Innovation has marked his writing ever since he initiated his literary career. Poet, novelist and critic, Gilbert Sorrentino is not searching for a mimetic art. His elaborate play of ideas in constant transformation allows him to integrate form and meaning to create his artifacts. Being first a poet, he has a proclivity towards manipulating the language in ludic ways: lists, catalogues, etc., while he ignores John Gardner’s preaching towards the search for truth as a necessary aim. He’d rather accommodate to William Gass’s assumption that the only reality is the one intrinsic to the created artifact and therefore unique and distant from a «real» nexus.

Gilbert Sorrentino explains that he feels nearer to Europe than to America. His aesthetic qualities are close to those of French writers such as Raymond Queneau and the OU-LIPO. He confesses in *Something Said*, a collection of critical essays published in 1984: «I am closer to Laurence Sterne than I am to Henry Thoreau, and I ‘understand’ Italo Calvino better than I do John Cheever.»

Sorrentino’s interest in writing focuses on experiments of all sorts, but especially those that impose constraints as a source device. *Mulligan Stew* is his most well-known novel. It was written in 1979, and re-edited the last time in Dalkey Archive Press in 1996. A book full of humor that tells of the avant-garde novelist Antony Lamont, whose struggle to write a «new wave murder mystery» is portrayed in a self-conscious way, but is wrecked by his frustrating emotional life. He uses metafiction borrowing the characters from other books: for example, Antony Lamont from O’Brien’s novel; and Chad Newsome, from James’s *The Ambassadors*.

The interview here printed took place in June 1996 at Stanford University, where Mr. Sorrentino teaches both Creative Writing and Contemporary American Literature in the Department of English.

*You have always maintained a very personal and coherent position towards your writing career. When you started writing in the 1950s and you were publishing the magazines Neon and later Kulchur, was ideology an important element in your conception of art?*

If by «ideology,» you mean an aesthetic, rather than a political or social position, yes, it was very important to me, and, for that matter, it still is. I’m not rabid or doctrinaire when it comes to attitudes toward or theories about literature, that is, it is the artist who gives the theorist his materials—this seems to be beyond cavil. On the other hand, I’ve never been comfortable with the sort of writer who is ignorant of the structural or formal elements of his work, who considers thinking about what he and other writers do is somehow beneath his or her status as a creative being. It’s almost as if they are embarrassed by the possibility that they may well be making art! So they retreat into a kind of snobbery of ignorance. I was talking some time ago with a young writer who it turned out, didn’t quite know what exposition is, and wasn’t really sure what a motif is. He was perfectly happy in his blankness, and, if all goes as it probably will, he’ll publish a first book soon that will be described as vital or compelling or deeply felt, filled with characters whom we think we know. And on and on it goes.
The editorial marketplace seems to act as a dictator that favors a writing which is submissive and condescending with conventional values. How does it affect writers and what is the role of the small presses in this country?

I’ve talked about this so often that I fear I may be turning into a crank. Of course, anybody with half an eye knows precisely what I know—it doesn’t take a great deal of intelligence to see that most trade publishing puts most of its resources into the publication and marketing of books that have absolutely nothing to do with literature, and, sad to say, nothing to do with a sturdy popular literature. That’s when you know that the culture is in trouble, when serious writers are ignored, and pop writers are becoming editor-enslaved hacks whose books are elevated to literature by expensive marketing campaigns. So, instead of Whit Burnett we have Mary Higgins Clark; instead of Booth Tarkington, Amy Tan. As far as this situation affecting writers, it sets up a censorship of the marketplace. The serious, «experimental», risky book, let us say, is published, by some miracle, by a major trade house. The advertising budget is minuscule, and the author is expected to flog his own book on a very limited, low-budget reading tour, which, most of the time, entails reading at a local bookstore to eight people, one of whom will ask him how he started to write. Not one of these people will buy a book. Concurrent with the triumphant reading tour will be the idiot reviews by people who think that Modernism is about a week or two old, or the total silence from larger venues. Better yet is the review in The New York Times Book Review that appears three or four months after publication. So this is not to mention the substitution of biographies or wit-and-wisdom books by stand-up comics and sitcom stars for a Carl Van Vechten or Thorne Smith, say. While there may not be a governmental censorship, there is a censorship that exists on the level of author-reader interaction. And the scenario I gave you is an ideal one, that is, there are many more risky, let’s say, books that have no budget for anything at all, not even a 15-minute reading in a phone booth a cab-ride away. So, if the book comes out silently, if there is no publicity, if the reviews are dumb, lazy, as brief as jacket copy, or if they don’t exist at all, the bookstore will either not order this book or will order one or two copies. If they should sell, the store will not order any more. You may call it what you want, but it certainly acts like censorship. Small presses have done wonderful work picking up titles that the trade houses won’t touch. But small presses are almost wholly subject to the censorship of the marketplace. They have nothing to give the all-consuming maw but the literary product that it most certainly does not want. And yet, these small presses have, and I’m quite serious about this, permitted an interested audience access to literature that would otherwise have had no outlet at all. They have, not to wax dramatic, kept real literature alive. And if I may include New Directions and Grove Press in the ranks of small publishers, which, in a very real way, they were—and still is—I can make the argument that the American reader, without these presses, would have been deprived of at least three authentically great writers of our century: Pound, Williams and Beckett

What are your roots in New York City? You sometimes use it as the setting for your novels, like in Steelwork and Crystal Vision, does it mean you still feel very much identified with that city?

