almost compelled to read each of the fifty sections looking for apparent correspondences between them, whether of character, setting, action, or image. And there are indeed correspondences—an orange glow in the first few sections, the perspective through a window in many of them, references to the Milano restaurant, characters who move to St. Louis, an aging writer figure who keeps writing because it's all he can do. Most of these correspondences are probably either trivial or accidental, while others are simply consequences of the setting of many of the episodes in Brooklyn and of characters no doubt in one way or another created from the experiences of the author. Perhaps these motifs were conjured by Sorrentino to help him develop the book's structure organically, from episode to episode, but one can also imagine Sorrentino taking delight in the possibility they would lead some readers on a hunt for "meaning" that would ultimately prove fruitless. Even so, following along through his formal and stylistic turns, even when they entangle us in their convolutions, has always been one of the pleasures of reading Gilbert Sorrentino's fiction, and so it is also in this novel.

Also like *A Strange Commonplace*, the most consistently maintained correspondence linking the condensed stories related in *The Abyss of Human Illusion* is thematic. Each of the stories tells of characters caught in the "abyss" named in the book's title. Some of the characters realize the depth of their illusions, while others remain possessed by them. Some are elderly, most often male, facing what now seems to them the emptiness of their lives, while others are still in the midst of carrying out their illusions. Infidelity, divorce, and general domestic unhappiness play prominent roles, resentment, envy, and an emotional numbness often the accompanying states of being. The overall tone conveyed by the stories is a fairly brutal frankness about the disappointments and futility that frequently enough define human existence.

While such a portrayal of his characters' motives and behavior is common in Sorrentino's fiction, rarely is it made quite so relentlessly the focus of interest as it is in *The Abyss of Human Illusion*. Sorrentino's view of the role of "theme" in fiction has always been that it undercuts the aesthetic integrity of the work when conceived as the act of "saying something" through the work rather than as simply "something said," thematic implications that arise from the work as it pursues its own aesthetic logic. It is entirely possible that Sorrentino began this work with the brief image described in the first section—a young boy sitting at a kitchen table on top of which are placed a bottle of French dressing, a bowl of salad, and a bottle of Worcestershire sauce—and that all of the succeeding sections developed from this base and in imaginative interaction with each other, but the ultimate effect of the central conceit is to leave the impression the novel is a "commentary" of sorts on our capacity for self-delusion.

The coherence this conceit provides could make *The Abyss of Human Illusion* perhaps a more accessible work than some of Sorrentino's other fiction, in which complexity is built out of simplicity. This last novel more nearly reverses that process, producing apparent simplicity from a deceptive complexity. Whether this inversion of his normal practice is a structural device Sorrentino intended us to notice probably cannot now be known, but it does draw our attention to structure in a way that is consistent with his distinctive brand of metafiction more generally and especially with the three novels preceding *The Abyss of Human Illusion*.

Both Sorrentino's final published novel and this posthumous work could serve as relatively low-key introductions to Sorrentino's fiction—both illustrate his pursuit of formal innovation as an alternative to the reflexive use of conventional narrative, but not at the length of *Mulligan Stew*, or with the metafictional intensity of *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* or greater intricacy of the *Pack of Lies* trilogy. However, both also help communicate an impression of the inadequacies of modern human existence that is more direct than Sorrentino's general insistence on the priority of form to "content" (or the dependence of the latter on the former) usually allows. This seems especially true of *The Abyss of Human Illusion*, which also arguably seems too similar to *A Strange Commonplace* in its emphasis on this theme (if not exactly its method of conveying the theme).

Yet the status of *The Abyss of Human Illusion* as a kind of valedictory testament perhaps can be said to partly extenuate this inconsistency, directing our attention to a particular feature in the novel's assortment of characters. A number of the vignettes concern old men, and in particular an older writer (not literally the same person in each entry, but close enough in circumstances), so that these passages unavoidably come to seem like vehicles for Sorrentino's reflections on his own situation as an aging writer, considering the trajectory of his career and anticipating the end of it. Some of these characters' ruminations seem to describe Sorrentino's circumstances quite closely: "Well, he had been at it for fifty years, a little more, really, than fifty years if he counted apprentice work; he had a shelf of books to attest to those wearying yet absorbing labors"; "He was tired, very tired, and too old and immovably marginalized for the [in-progress] story to make any difference to his life: what he had come to, in his mid-seventies, he had come to," Yet, whatever regrets or frustrations the writer expresses do not forestall the need to continue writing:

The old writer put the yellow legal pad he'd been writing on into a fresh file folder, on which he wrote *Stories*. He'd look at the story tomorrow, although he didn't want to look at words any more, especially his own. But he would, he would. He should have stopped this foolishness years ago, but he didn't know what else to do and he was not quite ready to disappear into dead silence.

It is hard not to regard this as Sorrentino's own affirmation of purpose, however qualified.

The Abyss of Human Illusion might now be called a collection of "flash fictions," but it is clear enough that Sorrentino intended the individual parts of the book to be considered together in the "synthetic" mode he consistently cultivated. If the vignettes in this novel are structurally less explicitly connected than they are in *A Strange Commonplace* (however obliquely), to consider them in isolation as simply microfictions would defeat Sorrentino's overall purpose to alter our conception of form as it applies to fiction. For Sorrentino, "fiction" identifies not a specifiable form but an opportunity for the resourceful writer to further specify through example its yet unexplored forms. *The Abyss of Human Illusion*, along with *Under the Shadow* and *A Strange Commonplace*, advance this goal by showing, even more directly than most of Sorrentino's other work, "what happens" when you "take disparate parts and "put them all together" to create a different kind of artistic whole.

Sorrentino the Comedian

Few readers or critics familiar with his work would likely dispute the claim that Gilbert Sorrentino is fundamentally a comic writer. While the vision of human reality expressed in much of his work can be dark and comfortless, the treatment of his clueless and forlorn characters does not adopt a sober tone that might match the desolation of Sorrentino's underlying outlook, but instead presents his characters' circumstances as absurd and, at times, outright farcical. Sorrentino's "comedy" is certainly not mirthful (although some of his novels contain plenty of good jokes); it shares with many other American postmodernists and writers of metafiction the goal of depicting a world of comic disproportion and confusion—although Sorrentino's vision is perhaps even more starkly unsettling than what we see in, say, John Barth or Robert Coover. Still, the proper response to both Sorrentino's fictional world and to the sheer outrageousness of his structural conceits is, first of all, laughter.

Metafiction itself is predominately a comic mode, in which the comedic target is most immediately the practice of fiction, at least in its most traditional form. Narrative, when it is related straightforwardly and transparently as a version of real life that is "really happening" through a suspension of disbelief, is a cheap trick played on the reader, which metafiction, in part, seeks to expose. Some readers do not all appreciate this gesture, preferring to remain in the bubble of illusion, while those who are more receptive to this central gesture surely take a kind of comic delight in the various ways the illusion might be punctured. Sorrentino's attempt to dispel this illusion can be particularly pointed, and even excessive, which makes his fiction even more preposterously comic.

