

“Form Shaping Content”

The Moon in Its Flight
Gilbert Sorrentino
Coffee House Press
272 pages, \$25.50 paper
ISBN: 1566891523

by Jeff Bursey

Reading this collection of twenty short pieces, which cover thirty-five years of creativity, is like stealing time for a favourite pursuit on a summer's afternoon. Despite containing unending marital strife, heavy drinking, and the casual, occasionally fretted over, sexual infidelities, the material remains airy. Few of the tales are conventional, many digress, and one or two never make it past the setup. None are stories, if one maintains that, among other things, stories ought to present character development, have plot arcs, depict settings with realism, and place people in believable situations. Throughout *The Moon in Its Flight* the reader is encouraged to disregard the importance of verisimilitude. “Psychopathology of Everyday Life” takes place in a nebulous somewhere: “Let's put the center of events in a publishing house or advertising agency or public-relations company. Some business on the East Side...” Part of the title story takes place in a quickly fabricated setting: “A girl named Sheila whose father owned a fleet of taxis gave a reunion party in her parents' apartment in Forest Hills. Where else would it be? I will insist on purchased elegance or nothing. None of your warm and cluttered apartments in this story, cats on the stacks of books, and so on.” What is present throughout is Sorrentino's delight in replacing the usual contrivances of stories and novels with other contrivances.

Part of Sorrentino's argument is that character, plot and setting have always been suspect, as they never can provide a reality that is actually real. Instead of an old and creaking artificial environment to read within, then, he offers the equivalent to contemporary architecture where beams and struts are exposed. It is no less artificial a structure, but it does not suppose that there is a world which can be described in words. (When Bellow and Updike are mentioned by a narrator, the implication is that their fictive worlds are aesthetically out of date.) In “Sample Writing Sample” a manifesto is quietly put forward:

“By paying strict, even rapt attention to the false world that will deal with certain aspects of life, embroidered, as they must be embroidered, we *may* gain an understanding of, well, real things as they really are. This is how literature works, if “works” is the word. I do not describe narrative, or this narrative, as false so as to mock or denigrate it, but to differentiate it from the real world that exists, despite all, for all of us, outside the narrative. And that is so even if the narrative appears to represent a number of aspects of that real world in, as might be said, moving and well-written prose.”

Most of the tales target novelists and poets (all mediocre) and those who encourage them, as well as those who possess a slender ability to write and end up working in advertising

agencies. The composition of their conversations is filled with slander, braggadocio and declarations of what they would do for art. How they speak is little different from James Jones, Norman Mailer and William Styron, as related in Hilary Mills's *Norman Mailer*: "... Styron suddenly stopped on a street corner and put his arms around Jones and Mailer, saying, 'Hey, /20/ fellas, isn't it wonderful? The three greatest young American writers, and here we are together.'" Sorrentino has one male narrator put it this way: "It is emotionally numbing for me to acknowledge, to admit, that I never thought of these perpetual visitors [to the apartment he and his wife have opened to other artists] as anything other than legitimate, as the cream of the tottering fifties. We made fun, we actually, good Christ, made fun of other people!"

Far more relevant than employment are the pretensions and aspirations of each figure, for appearances and desires help place people within the artistic class. "A certain Babs, who yearned to wear small black hats with dotted veils, sheer off-black stockings, black suede pumps, and flattering accessories, had to deny herself this pleasure since her husband was seeking tenure and that was that for couture." In "Decades" the narrator says, of someone named Ben, that his "father did something. Whatever your father does, that's what he did..." Readers conditioned to expect grounding in a shared experience, such as the working world may be called, will go begging here. A disregard for background material is in keeping with Sorrentino's view that, since stories don't present reality, it's worthless and beside the point to provide so-called concrete details meant to beguile the reader into thinking that what is about to be said is true because of made-up 'facts.' So when the narrator of "In Loveland", a cuckolded husband, declares that "Reality, or, if you will, that which we constrain ourselves to believe, is, beyond all philosophies, also that which we make of what happened", this echoes the reader's interpretive reaction to this book.

