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**FICTIONAL WORLDS:
ONTOLOGY IN GILBERT SORRENTINO'S
MULLIGAN STEW**

by

John C. Kelly, B.A.

**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of
Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts**

**Department of English
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
July 1992.**

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the degree of Master of Arts

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "J. K. Morrison", followed by a dotted line.

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "J. R. McDonald", followed by a dotted line.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the ontology of Gilbert Sorrentino's Mulligan Stew as a description of an abstract, linguistic universe. Using notions of subjectivity, discursivity and fictionality, it examines the nature of being as a theatre of the American consciousness. Focusing upon the narrative voice in the novel and its characters, Sorrentino discusses the ontological condition in relation to possibilities of artistic freedom within an indeterminate, linguistic reality. Despite the seemingly chaotic surface of the text, his attitudes towards language, literature and culture help establish stable reference points that aid in interpretation. Central to an understanding of Mulligan Stew is the significance of Sorrentino's ethical and imaginative vision that acts both as an instrument of destruction and rejuvenation for an exhausted and corrupted culture.

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Special thanks to Professor J.R. Morrison for his guidance, generosity and support, and for introducing me to the works of Gilbert Sorrentino and a host of others.

To Lynne

Legend

BP	<u>Blue Pastoral</u>
CF	<u>Review of Contemporary Fiction (1988)</u>
FM	<u>Fiction Monthly</u>
IQ	<u>Imaginary Qualities of Actual Things</u>
MS	<u>Mulligan Stew</u>
ON	<u>Odd Number</u>
PR	<u>Partisan Review</u>
PW	<u>Publishers Weekly</u>
RC	<u>Review of Contemporary Fiction (1990)</u>
SC	<u>The Sky Changes</u>
SH	<u>Splendide-Hôtel</u>
SP	<u>Selected Poems</u>
SS	<u>Something Said</u>
SW	<u>Steelwork</u>
Y	<u>Vort</u>

Chapter One

Deconstructing the Funhouse

Writing is difficult and "strange," insofar as its vision of reality is unlike our vision of reality. Some writing is so remote from us that it cannot be read at all--it repels us, or, on the contrary, seduces us. We pretend that this writing is the manifestation of a private vision, that it sees a world, a reality, wholly different from our own . . . the intolerable proposition that the reality such writing offers is, indeed, our own, but that we cannot, though we live in the middle of it, recognize it. Such writing shakes our precarious sense of ourselves, so it is much safer to pretend that it is but the excrescence of a strange mind sifting through its own invented detritus. (CF 25)

Must we change identities from moment to moment, until all is chaos, babble, and darkness? (MS 431)

Described as an "inky thief, jigsaw in hand" (MS 261), the character Lamont does not become a "Yankee success" (MS 260) but an abysmal failure in the bizarre world of letters of Mulligan Stew. Knowing as he builds his "monstrous machines [that] he [is] doomed" (MS 262), he continues to strive for the contradictory goals of wanting to be the pre-eminent avant-garde writer in America and of attaining commercial success. Achieving neither, he fragments under increasing psychological pressure. Beginning to feel a victim of a vast conspiracy, he becomes incapable of distinguishing between the plots he invents and those in which he unwillingly performs. The nexus of an infinite number of worlds, Lamont remains incapable of disentangling one reality from another. Ensnared in a web of illusions, he is transformed from a producer of fictive worlds to a character in a grotesque and debased drama.

Lamont's bewilderment concerning his identity and the nature of the reality he inhabits foregrounds the ontological condition in Mulligan Stew. Disoriented and confused, he is lost in a realm Sorrentino describes as "an abstract world" (RC 25) that

does not mirror reality nor "explain the real world" (RC 25). It is what Brian McHale defines in Postmodernist Fiction as an ontology, "a description of a universe, not of the universe" (27). To comprehend this realm Sorrentino insists:

. . . you must be able to walk around inside of it and understand it in the sense that one understands the real world: that is, you're in it and whatever data and phenomena impinge upon you, you understand them insofar as you are able. (RC 24)

Like the challenge, "Now what do you think of that?", in the epigraph from Flann O'Brien, Sorrentino invites a response to his strange creation. He wants those who read his novel to question the artificial nature of reality beyond the text.