Some of Sorrentino's novels are, of course, more preposterous in their comedy than others. *Mulligan Stew* is his most conspicuously anarchic, carnivalesque novel, but both *Crystal Vision* and *Blue Pastoral* feature casts of broadly comic characters, the former depicting the characters with a less abusive kind of humor, the latter featuring rather cartoon-like characters that call for a more abundant kind of story to enliven them (as does *Gold Fools*, which also employs a picaresque narrative form, historically often invoked for comic effect). Few of Sorrentino's novels forego comedy altogether (with the possible exception of *The Sky Changes*), and the question then arises whether this is just a secondary effect of Sorrentino's broader

depiction of human limitations or whether his comic vision is more accurately understood as serving more strategic purposes, directly soliciting laughter in order to single out intended targets of ridicule.

If there is a group of people or a sphere of activity especially subject to Sorrentino's mockery across the body of his fiction, it would be what might be identified as the scene of intellectual and artistic activity in the United States—universities, artistic circles, and literary gatherings. Most critics discussing Sorrentino's work label his treatment of this scene as "satire," but as I pointed out in the discussions of *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* and *Mulligan Stew*, Sorrentino's satire, if that is what it should be called, is not of the usual sort that criticizes on behalf of violated norms. It is much more merciless, less sanguine that its targets might be reformed. Indeed, Sorrentino has said that satire "should wound, draw blood, even destroy." Satire is "heartless and anarchic" (Interview with Alexander Laurence at *The Portable Infinite*, 1994). Few of Sorrentino's novels are pure satire, but perhaps *Lunar Follies*, among his later books, comes closest to that, and provides an opportunity to look more closely at Sorrentino's satiric intentions.

Also among the later works, *Gold Fools* takes up a literary strategy often ascribed to Sorrentino's work, one that is closely associated with satire. Parody is perhaps most usefully differentiated from satire as the mockery of specific texts or forms or specific styles rather than of ideas, behaviors or persons (at least for a writer like Sorrentino, who is using parody as a comic device). Arguably, parody occurs more sparingly than satire in Sorrentino's fiction, since his general goal is less to modify or extend existing narrative forms than to bypass them altogether in an effort to conceive form in fiction separate from its usual dependence on narrative. Those works that do proceed primarily through narrative, *The Sky Changes*, *Blue Pastoral*, and *Gold Fools*, all enlist the picaresque mode. The first two don't exactly parody the picaresque form: *The Sky Changes* is a non-comic novel that employs picaresque as the most appropriate way to depict the protagonist's disintegrating marriage, while the picaresque journey in *Blue Pastoral* is likewise the obvious vehicle for its protagonist's quixotic (and absurd) quest for the "perfect musical phrase."

Gold Fools, however, seems more directly parodic of picaresque storytelling, in particular as manifested in the conventions of the boy's adventure novel. (Sorrentino had written

a briefer parody of this genre as interpolated passages in *Misterioso*.) A consideration of this novel might help us distinguish between the satiric and the parodic in Sorrentino's fiction—to the extent that making such a distinction illuminates Sorrentino's artistic ambitions—while also noting how the two methods of lampoonery can help to ultimately appreciate the overall comic outlook informing his work,

Gold Fools

Although ultimately *Gold Fools* provides us with a fully coherent (if comically exaggerated) picaresque narrative, readers are confronted first of all by its heterodox narration: the entire narrative, which is relatively long in comparison to Sorrentino's other late novels, is related in the interrogative mood, proceeding entirely in questions seemingly directed at the reader, as if the reader is supposed to supply the answers needed to allow the story to continue:

Why did Nort then retire to the deep shadows that lurked behind the sputtering gorget? Was this the signal, perhaps unintended, for Bud to relate in the most excruciating detail, the story of the boys' failure as ranchers? Again? Did Bud, at this point, need a good slap in the face? Or, at least, a good shake.

In most cases, however, the answers are implicit in the question, and soon enough we learn to take the questions not as uncertainties but the more or less trustworthy source of narrative information and movement—Nort does indeed retire to the deep shadows as a signal to Bud, who is indeed expected to relate their tale once again (although whether Bud needs a slap in the face might be, indeed, a rhetorical question). Perhaps a novel like *Gold Fools* would be even more experimentally daring if the questions posed were meant to be in fact more open-ended, dependent on a reader's subjective response, but Sorrentino's purpose does not seem to be to use the question format to create a fully contingent text. Rather, he experiments with the format as an alternative mode of narration. As the narrator carries out this task by pretending to puzzle out the story through the questions, the novel itself poses a larger question: Can a story really be told by sticking to this method over the course of an entire novel?

It turns out that it can, but this is because the narrator's questions help shape the narrative, not undermine it. Granted, it may be a narrative that is more readily shaped than others

Sorrentino might have offered—although, given the disinclination to engage with narrative form he evidences throughout his career as a novelist, it is difficult to envisage Sorrentino laboring over a “well-plotted” story of the usual kind—because it is a narrative model borrowed from a pre-existing genre (although not exactly one that is immediately recognizable to most current readers). While most obviously taken from a boy’s adventure novel, *Gold Fools* could also be regarded as a version of a Western novel, albeit the role of the boy protagonist (perhaps a collective protagonist encompassing three boys) registers more strongly than the familiar conventions of the Western, which is present mostly in the setting—the southwestern desert—and the archetypal characters with whom the boys interact.

But of course the sort of story associated with the adventure novel serves for Sorrentino as an opportunity both to apply the interrogatory method to a ready-made narrative type and to affect a narrative manner that is consistent with the tone of mockery and comic absurdity that characterizes most of his fiction. The mockery is more thoroughgoing in some of Sorrentino’s other novels; in *Gold Fools* the attitude toward the characters and their adventures expressed by the narrator/interrogator seems somewhat more indulgent, as if the story is less deserving of outright derision (one wonders if Sorrentino might have retained some fondness for this kind of adventure story). Still, the story of Dick, Nort, and Bud teaming up with the veteran prospector Hank Crosby and his sidekick Billee Dobb and their quest for the mother lode, turns most of the clichés of both underlying genres upside down in what is clearly a parody of these familiar forms.

Although Sorrentino himself spoke about *Gold Fools* as a parody (on Michael Silverblatt’s *Bookworm* in 2002), terms used to identify several different comedy types might be applied to this novel, as, indeed, they might fit many of Sorrentino’s novels, often all at the same time. If parody is most accurately defined as comic imitation of a specific work, such an imitation of a form or genre is sometimes identified as a *burlesque*. Critics have used both terms to characterize Sorrentino’s use of comedy, and burlesque does seem an apt description of his farcical treatment of literary convention in *Imaginative Qualities* and *Mulligan Stew*, although his approach in the latter is so thoroughgoing in its burlesque of established fictional form that it might be most appropriate to call it a *travesty* of proper aesthetic decorum. Other works that are less forceful in their comic deflations, in which humor is more a matter of tone or occurs in

particularly absurd moments or individual episodes, still seem rooted in burlesque, but perhaps in Sorrentino's fiction distinctions between these types of comedy are less important—they all seem appropriate in describing his attitude both toward conventional literary practices and toward human nature as revealed through his characters.

