

THE PLEASURES OF INFLUENCE. INTERTEXTUALITY IN  
*MULLIGAN STEW* (1979) BY GILBERT SORRENTINO

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This article analyses the extreme intertextuality displayed in *Mulligan Stew* (1979) by the American novelist Gilbert Sorrentino. Building on a sensible taxonomy of intertextuality offered by Broich and Pfister (1985), the analysis of the novel first of all attempts to grasp the impressive range with which Sorrentino borrows from or evokes existing texts and genres. Secondly, the article argues that Sorrentino deals with those existing genres and texts in an effort to show his own mastery and thus to establish his artistic identity. Instead of resorting to intertextuality because there is nothing else left to do, he turns the weight of tradition into a source of aesthetic pleasure as a proof of his own virtuosity as a writer.

«*mulligan stew* n -s (prob. fr. the name Mulligan): a stew of vegetables, meat or fish, and other available foodstuffs» (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*)

«— Seymour's back in town, the young man  
 said, grasping again his spur of rock.  
 Chucked medicine and going in for the army.  
 — Ah, go to God, Buck Mulligan said.  
 — Going over next week to stew»

(James Joyce, *Ulysses*)

The discussion of intertextuality has reached a stage in which theory seems to have had its day, yielding the ground to practical analyses which can now be executed with a greater sense of purpose and historical relevance. A prime feature of «poststructuralist postmodernism» (Bertens 1995, 6-7), the inevitability of intertextuality has driven a great many authors to imaginative acrobatics in dealing with the literature at their disposal. *Mulligan Stew*, a novel hailed for its extravagant use of parody, offers an extreme instance of this procedure. The title of Gilbert Sorrentino's novel can be understood in at least two (complementary) ways. On the one hand Sorrentino metaphorically suggests that his novel will consist of the «foodstuffs» at his disposal, which can only mean already existing texts and genres. On the other he uses the name of his title dish to illustrate precisely this literary mixture, since it already contains an intertextual reference. My second motto, in which the words «Mulligan» and «stew» (here meaning «to study») appear so close to one another, might even indicate that *Ulysses* (1922) is where Sorrentino got the idea for his title in the first place. But more importantly, in *Ulysses* Buck Mulligan is a carefree joker who continuously treats the other characters to literary quotations and who keeps dishing up parodies of popular genres. Because he readily changes his attitude and plays a different part each time, he may be judged to lack a full-fledged personality with a distinctive voice. This compensatory resort to quotation and parody in Joyce's novel leads one to suspect that Sorrentino is making a novel out of already existing material so as to compensate for his inability to overcome the Western literary tradition in which he finds himself pla-

ced and perhaps trapped as a creative writer. Sorrentino is obviously not the first author to realize this particular predicament, but *Mulligan Stew* provides a consummate example of the way in which intertextuality has been offered as a (playful) solution to this problem. Indeed, not only does Sorrentino attempt to overcome the restrictions placed on the writer by a crushing literary tradition, but he also tackles the additional tradition of escaping the burden of that tradition through intertextuality.

This double effort must be analysed with a view to its effect on the reader, but in order to grasp the massive intertextuality in *Mulligan Stew* I will for now leave its reception aside and make use of two simple scales designed by Ulrich Broich and Manfred Pfister (1985) in their taxonomy of the ways in which an author can connect with existing texts and genres. Each intertextual reference can be assigned a point on each of these scales. On a first scale, an author may allude or directly refer to a specific text, or (at the other end of this scale) to types of discourse (such as the scientific, juridical, religious or political discourse) and (conventions of) literary genres. On a second scale, Broich and Pfister classify what exactly an author may borrow. From another text or genre, he/she can adopt either elements (e.g. literal quotations, characters, themes, symbols) or structures (e.g. plots, interrelated narrative levels). Obviously, several possibilities from the two scales may operate within one and the same text.

