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Gilbert Sorrentino: A Crystal Vision

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Gilbert Sorrentino (1929–2006) arrived on the palm-littered campus of Stanford University in the fall of 1982. He had been recruited to the prestigious creative writing program by the novelist and critic Albert J. Guerard (*Christine/Annette* [1985] and *The Triumph of the Novel: Dickens, Dostoevsky, Faulkner* [1977]) on the strength of what has remained Sorrentino's magnum opus, *Mulligan Stew* (1979). Guerard's enthusiasm for the inventive, highly stylized, reflexive parody of modernist fiction that simmered in Sorrentino's long novel was not shared by the writers in a program founded by Wallace Stegner, the West Coast naturalist writer, and his progeny, the Stegnerites, who aspired to publication in the genteel pages of *Esquire* or *Harper's* and hoped to be tapped for fame by the judges of the O. Henry Prize. It was not Sorrentino's first academic position, having previously taught in term appointments at Sarah Lawrence College, Columbia University, and the New School for Social Research, but his appointment to a full professorship vaulted him directly into prominence among a class of postmodern writers that included John Barth, Robert Coover, and John Hawkes. Yet for seventeen years the Brooklyn-born Sorrentino, who had studied classical literature at Brooklyn College, interrupted by a two-year stint in the U.S. Army Medical Corps, and not taking his degree, would remain a "vox clamantis in deserto" at the sun-bleached, moped bestraddled, and conservative Hoover Institution dominated campus. The degree of improbability that the son of a broken marriage between

a Sicilian-born Brooklyn Navy Yard ship-overhauler and a Welsh-Irish working-class mother, largely self-educated in the arts at such institutions as the Cedar St. Tavern near Washington Square frequented by the New York School of abstract expressionists, the editorial staff of *Kulchur*, and Barney Rosset's Grove Press, should reside in the midst of the "laid back" Bay Area privileged classes defies the quotient of realism in fiction, unless, of course, we are speaking of darkly comic novels in which the protagonist finds himself cast into the torments of Purgatory with sound effects.

By coincidence I too arrived at Stanford in the fall of 1982 as a graduate student in the English department and enrolled in Sorrentino's first seminar on the physician-poet from Rutherford, New Jersey, William Carlos Williams, whose poetry I had already preeminently admired. We were impressed by the appearance in Book Five of Williams's *Paterson* of an impressionistic passage describing American GIs in a Mexican bordello, attributed to "G. S." Here was a tangible connection to the unacknowledged genius of the American spirit, the "country doctor" whom the literary establishment had either patronized or dismissed; to whom the Pulitzer Prize for poetry was awarded only posthumously in 1963. In response to Williams's praise of a young writer's "rough [. . .] but exceptionally well written" sketch, Sorrentino admits "I was broke, miserable, had a huge body of poems and prose that no one had any interest in, and worst of all, I didn't know a single writer to whom I could show any of the work, for 'professional' criticism" (*Paterson*, ed. Christopher MacGowan). That the elder Williams would show such generosity in encouraging an authentic American writer when those who had shaped the canon of international modernism had so neglected him was a prominent theme of the seminar. It's also a coincidence that my own father is born, like Sorrentino, in 1929 the product of Italian immigrants, gains a Jesuit education at Fordham University in the Bronx, New York, partly funded by the GI Bill after two years at the Berlin Wall in counterintelligence; he becomes, unlike Sorrentino, an attorney, and remains a devout Catholic. Prior to my departure for graduate school, my father remarked, "Eventually everyone will need a lawyer or an accountant, but no one ever needs a critic." Writers find solidarity in the fact that they must create a demand for their work where none existed. And in defense of poetry Williams famously wrote in "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day for lack / of what is found there."

Although it was an admiration for Williams that initially drew me under Sorrentino's spell, in his role as a mentor he was indefatigable in promoting to my attention an essential list of avant-garde writers and a chrestomathy of their works that I would promptly tote to Wessex Books in Menlo Park or City Lights in San Francisco to stock up on. These referrals functioned for me much as Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading* was intended, as a shorthand introduction to a literary tradition—in Sorrentino's case one that emphasized the myriad pleasures of literary form as distinct from those writers whose works are read because they

had "something important to convey." It was on one of these browsing trips to the bookstore that I picked up the Grove Press edition of *Mulligan Stew*. Thus my reading of Sorrentino's prose and poetry was simultaneous with my education in the literature that had most obviously served as a model for his work. I was, as it were, reading his books from the inside out, recognizing there an immensely entertaining shadow puppetry, but from behind the scrim: the self-conscious narrative of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*; the defamiliarization of Victor Shklovsky and the Russian Formalist critics; the "borrowing" of characters on the advice of Flann O'Brien in *At Swim-Two-Birds*; the world-making "Aquinas map" that governs James Joyce's *Ulysses*; the self-imposed formal constraints in Georges Perec's *Life: A User's Manual*, Harry Mathews's *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*, and the rest of the Parisian Oulipians; the objectification of language in the poetry of Louis Zukofsky; the ludic exercises in style in Raymond Queneau; the intransigent artistry of Edward Dahlberg; the fetishistic cruelty of Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*; and so on. I recognize now more fully than when I was his student how completely I have come to admire and adopt as my own *primogenitori* Sorrentino's canon of literary invention.