It still seems most fruitful to consider *Gold Fools* as parody. The novel does not directly mimic a particular work, but it does follow the general narrative scheme of the adventure novel, while also invoking tropes of the Western genre involving the hunt for gold and the confrontation with the Western landscape. Thus, Sorrentino doesn't simply parody a particular kind of narrative (although he does do that) but in blending the parodic adventure story with a story about American values as reflected in the Western, he creates a new, separate story based on parody but that presents in tandem the twin objects of Sorrentino's comic attention found throughout his fiction in varying degrees of emphasis: the profound insipidity of most of American life, made even more profound by the absurd delusions of grandeur underpinning it, and the even more absurd presumption behind trying to create works of literary art in and about such a place.

The latter insight arguably helps make the former seem less (or more) than mere condescension. Indeed, it is writers and artists that are subject to the most caustic humor in Sorrentino's portrayals of character, but it is also the very act of artistic creation that is cast as an inherently ridiculous endeavor in many of Sorrentino's novels. Moreover, that attribute of his fiction—its status as metafiction—that has made it most notorious is itself a fundamental element in Sorrentino's comic vision. Comedy is not just something that he makes out of the behavior of his characters but is the default assumption of his outlook on all that appears in his fictional world, which includes the conventions used to represent this world—not just those prevailing conventions that Sorrentino's fiction conspicuously rejects, but even more fundamental conventions governing the uses of language and the processes of representation in works of fiction. The most metafictional of Sorrentino's works are also the most comic because metafiction makes manifest that the effort to create fiction is an inherently laughable affair consisting in its traditional practice of the attempt to disguise the fact that what the reader is offered is a product of the writer's invention (as the reader pretends it's all "real"), while the

metafictional gesture itself seems at best a belated response to the authority of conventional storytelling and at worst a sign of incompetence at the hands of inept writers.

In this context, the parody of *Gold Fools* could be seen as the only mode in which Sorrentino might have adopted a recognizable linear narrative (except for the non-comic approach of *The Sky Changes*, which Sorrentino abandoned after that first novel). Since his perspective on narrative is inherently mocking, a parody of realism would, in a sense, be gratuitous, and in his other novels Sorrentino shows more interest in creating new forms than in deconstructing narrative. This perhaps helps account for the tone of *Gold Fools*, (at least as it can be abstracted from the interrogatory technique), which is campy, to be sure, but does not really seem overly derisive of the genre it lampoons, or of the cultural prevalence of popular narrative genres in general. The three boys, whose effort to recover from their failed attempt at ranching provides the novel with its narrative foundation, are sympathetic enough, in the way the genre would prescribe, and Hank Crosby actually turns out to be rather heroic in his dedication to his task of leading the expedition, and altogether a stout fellow. The dreams of wealth prompted by “gold fever” are shown to be illusory, but the novel has a happy ending, anyway, as the boys discover a lucrative substitute for the gold (borax) when they reach, ironically enough, Death Valley.

The humor in *Gold Fools* arises not so much from the force of its parodic narrative (although some of the group’s misadventures while traipsing through the desert can be mordantly humorous), but from Sorrentino’s use of vernacular language, realized through the verbal manner of the narrator’s interrogations, which are often very specific in detail in a way that does make the answer implicit in the question but that at other times are more open-ended and recursive:

Did skin cancer kill many a cowpoke in the old West, or was it worry and a diet high in lard and thick beefies? Whatever happened to the authentic beefie? And was it, as Zane Grey noted, a victim of the railroad? And what was the real story behind Ben “Big Fella” Hardy’s cholesterol chart and its relation to six-gun mania? Will that grim story ever be told in full?

At times the questions mirror the characters’ speech and incorporate the lingo associated with the old West:

Did Dick suddenly interrupt his brother's maudlin reverie by suggesting that he and the other two take a mosey into the exotic sands of the Gila? Did he chuckle and mention that he had a real hankering to feel some tarnation actual desert under his feet? Did Hank and Billee, from out of their clouds of poisonous smoke, tell the youths that they shorely have to wait till the next day to walk on Gila sands proper?

One gets the sense that Sorrentino probably enjoyed writing *Gold Fools*, as it provided him the opportunity to visit (or revisit) both the adventure story and the popular Western with their cliched tropes, which, it turns out, actually gives Sorrentino an enhanced scope in exploiting the interrogatory method so that the risk it might wear out its welcome is reduced. The inherent potential for humor in the various plot and character conventions of the source genres allow the narration-through-query device to develop an amplitude that takes it well beyond the mere gathering of information or abstract Socratic inquiry (neither of which could really be taken seriously in a Sorrentino novel, anyway). At the same time, the strategy itself heightens our interest in the underlying narrative, which might otherwise seem of insufficient weight to support an extended parody by a writer of Sorrentino's particular comic gifts.

As it is, matter and manner in *Gold Fools* serve as effective complements in a work that may stand as the novel in which Sorrentino performs most straightforwardly as a literary comedian. It is often very funny, which in this case is an entirely sufficient achievement.

Lunar Follies

If the simplest definition of satire would be "mockery," then of course Gilbert Sorrentino is a satirist. Few of his novels are without elements of mockery, and in some it is undeniably essential to his comedic intent. Whether such mockery is always consistently purposeful enough to be regarded as satire, however, is questionable. Traditionally, satire directs its ridicule at subjects (persons, institutions, ideas) marked as deserving of criticism for bad behavior or for inflicting harm. The laughter of satire acts as a corrective to such violations of assumed norms, although the correction must remain metaphorical or rhetorical. Sorrentino's mockery does not usually seem a gesture of reform: the behaviors and beliefs on display in his fiction are subject to ridicule simply because they are ridiculous, not because they can be corrected.

Perhaps we should view this as Sorrentino's effort to amend the concept of satire so that it might be "heartless and anarchic" without pretending to redemption, but especially in his portrayals of artists and the art world, it does sometimes seem that Sorrentino's displeasure and disdain for the shallowness and philistinism he surveys brings with it an exasperated judgment that such people should know better, that better ideas about art are possible, if difficult to realize in a commodified American culture. Among Sorrentino's novels, the one most unequivocally satirical is arguably *Lunar Follies*, which both addresses this subject of the art world and its understanding of the nature of art and does so in a way that seems his most direct attempt to focus his penchant for comic mockery on the misguided direction art has followed in service to the intellectual and commercial forces that have inevitably trivialized it.

