

READING GIL SORRENTINO

Gil Sorrentino must surely be a genius -- else how could he have written "Mulligan Stew" and "Imaginary Qualities of Actual Things"? These two works of indignant and presumptuous intentions demonstrate how none among us, or certainly very few, who write and read, shall escape the elaborate flogging of genius.

They seem to be asking us to take a bath in folly, and celebrate the Byzantine meanness of a corrupt literary scene by flashing close-ups of the chancres. But such an aggrieved brilliance moults eventually so that we see all the underlying flesh as rotten, too, and turn away from admiring the bird itself as a part of Creation. Disgust seems as prolix as despair.

I much prefer Sorrentino's novels of more modest means, and appearance: "The Sky Changes," "Steelwork," and the recent "Aberration of Starlight." Such works are very moving to me, and they are finely shaped, dramatized to be pieces of imagined time. If they are nowhere so bold in their assertions and experiments, their effects are often more poignant: they seem to be dramatizing (though never in the slavishly realistic fashion) intense states of human interaction. Even when depicting brutishness and numbness, as in parts of "Steelwork," there is humor; the ironic comforts of hindsight clarifying the pain of recollected follies; and they seem able to perceive through dramatization rather than by imposing the brilliant surface varnishes of language on it -- however brilliantly.

I have also been moved by the same process when it seems in operation in Sorrentino's poems (in the early free form hard bop pieces, of very determined cadences, and the recent "Orange" sonnet sequence, for example). The poems are, we've been assured, the experience of language purely, yet it seems such language can't be too easily disconnected from those images, reflective of sensory and memory experience, through which this language was made into poetry. In some of the most moving poems, which seem to have childhood experiences of pleasure and wonder, loss and pain as their references (and bear similarities to the young boy's reveries in "Aberration"), this is most aptly demonstrated, I think.

I don't believe I'm being paid to heap compliments on Sorrentino's writing (which surely could be an excuse he might understand), so I don't intend to go on and on.

Sorrentino has probably learned from jazz and formal studies, the French late romantics, such as Baudelaire, and contemporary Americans from Williams and Stevens on down. He is a reader and a listener, and has never hankered after seeming naive. For a number of years I believe he served as one of Beckett's editors at Grove Press. In his most moving work he seems as severe and disciplined toward material as Beckett, though never as devoutly abstract. It's as if, unable to shake himself free from a certain obsession with autobiography, Sorrentino was able to shape and transform moments that may have begun in memory to be entirely impersonal, the artefacts of Time.

Sorrentino was one of Selby's most important coaches; they are friends even now, I believe, but, even in works of superficial similarity as to milieu ("Steelwork," for example, and some of Selby's writings about Red Hook, Brooklyn), the treatments diverge. One of Sorrentino's most powerful devices is the terse catalogue, as in this passage from "Steelwork" on "Sexology 1940":

1. If you jerk off you get hairy palms.
2. If you jerk off you go crazy.
3. If you jerk off you go to hell.
4. If you jerk off you can't fuck when you get married.
5. If you jerk off you won't like girls.
6. If you jerk off you get a heart attack...etc etc...

Sorrentino's 100 recollected points of street talk on sex in "Steelwork," and

much else here and there in his work, seem to have been a refinement of some of the crudely brutal naturalism of James T. Farrell, who also wrote about Catholic adolescents.

I first became aware of his writing through the poetry. Sorrentino's 'free' lines were so strongly determined by shifts of mood and perceptions that one experienced constant surprises of pain and tenderness reading such poems (as in some of early Williams and the early Blackburn New York poems). Moving from stanza to stanza, along his heavily stressed patterned language, was one way to get beyond monotonous end-stopped iambic.

Many years after the poems I became aware that there was also fiction. The poet, William Bronk, lent me a copy of "The Sky Changes." It was at a point in my life when I was beginning to think of breaking out of an unhappy first marriage. Though it was never for one moment didactic, the novel seemed to be speaking to me: simply by dramatizing a male in 50s America, in over his head in an unhappy relationship, with a woman of greater emotional depth, and demands, and maturity, I was made to see my own situation with greater intensity. The novel validated a despair afraid to speak its name.

I regard it as a true pity that this early novel remains out of print, because I am always running into such men, and such marriages, and know of few works, even now, which are so subtle, and touching, in depicting the pain of being mismatched.

Sorrentino's recent "Abberation of Starlight" has similar power for me. Most young men and women in this country have been raised by unhappy and bitter women, sell-outs and parasites, who never dared to allow themselves to live. The wonder is that more of us do not wonder more often what events led to such a self-betrayal. But this novel seems to start with such a sense of wonder, and rumination, and manages to depict one very small piece of time in the 1930s so that it is indelible for all of its characters, and readers, as, of course, life teaches us time really is

At a small lower middle class country boardinghouse, a recently separated mother and her son have taken a precarious refuge in the patrimony of a destructive and possessive father and grandparent. The novel dramatizes fantasies of rage, and eros, intimidation, and compliance. It is not a single narrative, but a series of parallel epiphanies: a philandering male fantasizes orgies; a son feels the hates inside him through the absence of his father and expresses them in fantasy communications; the mother feels trapped by her own feminine dependencies; and the patriarch, who seems to prefer to die unloved to being alone, creates dependency to intimidate and control his daughter.

When misery loves company life is made to suffer. The novel shows an act of compliance as it seems to be taking place; the mother cannot defy her own father and survive hard times. The system of family hates unlocked by Sorrentino is as apt today as the moment in time it purports to touch on, the loss of potentiality and pleasure just as cruel.

From all that I know of Sorrentino, in recent years, he seems to wish his reader to share in the fiction of language, pure and abstract, as his most elementary concern, and only means of knowing. I believe this is a persona that should be contemplated for what it is: the means by which an artist of great seriousness, and talent and ability, has shaped the pain of experience to animate language and show the limitations by which we live, and the dramatic breaks, and small startling changes, and terrible betrayals. Sorrentino doesn't pretend to affirm what he cannot know: his art is often bleak with remorse, but it is not the shiny hair oil salesman's hype that they go for along publisher's row; and I hope and believe that some of it will endure.