In his work, Sorrentino is concerned with "breaking up the concept of reality" (RC 8) as a "system edged with falsity" (SP 94). This impulse differentiates him from what he terms the "'Official' poets [who] are still writing out of The Waste Land" (RC 6), which he perceives as part of a spurious romantic tradition in American literature. Concerned with the "bankruptcy of [his] country and . . . culture" (RC 9), Sorrentino identifies the tastes and ideals of official literature as a manifestation of the declining quality of American life. Outside this tradition, Sorrentino insists that he "never think[s] of an audience" (RC 7) when he writes, only his "own pleasure" (RC 7). Those who read his work, he claims, have not been "educated in the old ways . . . [nor taught] to think a novel is this and a poem is that" (PW 71), but instead are open to experiments in form and language. They constitute the "great mass of people who cannot 'find' an art to sustain them [and] are the potential audience for 'the new' in literature" (CE 27). As a result, by challenging sterile literary conventions, Mulligan Stew explores what Sorrentino sees as the debilitating conditions at work in America.

Sorrentino's antipathy to American culture is a position he has maintained throughout his literary career. Born in Brooklyn in 1929, he served in the military from 1951 to 1953, then attended Brooklyn College where he studied English literature and the

Classics. Leaving prior to graduation, he published his first volume of poetry, The Darkness Surrounds Us, in 1960. Before the widespread critical attention that arrived with Mulligan Stew, he wrote eight volumes of poetry, four novels and "The Masque of Fungo." To support his family over the decades, he held over twenty-five jobs. These included work as an editor at Grove Press and for magazines like Neon and Kulchur, where he says he was driven by a "sense of duty . . . to lacerate what [he] thought was rotten writing, thinking it might disappear" (V 24). Recognized as a critic of considerable ability, Sorrentino has championed William Carlos Williams over the years and other writers neglected by the critical establishment.

Williams has had a considerable impact on his poetry and fiction. From him, he learnt to concentrate upon nouns in order to create poetry as self-contained and solid as "artifacts, like sculpture" (RC 5). Sorrentino believes there is nothing more interesting than to make "language work . . . to make a perfect beauty out of all the rubbish in the world and in his own mind" (RC 7). In addition he insists that the "concept that language must convey information" (RC 5) be abandoned, for, like poets, novelists should not be concerned with "fleshing out an idea" (RC 5). Instead, writers should investigate the possibilities of form. In this manner, he attempts to break to "pieces that which is recognizable to the quotidian eye" (SS 264) in order to hold up to inspection all the rituals, routines and beliefs that structure daily experience. His elaboration of the role of language underscores both his rejection of what he terms official literature and his desire to subvert the discourses that shape society.

Describing himself as an estranged voice, a "depressing / man" (SP 101) who writes "depressing poems" (SP 101), Sorrentino criticizes the moral and imaginative entropy that surrounds him. Speaking through what he defines as a lyrical and sophisticated "poetic mask" (RC 23), he fashions in his poetry what he calls "perfect fictions" in opposition to the imperfect ones that formulate the collective consciousness.

In contrast, every novel, he claims, is an attempt to solve a particular "fictional problem . . . by inventing another voice or another group of voices" (RC 23). Refusing to comment directly on society, he uses each experiment to unveil a particular aspect or quality of his world.

In Mulligan Stew, Sorrentino tries to remove himself completely from his work and fashion a voice immersed in an artificial world. He remarks that the book is written in what Lamont "thinks is his writing style" (RC 22), one that produces a roman-à-clef relating his experiences in the art world. Consequently, as John O'Brien concludes in "Every Man His Voice," there are two Lamonts: the first, in the process of writing Crocodile Tears; the second, the protagonist in the novel of the other Lamont. In this manner Sorrentino has invented a

. . . voice and a tone that for the first time could in no way at all be identified with [him] . . . a disembodied voice . . . a tone that permeate[s] the novel and seem[s] to cut loose from the man who wrote it. Total fabrication. (RC 19)

A product of Lamont's ambitions and desire for vengeance against those who destroyed his career, the novel reflects Sorrentino's concern for using the "materials of this terrifying world in order to make an art that replies" (PR 236) to it: that is, to take the corruption of literature, cultural decay and degeneration of language in America and turn these "materials into something valuable" (PR 237). A poor and derivative writer, Lamont, as the locus of a prolific melange of discourses, functions as the filter through which the novel is produced.