As one of Sorrentino's last novels to be published before his death in 2006, *Lunar Follies* shares many of the characteristics of his other later novels: it is relatively short, structured through episodic fragments, and avoids linear narrative (in fact avoids narrative altogether). However, it is more unified around a central theme than any of these other works (with the exception of *Red the Fiend*, which is centered on a single set of characters). The episodes are mostly in the form of catalog copy or reviews of individual art exhibitions (a few move away from art galleries per se, such as "Caucasus Mountains," which concerns the "Odradek," an ancient animal whose preserved remains are on exhibit in an American museum, catalog copy courtesy of the "Prague Zoological Society and Marching Band," and "Copernicus," one of the longest pieces in the book, which begins in a centuries-old castle in England and moves to a penny arcade in Paris.) Although all of the entries—named after geographical features of the moon—feature Sorrentino's signature brand of deadpan absurdist humor and make extensive use of his familiar outrageously extended lists, the narrators of each episode are not exactly identical with each other, as they adapt themselves to the circumstances surrounding each object of attention.

Many of the entries produce their humor through ostensibly objective description of the artworks (predominantly installation art) at hand:

High upon a wall quite near the ceiling, a large thing, colored a strangely glowing puce, abuts a frosty moon. Splinters descend, *splinters of ice*, falling on other things below; below, that is to say, the frosty moon's "mirror image" (although this notion has long

been subject to critical attack, mostly labile in nature), the thunder moon. The latter moon leans against a lavender thing. Other vaguely organic elements crowd about, in the best possible way. . . .

The vagueness in this passage (“a large thing,” “in the best possible way”) might be a reflection of the indifference the artist has brought to the execution of the work, but it might more pointedly be taken as an inherent vagueness of perception, and, indeed, much of the satiric intent in *Lunar Follies* seems directed at current discourse about art, which combines lack of clarity, pretense (“labile” is a favored work throughout the book), obscurity, and, at times, sheer ignorance, in a sludgy stew of meaningless babble.

The trendy bombast of much contemporary art itself is not spared Sorrentino’s satirical jibes, however. In “Sea of Nectar,” subtitled “The Transgressive Act,” the catalog copy putatively echoes the “transgression” of the art on display:

Fourteen motherfucking beer bottles are fucking haphazardly arranged next to an off-white shitty wall on the left. Six fucking more are fucking lined up in front of the fucking off-white wall on the right, in the foreground, you got it, cuntface? Four more are over here, right fucking *here*, next to this, you cocksucker! There are also twenty-six bottles in the back, and just behind those fuckers, thirteen more. Nearby, shithead, two bottles lie on their sides, and one fucking hangs from the fucking ceiling, just above them, or above that, shiteater. . . .

Clearly influencing both the artists and the museum curators are the academic art critics, whose jargon permeates most of the art discourse to which we are exposed in the novel: the “loosely Hegelian theoretical vistas,” the “’ur’-constructions” that are subject to “aporia,” the “cultural topoi,” the “motile linear perspective and the labile interfaces.”

Although the dominant focus of *Lunar Follies* is conceptual and visual art, no doubt Sorrentino would extend his satirical treatment to artistic practice in general, including literature. In one episode, Sorrentino does indeed turn to attitudes about art in contemporary publishing, in the form of “editorial correspondence” received by one writer identified simply as “B,” but pretty clearly evoking correspondence received by Sorrentino himself, suitably exaggerated (probably) for comic effect: “B’s new novel is compellingly urgent, but it is not intriguingly

powerful or astonishingly compelling, Sorry,” “I read B’s sickeningly erotic book with as much lust as I could muster, but I doubt I am the right whore to do right by it. Best of luck to B.” “The utter holocaust of B’s new exploration of a novel is a marvel of authorial honesty and creative tale-spinning, but alas, we all felt that it depended much too heavily on stylistic crap rather than straightforward plotting.”

Even with the variations of subject and approach we find in the separate parts of *Lunar Follies*, overall we are ultimately offered through the interaction of the parts what is clearly enough a critical assessment of ideas and attitudes about art rendered through Sorrentino’s often impassive but cumulatively potent comedic method. The book’s title also signals the novel’s broader satiric purpose to evoke the lunacy of artistic culture as it developed into the 21st century, although it is the influence of America’s benighted culture at large with its servile dependence on the marketplace that has produced a meretricious art and the derivative devices the marketplace rewards.

A contrast with the fakery of the art and art discourse generally on display in *Lunar Follies* is provided in a few of the entries, in which the narrative voice clearly sees through the reigning lunacy. “Tycho,” the next-to-last entry in the book, offers an especially notable alternative to the inanity the novel otherwise samples, beginning with its unironic evocation of a photograph of a woman, weeping inconsolably, we are told, for her dead son. “She thinks about her son all through the day, the days, everyday, her obsession is said to be ‘unhealthy,’ an ‘unhealthy obsession.’” But we know from Sorrentino’s body of work preceding *Lunar Follies* that the narrator’s interjection that “Life, despite its vaunted pleasures, can be monstrous and ruthless, utterly without pity or solace, despite sunsets and cool forests,” is utterly sincere, thus only reinforcing the sincerity of the mother’s reaction to the son’s death. We then discover that this is a photo within a photo, which portrays a man guarding his eyes from the sunlight flowing through the window shade and looking at the photo of the woman weeping. In fact, the narrator asserts, “he has looked at the photograph every day for months, ‘an unhealthy obsession.’”

The art object described here is self-reflexive and multilayered, but not, like so many of the other art works to which we are introduced, frivolous or muddled. Although we can’t be sure of the burden of the man’s own “obsession,” the details we are given, and the tenor of the narrator’s account, would suggest to us that the photo of the woman conveys some strong

emotion that compels the man's attention. Sorrentino is not, of course, a writer who usually cultivates patently emotional responses from his reader, but beneath the formal innovations of his work, his fiction remains engaged with the facts of human reality, and "Tycho" reminds us of this reality among the numerous works of counterfeit art we encounter in *Lunar Follies*.

Gilbert Sorrentino was at times accused of being cynical—cynical about human nature, about American cultural values, about the motives of artists and writers. There is no question that the acidity of Sorrentino's comedy can at times seem quite corrosive. But a sizable share of his success as a writer comes from his ability to persuade us that during those moments in his fiction when we laugh (which is often), we are laughing not just at the characters and their ludicrous actions or at the social circumstances depicted, but are also laughing at ourselves and those conditions of our culture that we are willing to tolerate. If the humor in *Lunar Follies* is the more directly critical humor of satire, targeted at the specific culture of the art world, to the extent that we participate in that world or passively accept it, the joke is still on us.

