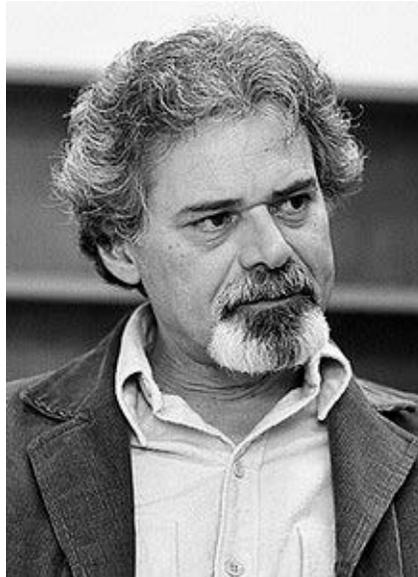


ANALYSIS

Mulligan Stew (1979)



Gilbert Sorrentino

(1929-2006)

“A mulligan stew is a potful of meat, potatoes, and whatever else the cook may throw in. Gilbert Sorrentino’s *Mulligan Stew* is the literary equivalent, a potpourri, a big jigsaw puzzle with the pieces heaped one on the other. The chief ingredients of the ‘literary stew’ are literary parodies and satirical thrusts at authors, editors, publishers, the entire industry. Sorrentino’s central figure is an author, Tony Lamont, who is becoming increasingly paranoiac at what he sees as loss of critical and popular attention. He is the aging writer who has lost faith in himself and in his work, except to defend it obsessively, and whose sanity is slipping away from him as he sees so-called lesser authors praised and popularized. The theme, then, is a very American one, about failure and success, about loss of powers, about the vaunting of the self. Not unusually, two characters, Daisy and Tom Buchanan, walk out of *The Great Gatsby*, the archetypal novel about American success.

The basic line of *Mulligan Stew* is simple. Tony Lamont is working on a new novel, tentatively called *Guinea Red*, and his characters in that enterprise include Ned Beaumont and Martin Halpin. Both would like to escape Lamont’s novel, since they feel he is uncertain about his aims and will make them do things they prefer not to do. During a lull, when Lamont seems distracted, Halpin murders Beaumont although this is not a final action, since Lamont still controls them.

Desperate for recognition, Lamont writes a critic, Professor Roche, about his new work: ‘another first-person narrative, but this one with a real persona, a man who doesn’t know what he is doing, or, for that matter, what he has done. I’m afraid that I am having trouble getting on with it, and am casting about for the correct “tone” to give this voice.’ The novel is, indeed, a search for a tone, which is another way of saying, for a novel. While Sorrentino provides Lamont with materials, they never coalesce--since novel and author are doomed to failure--and the enterprise, with lists, parodies, satirical thrusts, becomes the novel *Mulligan Stew*. The level of parody comes early when Lamont speaks of his sister’s article, in *Object Review*, called ‘643: The Double Play in Malamud’s *The Natural*.’

Sorrentino, unsatisfied with the multileveled reality suggested by Robbe-Grillet's work, ingests that author's principles of uncertainty and turns even them into parody, of Robbe-Grillet himself and all those 'new wave mystery writers' who feel they have captured a reality by evading it. Sorrentino's Lamont is more hazardously located than they, for his characters are themselves struggling to break away from what they think will be a second-rate production, or from acts they do not wish to commit. Embedded deeply in their activities is Ned Beaumont's infatuation with two whores named Corrie Corriendo and Berthe Delamode, who perform all kinds of tricks, magical and sexual, as forms of entertainment and whose marvelous bodies send Ned into paroxysms. Ned is himself involved with Daisy Buchanan, who is tired of Tom; but when he meets Corrie and Berthe, he ditches Daisy for their charms. At one point, he takes Daisy to them, and she, seeing all that succulent flesh, cannot resist either. Part of Sorrentino's novel, incidentally, is devoted to sexual thrills, woman on woman, two women and a man, masturbatory fantasies offered up as novelistic material. Although he mocks Ned's attachment to the whores, Sorrentino derives some of the novel's entertainment value from it, a kind of men's club blue film.