Sorrentino adopts the entire structure of only one specific text. This dominant intertext is a metatextual novel, which contains the recipe of Sorrentino's stew. In *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) by Flann O'Brien, an unnamed narrator reports in the first person singular on his daily life as a student in Dublin, emphasizing the literary activity he develops in his spare time. Events from the autobiographical narrative regularly occasion the insertion of all kinds of texts (such as a few letters and excerpts from a textbook, a dictionary and an encyclopedia), but it is the literary production of the first-person narrator himself that from the very start almost supersedes the autobiographical narration. The first-person narrator's novel about the author Dermot Trellis, which is largely included, is in its turn a collection of barely integrated styles and genres. In addition it illustrates the theory of the novel as proposed in the autobiographical narrative:

Each [character] should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living....Characters should be interchangeable as between one book and another. The entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only when they failed to find a suitable puppet. The modern novel should be largely a work of reference. (*At Swim* 25)

Dermot Trellis lives in The Red Swan, a hotel in which he has assembled his characters, partly adopted from existing texts (such as Finn Mac Cool, Conàn, Anthony Lamont, Paul Shanahan and John Furriskey), and where he has raped Sheila, Lamont's sister. Trellis is asleep much of the time and his characters use this opportunity to start leading their own lives. Thus Finn tells the story of Sweeney and mentions the latter's visit to the village Swim-Two-Birds. Paul Shanahan relates his adventures from an earlier book, which leads to a short western presented as a series of newspaper articles. Later on, Shanahan, Furriskey and Lamont encourage Orlick, the son Sheila has in the meantime delivered, to write a story in which his father, Dermot Trellis, is indicted for abuse of characters.

The tendency to insert a variety of texts, already apparent in *At Swim*, is taken to the limit in *Mulligan Stew*. The novel consists entirely of pieces of writing which the characters on each level of the novel either compose themselves, find, or receive (by mail) from others. Sorrentino's novel does away with the frame first-person narrative from *At Swim*, but this does not mean that the worries of the person who is pulling the strings of the text

remain completely unnoticed. Eleven unnumbered pages precede the title page. With their long list of negative reactions by publishers and a favorable report by a lecturer of Grove Press, they constitute an extensive publication file about *Mulligan Stew*, a novel written by a certain Gilbert Sorrentino.

The equivalent in *Stew* of Dermot Trellis from *At Swim* is the not very successful writer Anthony Lamont, a parallel which immediately shows just how seriously Sorrentino has taken the theory of the novel expounded by O'Brien's first-person narrator. The choice of Lamont, whose looks completely correspond to those of O'Brien's Lamont (*At Swim* 161 / *Stew* 45), may have been determined by the additional idealizing description Orlick Trellis gives of him in the story about his father Dermot. Orlick interprets Lamont's appearance to be that of a poet:

His features were pale, finely moulded and ascetic, the features of a poet and one addicted almost continuously to thoughts of a beautiful or fragrant nature. The delicate line of his nostrils, his sensitive mouth, the rather escapade that was his hair—all were clear indications of a curious lovely aestheticism, a poetical perception of no ordinary intensity (*At Swim* 189).

The character of Lamont in Sorrentino's novel is more developed than that of sleepy Trellis in *At Swim*. On the one hand, there is Lamont's lively correspondence, especially with his sister Sheila, who marries a certain Dermot Trellis, the author of the pornographic novel *The Red Swan* (!), and with a literature professor who intends to discuss Lamont's earlier work in a class on the American avant-garde novel. On the other hand, there is Lamont's notebook, in which he comments on the recently written chapters of his new novel and on the news that reaches him. The clippings from Lamont's scrapbook hardly contribute to the plot about the author, but they certainly enhance the intertextual disposition of *Mulligan Stew*.