Sorrentino the Local Colorist

While numerous of Sorrentino's books have as their setting, directly or implicitly, wholly or partially, his hometown neighborhood of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, the social behaviors and cultural presuppositions native to the mid-20th century urban environment of New York City provide a sort of ambient background to almost all of Sorrentino's fiction. Even when the particulars associated with Bay Ridge are not explicitly evoked, the personae, as well as the attitudes they express, that Sorrentino habitually depict have their origin in the influences he absorbed when growing up there. In this way, Sorrentino could be called a "regionalist" writer, even though the region is urban (as opposed to rural, as in much 19th century local color realism) and the literal circumstances of the region are only intermittently present.

Several of Sorrentino's novels do of course literally center on the material circumstances specific to Bay Ridge (Brooklyn more generally). Most prominent among them are *Steelwork* and *Crystal Vision*, which could be seen as a diptych of sorts, one providing a more panoramic, historical perspective (although discontinuously presented) on the neighborhood and its inhabitants as they are subject to the conditions obtaining just before, during, and after World War II, the other focusing more closely on a group of neighborhood characters holding forth in their favored hangout, set at a particular (if generally unspecified) time in the neighborhood's life. In both novels, formal ingenuity is the principal objective, but both also, in realizing their formal ambitions through drawing on Sorrentino's more youthful experiences as a Brooklynite, provide a colorful portrait of this corner of the New York borough.

Although *Aberration of Starlight* is set at a New Jersey boardinghouse during a summer vacation rather than in Bay Ridge, from various references throughout the novel it seems clear enough that the family on this vacation is from there (the family itself is most likely based to a significant degree on Sorrentino's own). The dominant focus of the novel is on the effects created by its formal juxtaposition of point of view, but these characters may be the most thoroughly developed in the traditional sense of any set of characters in Sorrentino's fiction, which we might interpret as an effort to represent people in the real life milieu from which they are drawn as "rounded" characters, even if these characters are most human in their flaws and weaknesses. Many of the characters in the collection of short fiction, *The Moon in Its Flight*

(2004), are also more or less realistically portrayed (unlike the obvious caricatures with which Sorrentino often works), and while they are generally not specified as products of Brooklyn/Bay Ridge, the default assumption, based on scattered details and behavioral characteristics, should probably be that they are—characters marked as writers might nominally be inhabitants of California (reflecting Sorrentino’s 20-year diversion to Stanford), but otherwise Sorrentino’s characters are conspicuously New Yorkers, and for Sorrentino that would mean they are from Brooklyn.

When Sorrentino published *Red the Fiend* (1995), he surely wasn’t thinking that in the last phase of his career he would return more intently to Bay Ridge for characters and place, but the novels in the last decade of his writing life did bring Sorrentino back to his old neighborhood (in the imaginative world of his work, as well as literally when he moved back to Bay Ridge after his retirement from teaching in 1999). In addition to *Red the Fiend*, *Little Casino*, *A Strange Commonplace*, and *The Abyss of Human Illusion* are set at least partially in Bay Ridge. All four are in the collage form characteristic of Sorrentino’s late work, and while *Red the Fiend* is entirely a novel of Bay Ridge, the other three shift in time and place and employ a changing cast of characters. Together, the novels evoke a collective memory of Sorrentino’s Brooklyn, suffused in bitterness and regret, but also at times what can only be called a wistful nostalgia. But *Red the Fiend* and *Little Casino* are the most substantial and sustained contribution to the representation of Brooklyn provided in Sorrentino’s fiction, which is not in itself the ultimate ambition of his work but which anchor Sorrentino’s experimental impulses in a more recognizable literary practice that perhaps for some readers can lend to the experimentation a kind of aesthetic ballast that gives it a firmer foundation.

Red the Fiend

Red Mulvaney appears early in Sorrentino’s first Bay Ridge book, *Steelwork*, as a twenty-something street thug, looking, ironically enough, to menace “Reds” (“or pinkos at least”) in a local hangout. A marine lieutenant upbraids him for coarse language, upon which Red falsely ingratiates himself and then “knocked out three of the officer’s teeth.” He appears again later in the novel as a twelve year-old not yet fully formed in his violent proclivities, and *Red the Fiend* might be said to begin as a fuller exposition of how Red the boy became a

“murderous Shanty Mick,” as the Marine lieutenant pegs him. The answer the novel provides tells us a great deal not just about Bay Ridge or Brooklyn but about human degradation and degeneracy in general. Ultimately *Red the Fiend* shows us that Red Mulvaney became a “fiend” through the influence of his environment, although that environment doesn’t seem especially deprived by the standards of Depression-era New York City. Instead, “environment” in the novel is the malignant force exerted by Red’s grandmother, as relentless a destroyer of a young boy’s spirit as any wicked witch a child’s imagination might conjure (or an adult’s), and her behavior seems finally unaccountable except as a kind of elemental depravity, evidence of an original sin that manifests not merely as a propensity to moral error but a thoroughgoing inability to maintain even a minimum degree of human decency toward others.

Grandma behaves with an special cruelty and hatred toward Red, but she has disdain for everyone around her, appearing to regard everyone as irretrievably deficient, an affront to her own aggrieved dignity. Although Grandpa late in the novel makes a weak effort to explain Grandma’s ill nature as partially a response to the harsh religious zealotry of her own parents, her malice finally seems to be innate, an expression of her essential nature. Certainly for Red it scarcely matters whence the source of Grandma’s rage and cruelty: for Red, Grandma simply looms as the hostile presence that makes his life miserable. It never really occurs to Red that her behavior is not grandmotherly enough. She is what she is, her influence unavoidable. Ultimately Red is almost compelled to finally assert his resistance to her authority, but the novel remains mostly an expository delineation of the terror Grandma instills.

Above all, Grandma is dedicated to convincing Red that it is he who is “conscienceless and thoroughly depraved.” As he is being sent to the cellar “to kill the mice that have been caught but not killed in the trap” in our first encounter with him, Red is already inescapably aware of Grandma’s low opinion of him:

Red, the degenerate, the corrupt, the sinful, opens the door of the cabinet, from which have issued scraping and scratching noises. Behind a can of Drano is a half dead mouse, his crushed, bloody snout and right front paw caught between the steel bar and wooden base of the trap. Grandma tells Red to do the job that she knows he loves to do, abnormal little morphodite that he is. . . .

Sorrentino doesn't let us view Red as entirely an innocent victim, however. Also early in the novel, we are presented a scene in which Red first throws a stone at a bird sitting on the ground, "for something to do," and then cold-bloodedly proceeds to kill the wounded bird:

Without a moment's hesitation, Red picks the bird up and, underhand, throws it up into the air. Red never hesitates when it comes to attacking animals and insects, for he knows that to kill things successfully they must not be given a chance to consider fleeing. The attack must insist on the ideal of destruction. The bird comes down and smacks against the cobbles. Red throws it up again, a little higher, and then again, And again.