I’m a native New Yorker, reared and educated in the city. My parents and grandparents on both sides were New Yorkers. I have married twice, both times in New York to native New York women, whose parents were New Yorkers. I have three children, all of whom were born in New York. Until 1982, I lived, save for the usual trips here and there, and my two years in the Army, all my adult life in the city. New York is very much a part of me, very intimately connected to my view of the rest of the country and its people. I suspect that, for better or worse, I have a New York attitude toward other places, i.e., «Show me
something,» or to borrow Diaghilev’s phrase, «Étonnez moi!» This attitude is probably rooted in the fact that I came to adulthood in the years just following World War II, when New York was at the very height of its glamour and power and glitter, when it was the very center of energy and magic. My mother told me that when she and my father were on their honeymoon, a sleeping-car porter, when he discovered that they were New Yorkers, said, «When you leave New York you’re just campin’ out.» That sounds about right to me. Of course, economic exigencies have set me down in California, but my heart is not here nor will it ever be. The place always seems as if ready to implode with self-congratulation.

Experimenting with language has given way to such dynamic and suggestive laboratories as the Toronto Research Group (1973-1982) with Steve McCaffery and bpNichol as main researchers and OULIPO (1974-1987) with the founder François Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec, Italo Calvino, and the Americans Marcel Duchamp and Harry Mathews among others. How did you become interested in this French movement?

I’ve always been interested in formal compositional problems, and all of my books are designed formally, that is, the form all but exerts great power over what I say in my work. Form, despite those who think the artist has great things to «say,» and those, on the other side, who want form to act as a handmaiden to great things to «say,» so that these great things will be stamped with the seal of artistic know-how, really does determine content, or, at least, makes content act in odd ways. For instance, were one to write a brief history of Auschwitz as a set of interlocking limericks, Auschwitz would be something other than it is. This is old news of course, mock-heroic poetry operating in precisely the opposite way. When I discovered Oulipo, maybe 15 years ago, it was enormously appealing to me, since I’d been using constraints for years.

Usually criticism on contemporary fiction tends to connect American innovative writing with the French Nouveau Roman and Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges, but most frequently the Beat Generation is disregarded as an influence. There is an old book edited by Donald Allen and Robert Creeley, The New Writing in the USA, (1967) that, in my opinion, brings together a very accurate and absolutely American list of innovative authors from William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, Hubert Selby and yourself. What is the influence of the Beat Generation on contemporary innovative writers?

I don’t know if the Beat Generation is an influence, per se, on contemporary innovators. But surely the spirit of the Beat Generation is generally representative of the postwar period, say from 1947 to 1960, when American writing really began to throw off the stifling restrictions of the European tradition as interpreted by such critics as John Crowe Ransom, R. P. Blackmur, Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, and so on and so forth. The quality of American experience was held to be meaningless or shabby in the light of the great European Modernists, and so American writers were valid insofar as their work reflected those European concerns. To put this reductively: An American writer could write about American experience, with its frantic pop culture, its adoration of sports, its love affair with the automobile, its maddening combination of open-face friendliness with barely concealed violence, its righteous proto- and cryptofasim, and so on, but ONLY if these things were handled with aesthetic and socio-political contempt. The Beats, and all the other «new» writers of the time valorized, let’s say, jazz or baseball or whatever as experience that was just as valid as the experiences of, say, Tonio Kröger. That’s why postwar innovation was so violently attacked—the things that a Norman Podhoretz or a Lionel Trilling had refused to acknowledge as fit subjects for literature were suddenly being pushed into their faces. It’s also why young American writers of the time were so attracted to the work of William Carlos Williams. He had been insisting on the «actuality» of American.
experience for 40 years! For his troubles, he was mistaken by Pound, dismissed by Eliot, patronized by Jarrell (what nerve!), and generally ranked well below poets like Robert Lowell, who came to imitate his variable foot and were praised for such daring.

You are included in the group of postmodernist fiction writers but this group seems to me very heterogeneous. I think that there are many differences in the writers grouped under the name postmodernists. While John Barth and Robert Coover are still creating myths and metaphors within their books and use models, other writers like William Gass say that «models interfere with the imagination» and try to reach an abstract sensibility in the reader similar to what we sense when we listen to music. What do you think of the use of «postmodernism» in fiction and where do you place yourself?