I'll continue with an anecdote from that time that gives only a modest suggestion of Sorrentino's powers as a raconteur, because as comically witty and incisively discerning as his novels are, he was even more so in conversation. I had visited his campus office to discuss an aspect of my dissertation research, perhaps the proceduralism in John Ashbery's *The Double-Dream of Spring*. A young woman in a freshman seminar that Sorrentino was obliged to teach at this rather expensive private institution had presented him with a paper on Williams that contained in a mass of execrable prose a passage so "lapidary," as he described it, so finely honed that it couldn't be anything other than the work of . . . a professional critic! I never knew Sorrentino to use any sort of personal computer, which were only then coming into vogue, and all of his letters to me are typed with emendations and additions in his small but elegant hand; he was in this way a meticulous editor of prose, no doubt mastered during his years at Grove Press. So off to the library he'd gone, and knowing most of the Williams criticism very well, it was only a short time before he'd located the source of the suspect passage. When presented with the evidence of her plagiarism the student "looked at me," he said, "as if I were a magician. *C'est impossible*!" *Crystal Vision*, or *A Pack of Lies*. A writer of Sorrentino's gifts is both an adept, one who sees things as they are, and a conjurer, who brings into being things that are not. The mystery solved, the conversation concluded. Sorrentino picked up the office phone and dialed his wife, Victoria. "I'm on my way home, dear. Anything I can pick up, a loaf of bread, quart of milk?" One finds in Sorrentino's novels so many comically destitute characters who share, borrowing a phrase from Samuel Beckett, a "mirthless laugh." In person, however, he was eminently humane and so apparently governed by an

idiomatic authority that he had no use for any extrinsic set of "principles" that philosophy, religion, or politics are always suggesting that we can't exist without.

Sorrentino's third novel, *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (1971), takes its title from a passage in Williams's *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920): "The wish would be to see not floating visions of unknown purport but the imaginative qualities of the actual things being perceived accompany their gross vision in a slow dance, interpreting as they go." This satire in eight chapters of the pretensions of the arts scene in Manhattan during the 1960s (that cost Sorrentino more than one friendship among the poets and artists) does not develop as one might expect from a fictionalized literary memoir. Instead, Sorrentino deploys anecdotes, lists, digressions, and asides that demonstrate the various ways in which metonymy—how one thing leads to another—is the essential structure of fiction. One can find the theory that contrasts the metaphorical style of poetry and the metonymical style of prose in Roman Jakobson's "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" (1956), an essay that Sorrentino was quite fond of bringing to our attention. I recently taught Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) to Chinese students of American literature at a Beijing university, and I was struck by how easily the "symbolic key" unlocked the story of the old man [genius writer], an enormous marlin [literary masterwork], caught far out to sea [the "ocean of story"], and devoured by sharks [critical reception]. It works very well in the classroom, even for nonnative speakers of English. Sorrentino's metonymical fiction, however, is much more difficult than Papa Hemingway's "floating vision" but ultimately truer to the qualities of "actual things." The writer doesn't discover the world in its beauty but animates the "gross vision" of phenomena by reason of the imagination. Hemingway falsifies his Cuban seascape by making it bear the ponderous load of the symbolic. In *Steelwork* (1970) and in his later works such as *Little Casino* (2002) and *A Strange Commonplace* (2006), congeries of incisively observed persons and events drawn from Brooklyn's streets, Sorrentino shows that it is only through the writer's imagination that the mean and inert objects that comprise the world are lifted into significance and raised into "the dance" of interpretation.