Here Red is already clearly on his way to becoming a fiend, but the novel poises us between thinking that Red is naturally bad and that whatever errant impulses he possesses are being encouraged by Grandma's poisonous attitude toward him. "Red's beginning to understand," we are told, "that the world is a ruthlessly fair place in that it has no designs on or concerns for anyone, and responds, if it responds at all, to threats, cunning, and violence." Red is learning, at least as much from the inability of others to protect him against Grandma's abuse as from the abuse itself, that protection against the world's indifference comes from lashing out forcefully against it. The reader's response to Red is thus likely to be ambivalent: Red's own actions are often debased and hateful, but his treatment by Grandma is also undeniably reprehensible, and Red's behavior is undeniably being conditioned by his tormented home life. We are torn between finding Red a genuinely frightening figure and a pitiable one.

There are similarities in the underlying narrative situation in *Red the Fiend* and *Aberration of Starlight*. Each features a child protagonist among a family dominated by a grandparent (the grandfather in *Aberration of Starlight*) and a single mother struggling to raise her son without a father present. We can only suspect that the situation is autobiographical in its basic outline, although neither protagonist seems associated specifically with Gilbert Sorrentino the future writer, especially, of course, Red Mulvaney. This situation allows Sorrentino to offer in addition to the impressionistic alterations of perspective and fragmented glimpses of Bay Ridge we get in *Steelwork* and *Crystal Vision* (and later *Little Casino*) a more sustained portrayal of a single family, presumably representative of the sort of dynamics living in the neighborhood produced. If Red Mulvaney is not a "typical" resident of Bay Ridge, most such neighborhoods no doubt featured a character like him, and whether or not the precise set of circumstances

depicted in *Red the Fiend* account for the formation of someone like Red, the emergence of an adult Red Mulvaney from his particular environment does not seem an exceptional case.

The vision of human corruptibility informing *Red the Fiend* is pervasive in Sorrentino's fiction. Although a kind of close study of its unfolding in the interaction of its characters and between the characters and their environment, *Red the Fiend* presents a more sustained depiction of moral weakness and is shorter on the kind of unsparing comedy that accompanies his characterizations of other moral delinquents (his most frequent targets are artists and academics, who are subject to satirical treatment in a way that Red or the main characters in *Aberration of Starlight*, or really any of his specifically Bay Ridge characters are not). His invocation of Bay Ridge (or his fictional version of it) and its inhabitants is not done for the purpose of satirizing this subject but for something close to realism, however much in *Red the Fiend* the combination of formal strategy and character development takes realism beyond an emphasis on the commonplace and the ordinary (although Red's endurance of Grandma's enmity comes to seem ordinary for him). Indeed, in its focus on the implacable effects of environment in controlling destiny, it would not be so implausible to call *Red the Fiend* a work of what could be called postmodern naturalism. Its realism doesn't simply present Red's family circumstances as somehow "typical" of a place like Bay Ridge, but expresses a fundamental pessimism about the possibilities for human flourishing.

Red lives in a family that is broken in every way: a grandmother who is unable to maintain a healthy relationship with anyone, much less Red, a grandfather long reconciled to his loveless marriage and mainly concerned with making sure he has his Lucky Strikes, a mother so intimidated by her own mother and so absorbed in her bitterness toward her estranged husband that she is barely a mother at all, and a father who is almost literally not a father, however much he professes to care about Red when he meets with him at an ice cream parlor. *Red the Fiend* and *Aberration of Starlight* are the only extended portrayals of family life in Sorrentino's fiction (many of the characters in his other novels have no family life at all, as if disconnected from the notion of family as Sorrentino experienced it in his Bay Ridge childhood), so that insofar as Sorrentino offers an account of the realities of American family life it is based entirely on his youthful experiences in Bay Ridge, and while certainly *Red the Fiend* offers the starkest indictment of family behavior, both novels give us a view of it as an amalgam of authoritarian

control, passive acceptance of that control, self-absorption, and irresponsibility. These are human weaknesses consistent with the shortcomings manifest in most of Sorrentino's characters, not the degraded conduct induced by adverse social conditions.

Little Casino

Little Casino employs the collage method common to Sorrentino's other late novels, but it also results in a more general portrayal of Brooklyn, pre and post-WWII, rather than a specific evocation of Bay Ridge. It also returns to the comic, metafictional mode characteristic of much of Sorrentino's earlier fiction. Readers less acquainted with Sorrentino's work would thus find it more representative of his typical approach, while the setting unobtrusively provides a kind of continuity (along with repetitions of imagery and some characters) that has a more or less conventional aesthetic function in allowing the reader to identify the largely self-sufficient vignettes as a novel (or at least a unified literary work). At the same time, *Little Casino* fits into Sorrentino's body of work as part of the cumulative treatment of his Brooklyn upbringing, even though it is hardly accomplished through conventional literary means.

Of course, Sorrentino draws on his early experiences as many fiction writers have long done, but his overriding interest in formal experiment unavoidably overshadows the "content" with which his novels might be engaged. Thus, he is seldom discussed as an "autobiographical" writer since there are few protagonists in his fiction who obviously seem to be based on the actual Gilbert Sorrentino, and while the child protagonist of *Aberration of Starlight* may indeed be a version of the young Sorrentino, the novel is presented as a contemplation of conflicting points of view, not as autobiographical narrative per se. If Sorrentino is a kind of local colorist, providing the color is not his most immediate task but is a secondary effect of his habitual use of Brooklyn/Bay Ridge as essentially his default setting, even when the setting plays a less central role. *Steelwork* remains the novel most wholly devoted to the delineation of the Bay Ridge of Sorrentino's youth, but in his fiction as a whole, Bay Ridge serves as the representational foundation for the formal structures he builds.

By the time Sorrentino wrote *Little Casino*, the segmented structure of *Steelwork* to which he returned in *Rose Theatre*, *Misterioso*, and *Under the Shadow* had clearly become a

avored approach, applied on a smaller scale and as an organizing principle more akin to the discursive conventions of poetry than traditional prose fiction. Still, *Red the Fiend* follows *Steelwork* and *Crystal Vision* in allowing character and setting to provide some conventional unity absent an emphasis on linear story, although it seems even more tightly constructed through featuring a smaller cast of characters and an identifiable dramatic conflict, however much it makes itself present in the impressionistic manner shared by these later novels. *Little Casino* is less tightly structured—its tonal continuity is perhaps provided by the novel’s most conspicuous formal feature: after each vignette is appended some additional commentary elaborating on it, reflecting on its implications, or simply calling attention to it as artifice. More than the other novels in this later “poetic” phase of Sorrentino’s career as a writer of fiction, *Little Casino* asserts its continuity with the more radical metafiction of Sorrentino’s earlier work.