To me, «postmodernism» is but an extension of Modernism. I don’t see, as many others do, that they are antithetical to each other. Many of the formal concerns of the late texts of Modernism adumbrate postmodern formal concerns: Paterson, The Cantos, Finnegans Wake, USA, Watt, At Swim-Two-Birds, and on and on. I don’t know where I place myself, that’s for others to decide. Some people think that I’m part of a ludic avant-garde, others think I’m a throwback to High Modernism, some consider me a wonderful technician with little to say, some think I’m a comic writer, others that I’m filled with bitterness, and Thomas LeClair, some few years ago, and with the straightest of faces, said that I was not a member of the «true avant-garde» since my work was illocutionary, not perlocutionary! Now there is what they used to call «a mouthful.» But what is most astonishing about academic blather like this is the equanimity and serenity with which such people say things like «true avant-garde» As against what? The «false avant-garde»? Speaking of such pronouncements, a student of mine, some time ago, told me of a book that had been published in which my novel, Mulligan Stew, was taken to task for not being «transgressive» enough to be really postmodern. My own belief is that most of these critics are secret ‘pataphysicians,’ and their entire careers are a parody of scholarship.

The way you use texts and characters from other authors like Flann O’Brien’s At Swim-Two-Birds implies a metafictional technique. Are opacity and the use of flat characters part of your aims as a fiction writer? What quality do you intend to add to your books with such techniques?

I think that my characters are «flat.» as you say, and that many of them are borrowed, and, if my own, travel from book to book, because I’m not really very interested in why people did whatever, what made them the way they are, what their «characters» are. In other words, I prefer to posit characters who have no «ways» of acting that are not subject to variations any time at all, and in any circumstances. As soon as the writer decides that psychology, motivation, and character are to be jettisoned, his people become flat and unpredictable. This sort of thing often happens in life, too, as we well know, but it seems wholly amazing there, since in life we labor under the delusion that we know the people that we know: we have, as it were, «read» them, and when they act out of character we are surprised. In a novel, if characterless characters do something odd we are annoyed, because we had no posited information about them. That is, we want fiction to be «like» a reality that is only seemingly readable.«

Do you write from a conviction of a chasm within the convention of genres? Do you feel a poet sometimes and a novelist others or is such a distinction not significant anymore?

I’ve said in other interviews that I write poetry with one voice that I’ve discovered/invented and that has, for better or worse, one particular way of speaking of the world. In fiction, I invent many voices, some closer to me than others, some closer to my poetic voice than others, and still other voices that have nothing at all to do with me.

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In your book of essays Something Said you include a deep article on William Carlos Williams. Is he an important influence in your work?

William Carlos Williams was, and is, a very profound influence on my work, indeed. Many years ago, when I was a young, unpublished writer, he was of enormous importance to me through his belief in and encouragement of my work. He had also been a kind of remarkable example of a writer who persisted in the face of overwhelming hostility, philistinism, and misunderstanding. As for direct influence, I would say that he taught me, very early on, the value of American speech to convey complex thought, and, perhaps most importantly, he taught me to avoid, wherever possible, analogy, simile, comparison, etc., etc., what he called «easy lateral sliding.» He was, too, very instructive in his insistence on the unadorned noun as the ideal image.

In which direction do you predict the evolution of experimental writing in this country?

This is a hard question for me to address, since, at the age of 67, I’m not as familiar with the work of the young as I’d like. From what I see, experimental writing will have to cope with the vast floods of information available to people via computer systems. I don’t mean compete with, or rail against, but somehow understand what all this linguistic «noisiness» means for the essentially very private and dark messages of fiction. That is: how can fiction propose its negative discourse in a world that lusts after facts, and the more of them the merrier? The very idea that the web literally means that thousands are reading the same text concurrently means also that the privacy of book-reading will probably take on a texture that I can’t imagine. But whatever happens, I believe that experimental writing will find itself as far as it ever was from the «mainstream,» since the latter increasingly asserts itself as part of a world of general entertainment, wholly remote from literature. I suspect that the computer, the web, etc., etc., will very soon move out from its role as information-gatherer and purveyor to its true role as entertainment-provider, and when «facts» and «news» become entertainment, then the experimental writer will be a bona fide social, as well as artistic aberration.

In the last chapter of your book Something Said, «Genetic Coding» you say that you feel nearer to Europe than to America, I suppose you mean France and Italy but I would like to know if there are any writers from Spain that you like in particular.

I like Juan Goytisolo, Camilo José Cela and Julián Ríos, and also Pío Baroja and Lorca. I’m much more familiar with Latin American writers, among whom my absolute favorite is Julio Cortázar. And I also like José Lezama Lima and Severo Sarduy.

What are you writing at this moment?

I’m writing a story that threatens to become a novella.