Foregrounding language and form through the use of disparate materials, Mulligan Stew constitutes a confusing linguistic labyrinth. Few stable points of view exist to evaluate Lamont or the world he inhabits. This indeterminacy is a result of Sorrentino's desire to "bust the goddam novel apart and put it together again . . . and prove to [himself] that fiction is . . . total invention" (RC 18). Discarding the mimetic

conventions of realism, he explores the processes whereby fiction and reality are constructed through language. He explains:

The novel must exist outside the life it deals with; it is not an imitation. The novel is an invention, something that is made; it is not the expression of 'self'; it does not mirror reality. If it is any good at all it mirrors the processes of the real, but, being selective makes a form which allows us to see these processes with clarity. (SS 26)

Illustrating this concern is the surprise of the character in Sorrentino's Blue Pastoral who believes he is in a "Novel of Ideas" (BP 192) but discovers "the 'text' is being 'deconstructed' beneath [his] very" (BP 192) feet. Similarly, Mulligan Stew does not engage so much in philosophy as in a game of language that bares the devices whereby fiction is produced.

In relation to this anti-realist aesthetic, Sorrentino shares Williams' concern for the deadening effects of the "tyranny of 'reality'" (SS 24) that demeans the lives of characters. Crucial to both authors is the desire to avoid the traditional fallacy of the writer who manipulates his "book so that it seems as if life really has form and meaning" (SS 26). Subsequently, Sorrentino provides few stable points of view to order the chaos of the maelstrom of discourses in his book. A microcosm of the processes at work within the text, "The Masque of Fungo" depicts the triumph of the "tyranny of reality" over the voices that have subverted its monologizing tendencies. Functioning as one of many mise-en-abymes, structures reflecting on a miniature scale the texts in which they appear, the "Masque" mirrors the social and discursive forces that seek to achieve a hegemony of meaning. Caught in this dialectic, Lamont succumbs to the forces identified in the "Masque" and becomes part of the corruption that surrounds him.

The centripetal movement in "The Masque of Fungo" is the dynamic which leads to the condition of moral and imaginative entropy Sorrentino abhors. Fungo's recovery of his "flawless" playing ability is a manifestation of this process: it represents the

classic victory of the American protagonist over adversity in the mythical realm of baseball. In contrast, despite Lamont's intentions, Mulligan Stew erupts into a raucous chorus of voices and a melange of parodies that resist coherence and closure as an American tragedy. Though Daisy and Tom Buchanan re-enact their roles from The Great Gatsby, a romantic novel where "defeats mean something" (SS 29), they are drawn into an absurd world where meanings are arbitrary and life orderless. In this manner, they are used to explode the narratives upon which American consciousness is structured. Subverting the discourses that work to impose an illusion of harmony, Sorrentino reveals the linguistic structures that mold identity in postmodern culture.

Through Lamont, these formative processes are explored. His experiences foreground the tensions between an individual artistic vision and the ideals of the collective. This conflict is described by Brian McHale in Postmodernist Fiction as the "social construction of reality" (37). Reality, he posits, is a collective fiction constituted through language and the processes of socialization, institutionalization and social interaction (37). Under these forces a "jigsaw puzzle of 'subuniverses of meaning'" (37) is integrated into an encompassing symbolic universe. The shared social fiction constitutes the realm of interaction for members of society, while individuals experience a multiplicity of private realities in dreams, play or fictions (37). These escapes from the world of permanent reality range from mental strategies of ironic disengagement to sex and mass media entertainment and, ultimately, to schizophrenia (38). Working to eliminate these alternate worlds, the monologic forces in Mulligan Stew seek to establish a stable and unified reality.