The metafictional strategy here, however, arguably helps to sharpen the real focus of Sorrentino’s attention in *Little Casino*: however much Bay Ridge/Brooklyn serves as the nominal setting of most of the scenes, the emphasis is finally less on convincingly recreating the physical reality of the place than on conveying the lasting effects of memory. The memories invoked may be pleasant or they may be disagreeable (many of those), but many of the characters, as well as the author/narrator himself, seem preoccupied with the poignancy of remembering. Characters stare at photographs and contemplate the past, are reminded of past pleasures, try to recall the details of significant events (or at least they now seem). The implicit narrator of the novel (who pieces together all the various fragments we are reading) is engaged in a more general re-creation of the past, and sometimes expresses a kind of awe at the power of a wistfully remembered past to overshadow the stark realities that soon enough overwhelm youthful experiences.

This melancholy perspective receives its fullest expression in the novel’s final scene, in which we are presented with an image of the titular casino as perceived by a twelve year-old boy:

The Budd Lake Casino is a dazzling citadel in the summer sunlight. It is set back, in its gleaming whiteness, from a pale-golden beach, and offers shade and coolness, and the glamour of rattled ice in silvery cocktail shakers, the romantic smell of whiskey and bitters, lemon, and cigarette smoke, and the easy, crisp swing of white big bands on the jukebox. The tunes say again and again, “peace,” as if the sudden ebbing of the

Depression has come about without a price to be paid. The casino was not really like this, as you surely will know, save to a boy of twelve, and by the time he wanted to know just what it *was* like, it was gone, and the people who could tell him the truth, or, perhaps, their truth, were dead. So it exists, a white dream, “whose terraces are the color of stars.”

And *Little Casino* does not elide the ultimate reality of death. Indeed, the novel’s first entry, titled “The Imprint of Death,” introduces the inevitable prospect of death and our unacknowledged terror of it in the most unequivocal terms: after a man stares at a trio of photographs, each of which show their subjects with death-haunted expressions on their faces, he reflects that such images provoke us “to consider how completely strange death is, how remote from us, how foreign, how impenetrable, how unfriendly. In its ineradicable distance from our entire experience, it is inhuman.” Yet *Little Casino* treats death as anything but inhuman, insofar as it looms as inextricable from life, however “unfriendly.” One gets the sense in reading *Little Casino* that it is Gilbert Sorrentino’s effort to reckon with the approach of death, although *Little Casino* was written before he was diagnosed with what would be his fatal cancer in 2005. If the characters in the novel hide their fear of death by putting it out of mind as they live their messy lives, *Little Casino* itself does not flinch from depicting its inexorable presence.

Perhaps it is the contemplation of death that in this novel prompts the emphasis on youthful memories and what is almost a nostalgic note in Sorrentino’s representation of Brooklyn. Youth is the time when death seems farthest away (although several of the episodes in *Little Casino* depict the deaths of young boys), but that very quality of youth only makes recalling those experiences a more melancholy prospect, as we are forced to consider the naivete of youth: the memory of the Budd Lake Casino comes complete with the old jukebox tunes, which “say, again and again, ‘peace,’ as if the sudden ebbing of the Depression has come about without a price to be paid.” This is not a sentimental realization, although the moment is possibly more rueful than we might expect in a Sorrentino novel. As the last of his novels to use Brooklyn/Bay Ridge in a sustained way as a setting, *Little Casino* could be taken as a memorial of sorts (literally an extended exercise in memory) to the old neighborhood, and youth in general, at least as a source for the writer’s artistic transformation of it.

Not all of the episodes in *Little Casino* are explicitly set in Brooklyn. Some are interludes that are more broadly satirical in effect, such as the mock legal deposition in which a

woman is accusing her employer of engaging in “objectionable leering activities” and “looking improperly at my bosoms and private limbs and other organs right through my garments,” resulting in “post-dramatic stress.” In the metafictional postscript, the author mocks his own concocted discourse, suggesting it reveals he has “no respect” for his characters and that the fake document is simply an “exercise in barely disguised misogyny” (accusations Sorrentino likely had heard before about his work). It is true enough that Sorrentino’s “attitude” toward some of the characters he invents can seem pitiless, few of them, especially in the collage novels such as *Little Casino*, meant to be “developed” to the point that feeling either sympathy or contempt for them are responses the writer would envision. While some characters are comically exaggerated in the way we would traditionally expect in satirical comedy, others are less the object of humor than emblems of failure and futility. Since life itself is full of futility and failure, Sorrentino does not disrespect his characters by depicting their weaknesses but has created them in the first place in order to reinforce the truth of that fact. If Sorrentino’s portrayals of his native neighborhood could be taken as unconventional variations on local color realism, his treatment of his characters, however “flat” it can seem to be, suggests an intention to truthfully reflect “real life” as it is, which in Sorrentino’s case bespeaks a writer who is radically disabused about human nature.

It is this vision of an abject humanity that accounts for the sorry state in which we encounter the characters depicted in *Little Casino* and much of Sorrentino’s fiction, not a special animus against women or any other group of people (except maybe college professors). Simply put, ultimately most of Sorrentino’s characters behave badly—indeed, there really are no characters in Sorrentino’s novels that act as “protagonist” in the most traditional sense of the term: no characters who we might admire or with whom we can “identify,” although some characters are hapless enough we may grant them some degree of moral lenience. If there is joy or delight in Sorrentino’s fiction, it is the delight we might take at the boundless invention that characterizes the formal structures of his work, the “fun and games” that critics often invoked as a rebuke to the work. While we could say that *Little Casino* provides a capstone of sorts to Sorrentino’s fictional transformation of the working-class Brooklyn in which he grew up, it is the innovative turns in the transformations themselves, the maneuvers he makes and devices he employs, that are the real subjects of his fiction. They allow him to indeed reveal the imaginative qualities of actual things.

Epilogue

Splendide-Hotel

In the early to mid-stages in Sorrentino's career as a writer of fiction, *Splendide-Hotel* seemed something of an outlier among his books (so much so that some critics hesitated to identify it as a work of fiction at all). But in the last phase of his career, when he was publishing a series of short novels organized through the collage method featuring a sequence of connected vignettes, it became possible to see *Splendide-Hotel* as the precursor to this approach. It, too, dispenses with narrative and the development of characters in favor of self-contained prose compositions that seem disconnected but that ultimately realize their own form of unity-in-division.

The unity in *Splendide-Hotel* is manifested both structurally and thematically. The book contains 26 sections, each of them corresponding to a letter in the alphabet, and the theme that those entries each help to elaborate is indicated in the book's title, which is taken from a line in Arthur Rimbaud's *Illuminations*: "And Hotel Splendid was built in the chaos of ice and the polar night." Sorrentino takes Rimbaud's image and metaphorically erects a more fully materialized site—in "S" we get a fully detailed description of the hotel:

. . .the dark-wood paneling and lemon-colored wallpaper of many of its suites, the huge crystal chandeliers of the Golden Age Room, the oiled mahogany and oak furnishings of the Men's Saloon—all assure the guest that he is in one of the very last of the truly *regal* hotels. Although lacking such amenities as a swimming pool and a gymnasium, the Splendide is equipped with almost anything else a guest may desire. . . .

