

“Brief Reviews: Fiction”

Lunar Follies

Gilbert Sorrentino

Coffee House Press

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by Jeff Bursey

In 1994, Gilbert Sorrentino said about Oulipo that “their concern with formal structures as permissive of and conducive to compositional freedom was right up my alley.” Like his contemporary and countryman Harry Mathews (the only US member of Oulipo), Sorrentino, who died in early May, enjoyed a creative freedom brought about by restrictions. In his last novel, *Lunar Follies*, the structure is a set of fictional art installations named after alphabetically listed geographical sites on the Moon. There are plenty of settings, and a refreshing absence of plot and characters. However, the shifting narrative voice—ironic, neutral, scathing, submerged under the voices of artspeak and catalogues—firmly guides readers through the fifty-three almost plausible exhibits (which some readers may liken to chapters).

In *Lunar Follies*, Sorrentino has great fun with a familiar fallacy: if it’s in an art gallery, it must be significant. Exposed inside each of his rooms is the lunacy of avant-garde artists, curators, critics, and a society that no longer discriminates, in language or presentation of objects, between the extermination of the Jews (“*Arthur Miller, George Lucas, and Robert Altman smile from the midst of a massive three-dimensional collage, ‘The Holocaust: Years of Hope’...*” in “Pythagoras”), a new class of celebrities and their designer clothing (“*JINKS MIKADO: Slang collector and recipe verifier; Five-button tortured polyvinyl and ‘wet’ swansdown jacket, \$16,300. At Sabrett and Nathan,*” in “Cordillera Mountains”), and football (“Walther”). Present as well is a great deal of sexual imagery, which by virtue of its plenitude and ubiquitousness in contemporary art works, Sorrentino seems to be saying, has lost its erotic power, flattening photographs, texts, objects and living models into material that verges on pornography.

Blasting and bombarding in highbrow and demotic modes, *Lunar Follies* is an aesthetic and hilarious delight that often goes right over the edge of ‘correct’ taste, as illustrated by this sequence of titles taken from “Sir Banjo Hyde-Morrissey’s private collection of erotica”: “*Warriors Blushingly Confess; Albanian Musician Discovering Yorkshire Pussy; Young Ladies, in Deshabille, Fleeing Albanian Janitors; Serbs Humping Albanian Janitors, or Anybody; African Women Doing Dirty Things with Their Colonialist Oppressors; Burmese Musicians and a Popular Sponge...*” (“Moscow Sea”). The narrator of “Ptolemaeus” states that “others—happily, the great majority—know that art’s function is to disturb, to question, to disgust, to bore, to nauseate...,” while in “Theophilus” another confidently says that “art is, at its most sublime, simple, decent, and... ‘easy on the eyes.’” Perhaps thinking of reactions to his own works, in “Sea of Rains”, Sorrentino presents a wall of rejection letters received by a writer’s agent. One letter, pitched perfectly, addresses a possible reaction to *Lunar Follies*. “B’s latest foray into his standard porno-fiction is often elegant and even beautiful, but it lacks the punch of the short-

story collection of his that we passed on last year. Thanks so much for letting me see the work of this important author.” Sorrentino’s last book, *The Moon in Its Flight*, was a collection of short stories also published by Coffee House Press (reviewed in these pages in June/July 2004), and it’s safe to think he’s mining his own experiences.

The anger Sorrentino displays in his satire is healthier than depression over the state of things. Unlike the egoistic pessimism of V.S. Naipaul, who said in 2000 that the novels of that century “do not have any lasting power” compared to the works of the “great novelists in the last century,” Sorrentino has a more nuanced view, as expressed in a 1994 interview: “...the novel is, it seems to me, a very special and rarefied kind of literary form, and was, for a brief moment only, wide-ranging in its sociocultural influence... People used to understand, it seems to me, that there is, at any given time, a handful of superb writers or painters or whatever—and then there are all the rest.”

In the current literary world, the graphic novel is in fashion as ‘the new black,’ the blanchmange of Alice Munro is touted as the acme of fiction writing by Jonathan Franzen (the new fundamentalist of US letters), the death of the novel is sagely predicted by Naipaul while he writes yet another, and Rushdie’s novels are spoken of as though they were a release by an amalgam of U2’s evangelical protest songs and the inspired madness of Spike Jones and his City Slickers. *Lunar Follies* is a witty, intelligent and necessarily mean attack on the pretensions and vapidness of everyone and everything connected to facile artworks and the environment in which they flourish.

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