Fueled by the tension between individual and collective visions, Mulligan Stew functions upon the interplay of a disparate number of contradictory voices. This internal dynamic foregrounds the altered role of the "author" in contemporary society. Parodying Joyce, Sorrentino depicts the artist not as an invisible and indifferent "God of creation ...

refined out of existence" (Joyce 215), but as a being whose ontological condition becomes indistinguishable from his characters. Like them, Lamont discovers not "truth ... emerging like the image" (MS 1) in a puzzle but that all people are "pawns . . . in [the] absurd jigsaw puzzle that passes for life!" (MS 295). He is as much a subject of a despotic reality as he is the confused tyrant of the world he creates. Rejecting the order incumbent in the modernist aesthetic of a psychological coherence imposed upon a chaotic world, Sorrentino works to implement the deconstructionist impulse articulated in his book, Imaginary Qualities of Actual Things. He writes:

Prose will kill you if you give it an inch, i.e., if you try and substitute it for the world. What I am trying to do, through all this work, is to define certain areas of destruction. I mean we are surrounded by dead men. Who put them there? . . . Why are they dead, yet have their minds entire? (IQ 112)

Sorrentino wishes to reveal the underlying corruption that drains the vitality and creativity from the imagination, producing mindless beings dead to their world. In Mulligan Stew, he attempts to deconstruct the vast "funhouse" of fictional worlds that constitute reality.

In his novel, Sorrentino is not interested in "pseudo-reality but those facets of reality that bring what we do not know--or do not wish to know--about ourselves into the light" (SS 27). He insists that a writer's mind is as "full of trash as is the mind of anyone else [and is] subject to the same weaknesses and temptations" (SS 10) as anybody in an "industrialized technocracy . . . [who is] bombarded daily by the same endless and disconnected data" (SS 10). Representing the center of consciousness for this flood of information, Lamont, as a poor cliché-ridden writer, is vulnerable to a host of enticements and pressures. His paranoia and dementia represent the isolation and fragmentation of the psyche in the postmodern world. As he becomes progressively more bewildered, he questions his motivations and purpose: "What I mean is that I want

to get out of this 'career' that I have chosen. Or is it that I simply want financial success?" (MS 57-58). His condition is similar to that of the writer of "limited gifts" in Splendide-Hôtel, who as he "places that I on the paper . . . [is] in all his mediocrity, more puissant than the shade that he has turned into a 'character'" (SH 25). Yet Lamont, apprehensive that he is "beginning to sound like [his own] characters" (MS 59), begins to confuse the "I" he associates with his self, as a creative being, with the fabricated personalities of his fictions.

This ontological bewilderment is manifested in Lamont's novel, where one of his characters, Halpin, forced to play an "assigned role" (MS 80) in his wife's sexual fantasies, questions his own dream of becoming a writer. To be an author of fictions, or the unconscious object of creation and manipulation, is the ontological condition at the centre of Mulligan Stew. Subjectivity is enacted in an elaborate theatre of the American consciousness with its ideologies, narratives and roles. The disintegration of Lamont's personality results from his conflict with the collective fictions that choreograph the lives of the majority of people. Lamont is torn between success and the complete isolation of the poet in Splendide-Hôtel, who concludes, "I am the master of silence" (SH 25). Utterly incapable of communicating his knowledge, this man personifies the artist in America, who with his "relentless and despised imagination" (SS 31), is the witness to the degeneration of his culture.

Criticism is divided upon the merits and nature of Sorrentino's fiction. Many critics and reviewers are undecided whether Mulligan Stew sounds the death knell of the novel or embodies its renaissance. Complimentary criticism has dealt cursorily with problems of style, metafictional themes and parallels with other writers. In the scant criticism upon Sorrentino's enigmatic novel, little has been written on its internal structure and almost nothing of its ontological condition. Using notions of subjectivity, discursivity and fictionality, this thesis examines the ontology in Mulligan Stew as a

theatre of the American consciousness where fiction and reality have become indistinguishable. In discussing this drama, particular attention is given to his earlier work, for he explains that he commences with a "form, and the material [he] hang[s] on it is usually [his] same old material" (PW 70). Bakhtin's theories on dialogism and the novel and Foucault's on knowledge and power are used to investigate the discursive processes and the nature of subjectivity. Like Foucault, Sorrentino is interested in a "critical ontology" (Foucault 47) of the modern soul that treats the "instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events" (46). Concerned with the lack of possibilities for modern individuals, Mulligan Stew explores the means whereby they can transgress these limitations.