The remaining components of Sorrentino's novel are the chapters of Lamont's novel to be, whose original title *Guinea Red* is changed halfway through the book into *Crocodile Tears*, and the extracts from the diary kept by the first-person narrator of Lamont's novel in his spare time, to which he adds texts he has found or received. All the main characters in Lamont's novel are adopted from earlier texts. At the beginning of *Guinea Red / Crocodile Tears*, Martin Halpin (a gardener in a footnote on page 264 of *Finnegans Wake* [1939] by James Joyce) is in a cottage by a lake in the North of the US. There, too, lies the corpse of his publisher-colleague Ned Beaumont (the detective in *The Glass Key* [1931] by Dashiell Hammett), whom he may have killed. From a series of flashbacks it transpires that Beaumont initially had an affair with Daisy Buchanan (taken, together with her husband Tom, from *The Great Gatsby* [1925] by F. Scott Fitzgerald), but that he left her because of the seductive duo Corrie Corriendo and Berthe Delamode (resp. an actress and the costume designer from «The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies» in *Finnegans Wake* [219-259]). In Joyce's novel, Halpin, Corriendo and Delamode are hardly more than proper names, so that Sorrentino can develop their personalities as he wishes. Ned Beaumont is a character from a detective story, so that one feels he belongs in *Guinea Red / Crocodile Tears*. Although in *The Glass Key* he gets continuously beaten up, he eventually emerges the victor, while in Lamont's text he is no detective at all but is found dead on the first page. Tom and Daisy Buchanan, on the other hand, have roughly kept their original faces and functions. Tom has also studied at an Ivy League university (not Yale, but Princeton, where Fitzgerald studied as well) and has been successful at football there (*Gatsby* 6 / *Stew* 103). Daisy has an affair in both novels with the man (resp. Jay Gatsby and Ned Beaumont) who is close to the narrator (resp. Nick Carraway and Martin Halpin). In

Daisy's case as well some details have been adapted: she is now born in Mechanicville (no longer in Louisville), and she no longer has a daughter. Sorrentino may also have liked Fitzgerald's Daisy as a character choice because Lamont's favorite flower in O'Brien's novel is a daisy (*At Swim* 161).

When Lamont is not working on his novel, Halpin and Beaumont engage in their own activities. Although the excerpts from Halpin's diary already occur in *Stew* after two chapters of Lamont's novel, the autonomous lives of Halpin and Beaumont are only rationalized much later in the text by the fact that Lamont (by his own account) is losing control over his characters. The two publishers explore the cottage Lamont has placed them in. On an excursion Halpin discovers a town where only fictional characters live. Beaumont is annoyed at Lamont to the extent that he makes his exit from the novel and Halpin is forced to play both parts in hopes that Lamont won't notice. When Halpin is fed up with it as well and leaves the cottage, *Mulligan Stew* ends, without Lamont's novel being finished.

The way in which Sorrentino handles characters from *At Swim-Two-Birds* and other novels shows that he considers existing texts largely as reservoirs of (often trivial) elements to adopt and/or adapt. *Stew* is loaded with these elements. The following list does not claim to be exhaustive. In the publication file a number of publishers are named after an existing character who, however, is hardly involved in the book trade: Frank Bouvard (François Bouvard from Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet* [1881]), Yvonne Firmin (from *Under the Volcano* [1947] by Malcolm Lowry), Chad Newsome (from *The Ambassadors* [1903] by Henry James) and Claude Estee (a successful scriptwriter from *The Day of the Locust* [1939] by Nathanael West).<sup>1</sup> In one of the letters to his sister Sheila, Lamont discusses two earlier stories by her husband Dermot Trellis, whose titles (*Moonface the Murderer* and *I Divorce Thee Husband*) are taken from the list of Earwicker's names in *Finnegans Wake* (*Wake* 71 / *Stew* 28). In a letter to a certain professor Roche, Lamont mentions the French poet Pierre Dusort, who is in fact one of the characters patronizing the already mentioned mime in *Finnegans Wake* (*Wake* 219 / *Stew* 22). In Lamont's scrapbook, a number of lists with ten questions and answers contain a line from, among others, «The Second Coming» by William Butler Yeats («A rough beast has slouched towards Bethlehem to be born» [*Stew* 144]). Sometimes the line is slightly altered, as with «They're gonna wash some man right outta their hair» (*Stew* 145), whose original can of course be found in *South Pacific* by Rodgers and Hammerstein. Like the narrator in *The Glass Key*, Halpin always mentions Ned Beaumont by his full name. The passage from Halpin's novel in which Beaumont asks the best way to reach Lazy Creek starts off Halpin's digression (in the chapter 'Spilt Ink'!) on the different ways the police can use to reach the cottage. The New River Road in Hammett's novel appears in Sorrentino's text as an «old river road» (*Key* 691-692 / *Stew* 138-142). *American Lake Poetry* and *How to Understand the Deaf*, two titles from the endless list of books that Halpin finds in the cottage, are lifted from the series of subjects that Shem and Shaun at their father's (Earwicker's) request sum up in the «Night Lessons» section of *Finnegans Wake* (*Wake* 307 / *Stew* 31). Sorrentino adopts the typography of this section in the reviews of Lamont's earlier novels discovered by Beaumont (*Wake* 260-308 / *Stew* 89-93).