As soon as one looks within the novel, at male-female relationships, at attitudes that reach beyond the parodic, one perceives an unimaginative inquiry into the nature of things. Despite all his inventive lists--such as the books Halpin finds in an old barn, where he 'kills' Beaumont--the underlying premises are fraternity house male-female antics, men acting like boys, women as sexual objects, presented not as parody but as titillation.

The most effective section comes when the characters discuss their roles in Lamont's books. Occasionally, in fact, they encounter characters running loose from other novels by Lamont, or even other authors. Characters must also fear revisions, where their roles will be altered or even eliminated. 'You can even end up in boys' books, as an old man who comes out of a secret door or a gypsy on a mountain. Ned knows one man who wound up playing trained bears!' Thus, Lamont's anxiety about his ongoing novel is equaled by the anxiety of his characters, who stand to lose as much as he if he falters. Yet while they have some freedom--they can move around when he is not using them--they are limited by their designated roles. Here the book opens up to a larger metaphor.

The shape of the novel is such that the interior narrator, Halpin, is a man uncertain about whether or not he is a murderer; a man who has so lost touch with his life that he is caught in an 'absurdist murder mystery.' Although the narrator is trying to sort out what is certain from what is uncertain, he is still under the control of the larger 'narrator,' who is Tony Lamont, himself slowly sinking into paranoid fantasies concerning his career. In another dimension, Halpin's Journal, in which he works toward some sense of himself, is part of Lamont's novel, which is itself part of a 'new wave murder mystery.'

Sorrentino has now provided part of the stewish mix. He has prefaced the novel with several letters from editors and publishers rejecting *Mulligan Stew*, including one from the general counsel of 'Hasard House' that it will not even distribute the book under its agreement with Grove Press. The letters all point to the general worthlessness of aspects of the novel, or to its overall presumptuousness. With these lengthy rejections in hand, Sorrentino has solved several problems: he has provided a summary of characters and scenes, as well as themes, and he has undermined potential criticism. He has become, in his paranoia, someone very close to Tony Lamont in his letters to critics and friends.

But while these locations of characters and author are adroit, Sorrentino's real talent shows in lists. Lists provide him with several aspects of his craft: parody and burlesque, of course, but also a restricted area to work in, a way of relating himself to his contemporaries; most of all, a means by which individual paranoia can be transmuted into a more generalized cultural madness. For no item on a list is too crazy to be possible. Reviews of Lamont's earlier novels are included, all demonstrating reviewers as assassins and hitmen. A list of nude photos is offered to Beaumont by Corrie: 'JUST RELEASED! THE ULTIMATE IN BIZARRE BEAUTY!! NUDES IN LEATHER * HIGH HEELS * CORSETS * ETC. Yes mens! Fantastically proportioned Blondes, Brunets and Redheads in exotique costumes of shining Leather, gleaming Satin, formfitting Rubber, vice-constricting Corsets, spikeheeled Shoes and high Boots, and MORE!!' The book ends with a list, of gifts for various people: 'To Chichi Guffo, a tin zeppelin...to Obie, an overlapped seam...an empty ashcan for Toro Frank...'

Such lists are slightly tilted reproductions of segments from television or advertisements in local papers; that mixture of names, gifts, birth dates, and events, none of which has any significance for the viewer or reader. Yet these giveaways, announcements, promises, are all part of the culture, ongoing while we watch, accepted as part of a phantasmagoria. Sorrentino's lists are, of course, parodies of the original, in which paradise is promised but little delivered. Sorrentino turns America into a cornucopia, chock full of anomalous goodies, in the way that television presents an America lacking cohesion except through such giveaways. Sorrentino's 'stew' is the matter of America, a later version of what de Tocqueville, Melville, and Thoreau had spotted in the mid-nineteenth century.

Since 1975 is the completion date on the final page and the novel was not published until 1979, the rejections and paranoia may have been realities. An earlier publication, in mid-decade, would have helped Sorrentino, in fact, because his book is literarily topical and its subject matter has peaked."

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