For Sorrentino, life is "basically ridiculous" (RC 14), a condition that can be "tragic . . . pessimistic or dark, or . . . highly comic" (RC 14). Lamont's experience embodies all of these qualities in his trajectory towards madness. In the endless refracting hierarchy of mise-en-abymes, Lamont's "catabasis" parallels his characters' search for a better fiction, a "decent employment" (MS 385). Like Beaumont, who follows the classic American protagonist Huckleberry Finn, Lamont had hoped to journey away from a brutal and despairing reality by traveling "down the river" (MS 420) beyond the frontier of American culture. Sharing Williams' concerns, Sorrentino wishes to produce a particular American voice to evoke the condition of decay in his nation. Through Lamont's desire to write the pre-eminent experimental novel, Sorrentino reveals what Williams concluded on the possibilities of creating a great American novel in a deadening cultural environment: "There cannot be a novel. There can only be pyramids, pyramids of words, tombs" (Williams 160). In the final list at the close of Mulligan Stew, Sorrentino offers to the reader, his characters and all those "buried deep in wordy tombs, who never yet have walked off the page" (MS 445), greetings and the challenge to escape the indeterminate linguistic realms revealed in the text.

Chapter Two

A Game O' Mum-Chance

Life's a poor play by a drumbling knave, an't cannot but end
save in dust an' cerements. (MS 391)

. . . the noble MASQUERS of our entertainment . . . are costumed
to represent rich businessmen, rock stars, political reformers,
high-priced whores, evangelists, talk-show hosts, great
contemporary authors, radical activists, boring financial
advisors, and celebrities of the media: in short, the cream of
civilization. A babel-like din issues forth . . . which is understood
to be interesting conversation. (MS 195-196)

At the close of "The Masque of Fungo" the "masquers" have been transformed
from the "nine elements of Ugliness" (MS 179) to personifications of dynamic and
positive qualities. Mirroring this seemingly propitious change, the clouds and mist that
had obscured the beginning of the play are replaced by blue sky and sunshine. The color
of the sky parallels the ubiquitous blue that ends each chapter of Lamont's novel.
Tracing the historical significance of the color in "Best Intentions," Halpin is shocked to
discover that in Mongolia it symbolizes "authority and power" (MS 18). This revelation
reflects an altered paradigm of existence: no longer associated with a rich history of
spiritual and intellectual development, it denotes a rigid hierarchy of power relations.
Feeling as if the "sky had somehow ironically tricked" (MS 18) him, Halpin is
overwhelmed by a sense of confusion and alienation. Everything he once accepted as
given has been brought into question and he is paralysed by a sense of ontological
instability. Like the costumes of the "masquers" that change with the scenes in the play,
meanings and identities are subject to radical transformations in this indeterminate
reality. Nothing is as it seems in the metafictional universe of Mulligan Stew.

In the closing scene of "The Masque of Fungo," a bizarre and chaotic celebration erupts to commemorate Fungo's mythic achievement which has inaugurated a state of harmony and unity in society. Commenting on the strangeness of the proceedings, a character remarks that "[s]omehow, in its own crazed, peculiar way, this is--literature" (MS 215), an observation applicable to the entirety of Mulligan Stew. Functioning as a microcosm of the discursive processes at work in the novel, the "Masque" represents a theatre of the American consciousness where diverse and contradictory elements have been brought into play. Likened to an "opera," the novel's syncopated rhythms and conflicting voices create a discord that appears meaningless. Nevertheless, beneath the pandemonium lies a structure that rests not on narrative but on the dynamic interplay of numerous discourses. Like a bizarre postmodern opera where the soloists contend with a belligerent chorus, Mulligan Stew juxtaposes individual voices against overwhelming social forces in a chaotic and disquieting drama.