In concentrating on writers or those who have literary pretensions, there's little separating Sorrentino from other novelists who repeatedly situate activity in the same locales or activities. He doesn't escape the complaint that he writes too often about a select group. To help explain this, one critic quotes the narrator of Sorrentino's roman à clef, *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (1971): "Do you think for a moment that an artist selects his theme? It is all simple obsession." Obsessions occasionally can be resisted, but the point is taken. There are consequences when the attention on writers takes the prominent place it did in that novel; for one thing, it angered people Sorrentino knew and ended relationships. In this collection, "Life and Letters" appears to address such consequences, as Edward Krefitz writes a story that he hopes will be read by "the one person he dearly wanted to read the story and be hurt by it..." What compensates for Sorrentino's emphasis on writers is the wicked malice exhibited towards his own kind.

Figures without substance take the place of characters throughout these pieces—though "In Loveland" and "Things That Have Stopped Moving" provide narrators of some depth, relatively speaking—and they differ little from one another (one example, among many, of Sorrentino's resemblance to Wyndham Lewis). When named at all, most are labelled Ben, Claire or Clara, and are animated types rather than individuals. As an example, in "The Moon in Its Flight," Rebecca and a young man fall in love, though the likelihood of them having a future is out of their hands. This offers an opportunity for the narrator to again illustrate the falseness of fiction while taking a swipe at other, i.e. lesser, artists: "Isn't there anyone, any magazine writer or avant-garde filmmaker, any lover of life or dedicated optimist out there who will move them toward a cottage..." so they can be alone? In a later piece, "Times Without Number", a note relates that 118 sentences from "The Moon in Its Flight" are combined with sentences plucked

from works not written by Sorrentino. (This is an exercise in style, like “A Beehive Arranged on Humane Principles” which is written entirely in questions.) By removing ‘unique’ sentences from one work, which many readers would have comfortably regarded as suited to that work alone, and placing them in another context, Sorrentino erases the circumstances of the lovers. Their fate, their place in art, is abolished, and the words used to convey their predicament can be cannibalized. The narrator of “Psychopathology of Everyday Life” sums up Sorrentino’s approach: “...and while the specific nuances of feeling manifested by the ‘characters,’ let me call them...” There are no characters, only figures who possess no more ‘reality’ than do the Aristotelian unities. It’s a cruel world, wherein “Art cannot rescue anybody from anything,” as the narrator admits at the end of “The Moon in Its Flight”.

The notion of a controlling narrator is another device Sorrentino plays with. The narrator occasionally will phrase things in a haphazard way— “Some young man, Bill will do for a name”; ““This is the McCoy!’ I’ll have him say, or something like it, ‘Oh boy!’ perhaps.” At other times there is a clear, if unpredictable, flexing of narrative muscles, as when the narrator of “Perdido” says of a young boy named Justin: “Where, you may ask, was the child in this turmoil of art and love and life?... He became dyslexic—known in those days as ‘dumb,’ hyperactive... I could, as I don’t have to tell you, have made him into a solid citizen rather than a lout.” Generally, the impression is that the narrators form a set of clumsy fumbling trying to communicate, while the narratives are meta-representations of what stories supposedly look like. Yet there is no clumsiness on Sorrentino’s part.

The Moon in Its Flight is billed by its publishers (who also issued Sorrentino’s 2002 novel, *Little Casino*) as a collection of short stories, which is probably necessary but seems inaccurate. While “Lost In The Stars” is a weak meditation on the events of September 11, 2001, the nineteen remaining pieces foreground technique more than anything else, and frequently avoid any attempt to tell a ‘story.’ In an interview published in 2001, Sorrentino stated: “...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...” This philosophy can put off some readers, for there is often resistance to literary fiction if it is too literary. But Sorrentino achieves his goals, and retains the company of the reader, by combining a particular sense of humour (e.g., “The Dignity of Labour,” “It’s Time to Call It A Day”) with a firm commitment to his aesthetic purposes. *The Moon in Its Flight* is a refreshing work from a distinguished author.

[end]