Sorrentino's novel is also a downright encyclopedia of literary genres and discourse types. Among others, he evokes the detective story, the epistolary novel, the pornographic novel, the western, the Jewish novel, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century masque, erotic poetry, the interview with a writer, the catalogue of a publishing house, the horoscope,

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<sup>1</sup> See Kenner (1979) for Bouvard and Newsome, and Greiner (1981) for Estee.

the baseball scorecard, scientific discourse and commercial language. Some examples may clarify this procedure. In the town where only literary characters live, Halpin receives a play from a colleague. *Flawless Play Restored. The Masque of Fungo* (1974) had already been published separately by Sorrentino. It is in fact an anti-masque, an instance of the subgenre (conceived by Ben Jonson in the early seventeenth century) which preceded the actual masque. While the main part of the performance was interpreted as a static worship of the monarch and was thus hardly fit for the presentation of a problem, the anti-masque did provide the opportunity for dramatic development. Sorrentino, like Jonson, introduces many musical intermezzos and preserves the grotesque nature of the subgenre. The anti-masque has nevertheless lost its historical function in *Stew*, where it serves as a vehicle for the banal tribulations of a baseball player who eventually gets back in shape.

The parodic tendency in the evocation of genres manifests itself more overtly in the passage from Lamont's novel *Rayon Violet*, which is enclosed with a letter to professor Roche. About a page and a half of broken English interspersed with Yiddish words combines a number of themes from the Jewish novel: paranoia, the family situation (with an emphasis on the father-son relationship), financial and sexual problems, relationships with other peoples and, of course, the holocaust. Moreover, the name *Levenspiel* for the character from *Rayon Violet* might refer to *The Victim* (1947) by Saul Bellow, whose main character is named Asa Leventhal.

Sorrentino's evocation of a genre often contains a reference to one or more specific texts. «Red Dawn and Blue Denim,» the first chapter of the novel Dermot Trellis is working on in *Stew*, is a parody of the western which, through the hero Cal O'Nolan, refers to the equally parodic western from *At Swim-Two-Birds* by Flann O'Brien (a pseudonym of Brian O'Nolan). Since purple verges on red or blue, the title «Red Dawn and Blue Denim» alludes to *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), the best-known work by the western writer Zane Grey, already mentioned earlier in Sorrentino's novel.