Addressing the internal conflict at the heart of Mulligan Stew, this chapter explores "The Masque of Fungo" as a mise-en-abyme of the novel. Using Bakhtin's ideas on dialogism to clarify discursive processes and Foucault's theories on the disciplinary society to describe subjectivity, the play is examined as a microcosm of a deadening and oppressive cultural environment. The centripetal movement in the "Masque," that works to produce a stable and unified reality, is manifested throughout the novel. Opposing this dynamic are centrifugal forces that seek to maintain a polyphony of voices and a multiplicity of meanings. This conflict foregrounds the second aspect investigated in this chapter: the proliferation and interrelation of worlds. Constructed of a vast number of separate realms of experience, many that are shared and others that remain personal, Mulligan Stew embodies a complex jigsaw puzzle of sub-universes of meaning. An analysis of the language of various discourses helps unravel and differentiate the strands of individual fictions from those that have captured the

imagination of society. Finally, the ontological condition of the beings in this linguistic reality is discussed. Determining the boundaries between texts is difficult and differentiating between the authors and objects of fictional worlds remains problematic. Yet, like performers in a play, all the characters enact roles and speak lines from absurd scripts. Prisoners of language, they lack the freedom and knowledge to define or ameliorate their predicament.

The metafictional universe of Mulligan Stew is constituted of a complex weave of discursive forces. Applying Bakhtin's model of heteroglossia to this environment helps clarify the polyphony of social voices that determine Lamont's situation. Described by Bakhtin as a "Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages" (278), heteroglossia defines the linguistic and ideological atmosphere of an individual at a particular place and time.

Every language constitutes a

point of view, a socio-ideological conceptual system of real social groups and their embodied representatives. . . . A novel is constructed not on abstract differences in meaning nor on merely narrative collisions, but on concrete social speech diversity. . . . [The] abundance of embodied points of view to which the novel aspires is . . . a historical and concrete plenitude of actual social-historical languages that in a given era have entered into interaction. (411-412)

Reflecting this model, "The Masque of Fungo" acts as a microcosm of the unfolding social forces in Mulligan Stew. Yet, in opposition to Bakhtin's theory, Sorrentino's book is not a mimetic representation of a linguistic, ideological reality but embodies an artificial creation. It "is[, in] terms of literature, a reality and that's all it is" (RC 25). Foregrounding its own textuality, the novel projects "worlds which are the realization of discursive world-views [and thereby converts] an epistemological motif into an ontological one" (McHale 166). A metafictional construct, its processes do not mirror a concrete situation but bare the discursive relations that create reality.

In his study of dialogism, Bakhtin posited that the centripetal forces in society that seek to "unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world" (270) are mirrored in novels. This movement of a hegemonic discourse to impose constricting norms in language is opposed by heteroglossia, a system that works to maintain a multiplicity of meanings. Yet this discursive model of unresolvable conflict works only in the novel, while, in contrast, pure "drama strives towards a unitary language" (405). Reflecting this fundamental difference between genres, "The Masque of Fungo" depicts the "canonization of [an] ideological" (271) order, while the disparate elements in Mulligan Stew constitute a confusing polyphony of voices. Positioned near the centre of the text, the "Masque" dramatizes the centripetal forces that seek to establish a unified ideological system. Representing a microcosm of the environment Lamont inhabits, it clarifies the powerful and seductive voices whose influence is echoed throughout all levels of discourse in the novel.

Commencing in a condition of heteroglossia, the "Masque" moves towards a state of social and discursive unity. Personifying subversive voices to the centralizing discourse are historical figures, such as De Sade and the suffragette leader Susan B. Anthony, and fictional creations like Charles Dexter Ward, the Communist dupe. The interaction of these beings in the play constitutes a transgression of ontological boundaries. Drawing all characters into an ambiguous realm where identities become fluid and the border between fact and fiction dissolves, Sorrentino alters the personalities and history of his cast. In this manner Mulligan Stew echoes the theory of fiction propounded in Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds: this novel humorously proposes that 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. (25)

Reflecting this philosophy, the "Masque" draws history into the constellation of fictional worlds to be exploited for materials; it becomes reduced simply to another layer of reference in a universe of texts.