It's a matter for some reflection that Robert Creeley introduces his *Collected Prose* (1984) with the "thought that my work as a writer would be primarily in prose" and that Sorrentino's early writing is chiefly in poetry influenced by Creeley's *For Love* (1962) and abetted by Rimbaud's *Le Bateau Ivre* (1871) and Beckett's *Whoroscope* (1930). The critical juncture between Sorrentino's poetry and prose is *Splendide-Hôtel* (1973), with an afterword to the Dalkey Archive Press edition (1984) by Creeley. This remarkable book is at once a serial poem and an abecedarium: a series of discrete observations organized according to the succession of the (Roman) alphabet. Seriality, or, in Roman Jakobson's terms, progression along the "axis of contiguity," becomes the dom-

inant compositional method for Sorrentino in his prose fiction. Rather than wed himself to the development of "character" or "ideas" in narrative, Sorrentino engages in the unrestricted pursuit of what the Russian Formalists would call "unbound motifs"—the figure of "Claire" or "Clara" in various texts is in no way a fully-rounded persona but a serially visited motif that serves the writer's narrative purpose. Creeley's conclusion regarding *Splendide-Hôtel* is textbook seriality: "Always something, like they say. Always room for one more." But the author "must find some structure," as Sorrentino says in the chapter "D," "even if it be this haphazard one of the alphabet." Sorrentino's writing moved away from the practice of Creeley's Black Mountain dictum that "form was never more than an extension of content," or that literary structure would be intrinsic to a "given instance." Increasingly in his poetry and prose Sorrentino foregrounded the artifice of literary form. The more explicitly extrinsic to any "given instance" was the literary performance, the better; because the only instance present in the text is the instance of writing itself. Thus *Splendide-Hôtel* reminds us that art "does not stand for anything else. It exists outside of metaphor and symbol. Shaped and polished artifact, a game of—nouns and verbs." Which is not to say that old friends can ever be forgotten. Sorrentino would recite from memory his favorite poem from Creeley's *For Love*, apropos to an elegy:

> Oh No
>
> If you wander far enough
> you will come to it
> and when you get there
> they will give you a place to sit
>
> for yourself only, in a nice chair,
> and all your friends will be there
> with smiles on their faces
> and they will likewise all have places.

There's an entry in Lamont's Scrapbook, approximately halfway through *Mulligan Stew* that I've always found to be illustrative of the satirical conception of the novel. It's in the form of a news squib, a piece of curious "filler" attributed to UPI: "Author Sleeps, Wakes, 'Finds' Novel." In the context of the narrative one can understand the appeal of this story to the talentless and increasingly deranged author, Antony Lamont (a character "lifted" from Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*) who fantasizes, like the novelist in the report, that he awakes to find a neatly typed stack of manuscript pages of a completed novel awaiting him on the study desk. Although the pages bear corrections in the author's own hand, it is not his work; and furthermore, it's "meticulously plotted, interesting, suspenseful—and even rather poetically written"—in short,

everything that the author's own work is not. This satire of the writer as failed craftsman in turn recalls the fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm, "The Elves and the Shoemaker," wherein the livelihood of the impoverished and talentless shoemaker is mysteriously saved by the nocturnal visits of industrious elves. Notice that the shoes produced by the elves are vastly superior in quality to anything that the cobbler might make, so that even if he retails them as his own they stand as a vivid reminder of what a wretched artisan he truly is—a darker reading of the tale, to be sure. In *Mulligan Stew* the tale serves as a rebuke for those who ask, Where does literature come from? On the one hand, no amount of laborious "craft" will be adequate to produce the work of literature; and on other hand, there is no mysterious "font" of inspiration any more than there are elves. Whence a masterpiece such as *Mulligan Stew*? It is just so.

Sorrentino tells David Andrews, "all I can say about my books [. . .] is that I have always attempted to achieve a formal pattern decided upon before I write, that is, I don't start with the idea for a story, I start with the idea for realizing a form" (*Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Fall 2001). Each of his novels is an expression of what I would call design and what the Oulipians—Queneau, Calvino, Perec, Mathews—would call a "generative constraint." This is not Robert Frost's sense of a providential, if appalling, "Design," as if nature were the manifestation of a decree by some Authority forever beyond our apprehension and in which design exists as a pattern to be discovered by the poet. The design of Sorrentino's novels is a predetermined, arbitrary, and complex problem for which the execution of the book is the artistic solution. It's intriguing to think of such design as a form of self-imposed restraint that paradoxically stimulates artistic license. If this sounds like a fetish, then consider the many fetishistic tropes—a pearl gray homburg, black lingerie, a deck of playing cards, a letter left by or written to a faithless spouse—that recur throughout the novels. When I learned in May 2006 from a former classmate in the Williams seminar nearly twenty-four years earlier that Gil had passed away in Brooklyn, to which he had returned as if from exile in Palo Alto, I turned to *A Strange Commonplace*. Published that same month it takes its title from a poem by Williams, "The Forgotten City." Organized into two Books comprised of twenty-six episodes (yet another deck of cards), each concludes with a "Wake." The latter is a variation on the Irish wake at which the deceased is lamented but also propped up to take a pint and participate in the festivities. It concludes, "He stands in the center of the room, longing to join them in their erotic play, along with, of course, his buddy in the casket. He wants, even more than he wants to be alive again, to be dead with them, but he is dead with himself alone."

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