The interview-cum-essay with/on the writer Thomas Renfroux McCoy («Chats with the Real McCoy. By Richard Schiller» [*Stew* 36-43]) is an evocation of a genre that is interlaced with references both to *Mulligan Stew* itself and to other literary works. In addition, it contains elements from concrete examples of the genre in question. To start with, the interview/essay can be identified as a typical example of its kind because of the interviewer's respect for the interviewee and his attention to both trivial detail and the interviewee's opinion on other authors. Moreover, McCoy is modelled on Vladimir Nabokov, and some of the interviews with him collected in *Strong Opinions* (1973) form the basis of this section in *Stew*. McCoy and his wife live in a stylish hotel, just as the Nabokovs had done for years. In *Stew*, this hotel is named the Hotel Splendide. One of Sorrentino's prose works is called *Splendide-Hôtel* (1973), which title is taken from a building in *Illuminations* (1886) by Arthur Rimbaud. The description of the hotel in *Stew* is strongly reminiscent of The Red Swan in *At Swim-Two-Birds*: «The Splendide is somewhat disconcertingly eerie, particularly in the off-season, when almost all the rooms seem to be occupied by nobody save the creatures of McCoy's celebrated imagination» (*Stew* 37). Nabokov's linguistic meticulousness has turned into an obsession with spelling on the part of McCoy. Both authors are used to writing in bed (*Opinions* 139 / *Stew* 39) and have an exceptional sense of color (*Opinions* 17 / *Stew* 36-43). Finally, some questions asked to McCoy are literally lifted from an interview with Nabokov in *The New York Review of Books*: «What should we think about death?» is transformed into «What do you think of death?» and «What problems are posed for you by the existence of the ego?» has been changed to «What are the problems posed for you by the existence of other authors?» «What can (should?) we do about elusive truth?» becomes «What do you think you can do about fixing, or at least pursuing, the

elusive mercury of truth?» a formulation which contains an additional reference to Buck Mulligan/Mercury in *Ulysses* (*Opinions* 182 / *Stew* 40, 41, 43).

Sorrentino's book so strongly revolves around its own literary axis that even its intertextual bent and elitist nature are made explicit in the text. In a letter to Trellis, Lamont explains his use of existing genres: «I'm afraid that I didn't use a specific piece of literature as a model, but put together, from memory, all the junk I've seen over the years in order to make up a kind of prototypical cheesecake-porno ad» (*Stew* 128). «An anonymous sketch,» the writer's portrait Sheila sends to Lamont, contains a passage on borrowing:

Borrowing? Aye! From the base, the sublime, from the low to the high this thief took his ore. Reading a read of a novel he'd pull out a phrase or a line....A persistent and underground rumor ran thus: that with unparalleled insolence he stole his very characters—all of whom (but of course) were invented by better than he. The most casual glance at his books will reveal this to be. (*Stew* 261)

And when asked «What literary complexities do you find most interesting? That is, what do you like most to 'solve,' so to speak, as a novelist?» McCoy answers: «One wishes to create characters who will speak directly to the minds of comparative literature professors and intelligent book reviewers» (*Stew* 38).

The least one can say about the effect of intertextuality in *Mulligan Stew* is that Sorrentino's intensive manipulation of existing texts and genres creates an intertextual climate which urges the reader to activate his or her literary competence. The identification of an intertext may be helped by a more or less explicit reference, which, however, is not always found in *Mulligan Stew* at the same juncture where an element or a structure from the intertext is found. Some suggestions are obviously more important than others. Sorrentino has adopted one of his mottoes from O'Brien, and one from Joyce. The latter may lead to the reconsideration of the culinary title that I have attempted at the beginning of this essay. The former may, together with the dedication to Brian O'Nolan, put the reader on the track of the dominant intertext. The reader's report is not only an excellent introduction to the complex structure of *Stew*, but it also already betrays some intertextual references, such as the detective novel and the Jonsonian masque. In the letter to Roche containing the passage from *Rayon Violet*, Lamont himself reveals the parodied genre: «I must also confess that the only reason that I put [Levenspiel] into the novel was because of a mad desire I had to 'cash in' ...on the 'Jewish novel'....» (*Stew* 22). Halpin and Beaumont mention in their spare time for which author they used to work:

What have I done to be plucked out of the wry, the amused footnote in which I have resided, faceless, for all these years in the work of that gentlemanly Irishman, Mr. Joyce? (*Stew* 25)

«Look Halpin. Did you ever hear of Dashiell Hammett? ...Well, I worked for Hammett. I was a very big star for him.» (*Stew* 26)

In the interview McCoy not only vents his (negative) opinion of Nabokov, but also mentions Zane Grey and *At Swim-Two-Birds* in passing. For the most part, though, the reader has to rely largely on his or her literary foreknowledge. Reading *Mulligan Stew* is therefore quite a task. It either becomes a radical source of intellectual self-gratification or it turns into a very frustrating experience. Most probably a mix of the two will occur, a phenomenon which must be taken into account when trying to assess the result of Sorrentino's endeavor.