Compounding the ontological instability in the "Masque" are the presence of allegorical figures such as the Sin of Onan and Old Joe, trans-world characters like Pop Heart that appear in other sections of Mulligan Stew, and Eddy Beshary, who originated in Sorrentino's novel, Steelwork. As linguistic constructs, the characters represent particular world views in a seemingly pluralistic society. Yet opposing this diversity and exploding the greatest of ontological boundaries, God is drawn into the discursive turmoil when He intercedes to punish wayward Catholic clergymen and support the rejuvenated Fungo. Symbolizing the monologic, patriarchal discourse imbricated throughout Mulligan Stew, God "forgive[s] all .320 hitters and flashy infielders" (MS 212) and sanctions the oppressive forces that silence all non-conforming characters. Under increasing pressure from reactionary elements represented by the jingoistic General Kidwell and the clichéd Irish policeman Officer Killarney, the subversive voices are extinguished. Echoing the violence and fervour of Lamont's patriotic school essay, "What I Can Do To Help The War Effort," the play reflects a unified ideological system. By the end of the "Masque," the potential of heteroglossia to undermine the "authority of custom . . . [and to erode the] system of national myth that is organically fused with language" (Bakhtin 368-69) has been overcome. Spinning a web of fantastic fictions, the patriotic discourse has drawn the majority of characters into a world of illusion.

Beneath the frenetic activity in the "Masque" is enacted what Foucault believes is the "single drama . . . staged [in human relations: the] endlessly repeated play of dominations" (85) that mold individuals into a uniform social body. A product of this process, the audience in the play is a malleable and manipulatable mass. It worships the

"bas-relief frieze . . . [of the] twelve disciples" (MS 201), a group of debased popular figures such as Frank Sinatra, who do not signify spiritual values but cultural disintegration. Political and economic forces have collaborated on the script in which the audience performs. Violently racist, homophobic, xenophobic and sexist, the cast of the "Masque" is a model of Foucault's disciplinary society. They are the products of the "discipline" that "'makes' individuals . . . objects and . . . instruments" (188). Wielding the "power of the Norm" (196), "discipline" imposes homogeneity yet individualizes by isolating and rendering differences in the social body. Beneath these pressures, people are transformed into a useful economic mass. Parodying these brutal forces, Sorrentino directs the normalizing gaze against such figures as a "kike jig" (MS 196) and a "Protestant fag" (MS 196). Subject to a disciplinary society that "differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes [and] excludes" (Foucault 195), these individuals are drawn into a coercive system where they are refashioned to function as parts in a uniform totality. Enthusiastically administering these processes is Officer Killarney, who in working to end the "long tunnel of permissive American softness" (MS 181), persecutes a ridiculous catalogue of "nuns, Methodist clergymen, babies, cripples, old Jews, tricycles, artists manqué, homosexual gentlemen, well-bred ladies, Fellows of Reconciliation, liberal schoolteachers, and many others" (MS 180-181), all categorized as "dirty commie bodies" (MS 180). In the oppressive atmosphere of the "Masque," one has to look and "talk [like a] good American" (MS 188) to escape the penalty of the norm.

"The Masque of Fungo" illustrates Foucault's conception of a disciplinary society where the body becomes immersed in a "political field . . . [where] relations [of power] . . . invest it, mark it, train it, . . . force it to perform ceremonies [and] emit signs" (173). A victim of these processes, the mysterious bather Clark Sitz mortifies his flesh to negate his passions. Furiously attempting to eradicate his desires, he represents the modern individual, subject to the "sovereignty of the good" (Foucault 138), the ethical order

where the sins of state have been married to those of the bourgeois heart. In contrast, the Sin of Onan, a victim of coercive forces, is removed to a mental asylum for transgressing the codes of the collective. Sharing his fate is Harry the Crab who, ostracized like a leper, believes that only Henry Miller, wise "Hank[, who] knows much of the unruly fletch" (MS 184), can comprehend his situation. Writing explicitly of sexuality, Miller has been condemned for transgressing the moral boundaries of his society. In the oppressive moral universe of the "Masque" individuals must either conform or be exiled for their actions.