Sorrentino has made his Splendide-Hotel "real," but its reality is the reality created by the artist's imagination, the residency for which the Splendide is built. As the narrator says of a painter known for painting pictures of waiters: "they are totally unlike any waiters that anyone will ever see. And yet—and yet surely they must be the waiters employed by the Splendide. By an act of the imagination, the artist has driven through the apparent niceties of restaurant dining to reveal the bewildered rage and madness therein." The waiters' "irrational behavior and broken spirits *do* exist: in the imagination, purified against all change in the Splendide." This notion is central to Sorrentino's conception of the essence of literary creation and affords an appropriate

rejoinder to those critics who claimed that Sorrentino paid insufficient attention to “reality”—the writer’s verbal creations are real, “willed into existence by an act of the imagination.

Sorrentino arrived at this view of the act of creation through his extensive reading of William Carlos Williams (both the poetry and the fiction), and Williams along with Rimbaud might be seen as the de facto protagonists of *Splendide-Hotel*, each of them at different points invoked as “the poet.” The attention given to poets and poetry in *Splendide-Hotel* on the surface at least might leave the impression that it belongs to poetry (and the criticism of poetry) than to fiction—an impression that is reinforced in the Dalkey Archive edition of the book by the Afterword provided by the poet (and Sorrentino friend) Robert Creeley. Some critics have even referred to *Splendide-Hotel* as itself a collection of prose poems rather than a work of fiction, and while we might consider the book to be, in part, a meditation of sorts on the implications of poetic language, and there are numerous passages confirming Sorrentino’s own skills with language (such as “Y,” in which the narrator associates “love” with the color yellow), Sorrentino’s subsequent books, and especially the late works, would show that the structure and style of *Splendide-Hotel* continues to inform his efforts to create alternative formal patternings in works of fiction.

Reading *Splendide-Hotel* reminds us, however, that Sorrentino indeed was first of all a poet, and that all of his fiction proceeds through formal assumptions that reveal a poet’s awareness of form more than the narrative instincts of a traditional novelist. (As a poet, Sorrentino is inclined toward formalist-inspired lyric poems rather than shapeless “free verse.”) In neither his poetry or his fiction does Sorrentino conventionally “wax poetic” through the kind of lyrical figuration that often passes as “literary” writing. Love is not “like” yellow, it is inhabited by it, embodied in the arrangement of images:

. . .It may be, though, that in flailing about, the notion that yellow is love’s color appealed to my sense of design. I think of the pale sun that occasionally shines above the massive hotel: I think of Amarillo: I think of the color of the walls in that tavern where the men still sit, drinking red beer. The peeling paint of those walls, a kind of dull mustard-yellow, is close to the color I envision. Nothing spectacularly brilliant will do, The color is somehow perversely pleasing in apposition to that which it surrounds.

But is this “I” Gilbert Sorrentino the poet, author of *Splendide-Hotel*, or is it an invented narrative persona, masquerading as the author and tempting us to assume he speaks for the author? On the one hand, this narrator performs the tasks a narrator conventionally undertakes, introducing characters, setting up a situation, at times even telling a brief story, but on the other he freely acknowledges that this is a role he plays, that he is, fact, making things up. In “P,” he tells us that a “painter whom I have invented has recently painted a picture which, after some deliberation, he has decided to call P. It is not a good painting, but I find myself strangely drawn to it.” This picture reminds the narrator of an old photograph that includes his grandparents in a composition much like that of the painting. “What is strange, of course, is how this painter should have come upon his subject, notwithstanding his butchery of it.” This does not seem strange to any reader who did simply pass over the narrator’s declaration that the painter is invented: the painter came upon his subject because the author/narrator contrived the situation in which the mysterious coincidence supposedly occurred.

Mysteries in fiction are always contrived, as are plots, settings, and the idea of character development, and Sorrentino’s fiction, at least after *Steelwork*, makes no pretense to concealing its own contrivances. Along with perhaps John Barth, Gilbert Sorrentino may arguably be the most purposefully self-reflexive writers in postwar American fiction. Any serious consideration of the phenomenon of metafiction as it emerged in the 1960s and 1970s would have to give a prominent place to *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* and *Mulligan Stew*, and *Splendide-Hotel* continues the practice established in *Imaginative Qualities* of directly acknowledging the presence of the author (or at least that authorial persona) engaged in bringing the work we are reading into being. (*Mulligan Stew* relies less directly on this kind of direct discursive gesture in calling attention to its own blatant artifice.) Even though it returns us to Sorrentino’s antecedent interest in poetry, *Splendide-Hotel* now serves not just as an aesthetic progenitor to some of Sorrentino’s later work, but as one of the paradigmatic examples of the rule-breaking strategy that arguably became the challenge to conventional assumptions about the nature of form in fiction most closely identified with the earliest “postmodern” writers.

If *Splendide-Hotel* is often enough overlooked, lurking between *Imaginative Qualities* and *Mulligan Stew* in the confirmation of Sorrentino’s gifts as a writer of experimental fiction

and immediately followed by a last resurgence of activity as a poet (three volumes in 1976, 77, and 78), it nevertheless affords a reader of Sorrentino's work a worthwhile reminder that it all arises from the poet's enhance awareness of language—the alphabetical structure of *Splendide-Hotel* directs us to the very source of language, and Sorrentino's fiction never really lets us stray far from it. There are no Sorrentino novels that invite us to look past the words on the page, as the shaper of form, and contemplate instead the illusionistic space occupied by “real people” caught up in the story being told about them. Sorrentino is more interested in the total effect his verbal arrangements might have on the attentive reader than in conjuring such an illusion.

Sorrentino certainly paid a price for maintaining this aesthetic throughout his career. After the semi-success of *Mulligan Stew*, Sorrentino conceivably could have enlisted his genuine comedic skills in further “rollicking” comic novels or postmodern Menippean satires, or transmuted his Bay Ridge past into more straightforwardly autobiographical narratives rendering the old neighborhood—books that might have sustained or even increased the commercial value of his fiction. He did not do that, of course, the partial feint toward commercial appeal of *Aberration of Starlight* notwithstanding, if anything further reducing the commercial viability of his novels with every new release. Perhaps there were those who thought Sorrentino thus showed at the least some impatience with conventional reading habits (if not outright contempt for them), but his disdain for mainstream literary culture was more often directed neither at readers nor critics, but at publishers whose notions of quality in books were pretentiously middlebrow and unshakably commercial.

Sorrentino's list of rejections from such publications was prodigious. Luckily, all of the works Sorrentino wanted to publish did find homes with one or another of the myriad independent presses that help to get adventurous fiction into print. (Dalkey Archive being among the most prominent of these.) That Gilbert Sorrentino persisted in writing his own inimitable versions of formally adventurous fiction right up to his final, fatal illness finally suggests he did believe there was and will be an audience for this work, however much the American “book business” wants to ignore it.