

# BOOK REVIEWS

## GILBERT SORRENTINO'S *ISOLATE FLECKS*

Arthur Saltzman

**SOMETHING SAID**

Gilbert Sorrentino

Dalkey Archive Press

<http://www.centerforbookculture.org/dalkey>  
 364 pages; paper, \$14.50

Has ever so accomplished a writer advanced his views so modestly as Gilbert Sorrentino? Consider the title of his collected essays: *Something Said* suggests the casual remark, not the considered analysis; the occasional meditation, not the fevered thesis. The phrase likewise anticipates a comment from the opening essay, "The Act of Creation and Its Artifact," where Sorrentino champions the challenges and pleasures of the writing process (the activity of "saying") over the achievement of an end product (the static, objectified "said"). For the writer, the finished work "testifies to the fact that he is once more unem-

ployed. It is a truism that the successful completion of a poem or a work of fiction leaves the writer with a feeling of relief mixed with a sense of loss and anxiety, but I would go further and say that this completion also leaves him abashed, disgruntled, even in a state of what might be called intellectual despair." As Sorrentino quotes Donald Barthelme at the close of a review of *Sixty Stories*, "Let me point out, if it has escaped your notice, that what an artist does, is fail." To this, one might append Samuel Beckett's motto "Fail again. Fail better." Integrity lies in confiding one's lack of confidence in the legitimacy of arrival.

***I dare anyone to read passages like these and not read further.***

Consider, too, in this light the preponderance of disclaimer throughout *Something Said*. In his preface to the original 1984 edition, Sorrentino admits to some embarrassment in retracing his prior judgments, to an urge to second-guess him-

self, and to his peripheral, qualified status as a reviewer. (He does dare to "flatter" himself that some of his judgments will stand up over time, "on occasion right for the wrong reasons, or for reasons that now seem inadequate or unimportant.") The 2001 expanded edition (for which we have to thank the relentlessly heroic Dalkey Archive Press) offers no proof that their author has achieved greater security in the reviewer's enterprise, which he submits "for better or worse." Moreover, these pieces "aren't 'really' criticism...not that this absolves them from error." And finally, of the approximately 30 thousand critical writings of all sorts he has read—yes, here he confesses to his own astonishment along with the reader's—"I'd guess that about three hundred, or one percent of them, have informed my life as a writer. The rest are, in a word, baloney." A veritable festival of self-effacement—

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one is hardly inspired to anticipate stalwart readings to come.

And yet, that is precisely what Sorrentino provides, in prose that is mercifully free of jargon, cheap provocation, or stridency. To be sure, there are reviewers who seem to compete with their subjects, who seem to select those subjects, in fact, as excuses to exercise their own preconceptions, agendas, or maneuvers. On the contrary, Sorrentino proclaims that the chief justification of the reviewer is *usefulness*, and he consistently demonstrates that his chief motivation is intelligent celebration. With rigorous sympathy, Sorrentino sets the stage for effectively engaging and appreciating his favorite writers without blocking the footlights. By way of example, here are two excerpts from his discussion of William Carlos Williams, whom Sorrentino has long acknowledged as a personal muse, guru, and behavioral model:

So. We have the poems of *Spring and All* before us. Twenty-eight short lyrics, lanced through with light and space, they end in slammed doors, they cover the emotional range of a man intent on recording the mayhem of life in urban, despairing, profuse America of the twentieth century. Nowhere before them do we find such mastery of the gross, such triumphant willingness to use the speech so kicked around the gutters.

...

To one who wishes to be hurled into the open freedom of a great poet's imagination, there can be no obscurity. That is not to say that all the poems can be "understood"—thank God. As poems they are trees that we come upon in the country—or, I remember the first time I ever saw a yak at the zoo. I had never seen such a thing before, but there it was! I didn't try to "understand" it. I *looked*.

I dare anyone to read passages like these and not read further, or not investigate the sources of Sorrentino's interest.

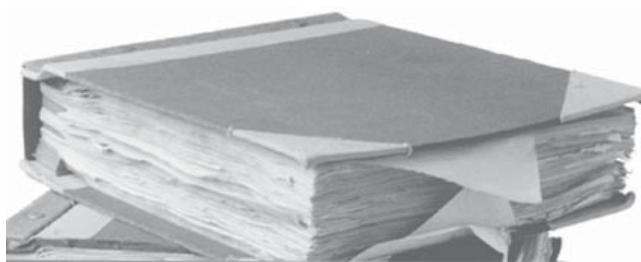
Along with Williams, who looms throughout the volume as an exemplary artist and persistent measure, Sorrentino says something about an impressive variety of writers, ranging from the renowned to those for whom he urges greater recognition. As evidenced by his selection of subjects, including Jack Spicer, Louis Zukofsky, Lorine Niedecker, Coleman Dowell, Italo Calvino, John Hawkes, Maurice Blanchot, Flann O'Brien, William Gass, Hubert Selby, and Donald Barthelme, Sorrentino finds most inspiring writers who are as impatient with banality and empty posturing as he, who are intrepid in

their eccentricities, and who impose fresh demands upon their medium. There are numerous "touchstone" moments in this collection—concisely rendered estimations and deft phrasing to warrant the reader's brackets and seconding in the margins. Furthermore, Sorrentino's personal store of literary

reference is extraordinary—he seems to have read damn near everyone, thereby further authorizing his evaluations. In other words, he is not only clever but wise. A writer could wish for no better champion of

his work. Would that he might one day shed his thoughtful, generous attentions on mine.

*Arthur Saltzman's most recent book publications are This Mad "Instead": Governing Metaphors in Contemporary American Fiction (South Carolina) and Objects and Empathy, which won the first series award for creative nonfiction from Mid-List Press.*



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