*Mulligan Stew* does not illustrate the poststructuralist theory of intertextuality as formulated by Julia Kristeva (1969), who saw literature as *productivité* and writer and reader

as absorbed in an infinite textual universe. For Kristeva, the author has no control over his or her product. Discourse is multivoiced, yet there is no director to manage it. *Stew*, on the other hand, is clearly controlled by an organizing individual, Gilbert Sorrentino, who, in fact, projects himself into the novel at regular intervals. This occurs not only in the publication file, but also through a partial resemblance of Sorrentino with Lamont (who e.g. has also already published four novels), by means of a number of authors' names (e.g. Bert Sonnertino, Gilberto Soterroni, Gilles de Sorentain [*Stew* 32, 33]) and by the insertion of elements from Sorrentino's own oeuvre (e.g. the fascination for blue and orange, which appears not only in *Splendide-Hôtel*, but also in *Imaginary Qualities of Actual Things* [1971]).

Sorrentino reaches back to a huge number of language components at his disposal. Intertextuality pushed to extremes still seems the only possibility for overcoming the deadlock literature finds itself in. Everything has already been said, so the only thing left to do is to say it again with reference to earlier treatments of the theme at hand. Sorrentino shows that this is likewise an outdated procedure, not only by making it explicit and by pushing it to what can only be described as its limits, but also by borrowing the structure and the main character of his novel from *At Swim-Two-Birds*, a book which—though less overwhelmingly so—precisely gives shape to the issue that is being thematised. With this twofold recuperation, Sorrentino betrays an extreme awareness of and maybe even a skepticism as to the compensatory force attributed to intertextuality in contemporary literature. The novelistic aporias would thus loom even larger in *Mulligan Stew* than in some of the work by John Barth, Richard Brautigan, Donald Barthelme, and other postmodern authors, since Sorrentino would then be seen even to undermine what he would consider the already poor ersatz developed by his colleagues for lack of an original type of literary discourse.

Yet the resulting stew is a virtuoso performance that should still, for one, enable Sorrentino to play the part of the sophisticated entertainer and producer of literary beauty which contemporary society has come to expect from the novelist. In my opinion, however, Sorrentino did not want to stop at the entertainment of the reader eager for formal complexity. I submit that he had the intention to go beyond the communication of a deadlock. With an ironic self-awareness and a fair amount of distancing humor, *Mulligan Stew* brings up some aspects of contemporary authorship, such as the situation within the book trade and the psychological and technical problems that arise during the composition of a book. Along these lines, the undoubtedly problematic reception of the intertextuality in *Mulligan Stew* could be interpreted as the deliberately embraced consequence of the burden laid upon the author by literary tradition and the enormous variety of discourse types. But the reader's frustration is not the pessimistic end of it. The arbitrariness with which Sorrentino in his *Künstlerroman* borrows from this tradition and the humour with which he evokes existing genres are two indications of the way in which he might be attempting to overcome this large-scale anxiety of influence (as described by Harold Bloom [1973]) in order to make his own voice heard. Influence becomes a source of aesthetic pleasure. Indeed, Sorrentino approaches the tradition masterfully rather than allowing it to master him—by showing that he can manipulate it as he chooses and that he does not take the potentially overwhelming body of tradition all too seriously. Instead of resulting in a novel which «ends up being an amusing formal exercise that in the final analysis is about nothing but itself» (Booker 1990, 129), the craft of intertextual fiction thus becomes a hedge against the death of the novel, even though the reader might be left craving for ethical or political relevance.<sup>2</sup>

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