Juxtaposed against the oppressive attitudes of the dominant discourse is Susan B. Anthony's pride in free sexual experience. She represents a disruptive feminist voice that desires to change the rigid patriarchal order. Discussing the debased condition of a female character, she concludes: "Is it any wonder that Fate has destined her to be this fucking whore?" (MS 188). In Mulligan Stew, fate embodies another of the authorial voices responsible for manipulating the puzzle pieces of reality; the sobriquet, "fucking whore," reflects the "benighted existence" (MS 188) women endure in the scripts issued to them. Coerced by the allegorical "Unbelievable Pressures," responsible for Fungo's metamorphosis, Anthony is transformed. Her desire to destroy traditional gender roles, whereby she attacks Fungo for identifying his "worth as a man" (MS 199) with his baseball skills, is reversed; she dons the "cruel unmentionables that [she now claims makes her a] true wom[a]n" (MS 212). Like a costume change in a theatrical performance, she returns to the lingerie she had denounced as objects of oppression used in the fetishization of women. Caught with Anthony in the pull of the centripetal forces, her lesbian lover, Odile Gashe, announces that for the first time she wants to "perform the act of shame with a man" (MS 211). Ironically returning to traditional roles, they contribute to the harmonious function of the disciplinary machine.

Completing the movement towards unity in the "Masque" is Fungo's cathartic return to flawless playing ability. His "rebirth" becomes the object of interest to Won Em En, a cynical book editor. Wanting to exploit the baseball star's feats, he seeks a "romantic loser and top writer who frequents waterfront cafes" (MS 213), a caricature of T.S. Eliot. Fungo's crippled condition embodies what Barnett Tete, the industrial magnate and art collector, would perceive as "Malamudesque" (MS 349), a manifestation of what he mistakenly calls the "terrible power of the post-modern" (MS 349). Parodying Bernard Malamud's The Natural, Sorrentino satirizes what he perceives as a debilitating strain of romanticism in American literature. Leslie Fiedler's description of The Natural in Love and Death in the American Novel illustrates the imaginative environment of this tradition. He writes that Malamud's book is

... a baseball story, disconcertingly out of Ring Lardner by T.S. Eliot: an account of the tragic career of a ball-player called Roy Hobbs, last hero of a culture which is not sure whether it needs more to cherish or to destroy its heroes [Emerging from] the legends of the sports page, The Natural creates a magical universe--in which white witch and black witch struggle for the soul of a secular saviour, who will restore the Waste Land to fertility, by winning the pennant for the home team. (492-93)

A satire of fertility myths and rituals, the "Masque" reflects the poverty of a culture where sport has come to possess a crucial significance in spiritual health. Like Tiresias in The Waste Land, Fungo is a "morphodite," but with his rebirth the generative principle is displaced by violent masculine qualities. An ironic Fisher King, he becomes the catalyst for his nation's salvation and the triumph of a unitary language.

The transformation of literature and baseball into an arena for myth represents for Sorrentino a sign of the debased condition of American culture. In Splendide-Hôtel he describes the game as

close to art in that it is so narrowly itself: it does not stand for anything else. It exists outside of metaphor and symbol. Shaped

and polished artifact, a game of nouns and verbs. (SH 14)

In "The Masque of Fungo" this conception of baseball as an autonomous artifact has been negated; simply the "thought of . . . peanuts and Cracker Jack at the old ball game" (MS 197) triggers patriotic sentiments. Similarly, in Splendide-Hôtel, it functions as a vehicle for ideology, as illustrated in the racist subtext found in the sports column headline recording an overwhelming performance by Sandy Koufax: "K-K-K-KOUFAX" (SH 14). Tainted by spurious meanings, the sport has become an integral part of the collective fiction. Consequently, Fungo's return to flawless playing ability is not the result of hard work and determination but of a conspiracy. Manipulated by "Unbelievable Pressures" and coached by the spirit of Ty Cobb, a legendary player noted for his viciousness and racism, Fungo awakes from his "heroic dream" (MS 210) to inspire his nation's rebirth. Staged by corrupt powers, his triumph does not symbolize cultural renewal but a fraudulent myth.

The "Masque" portrays a dialogic struggle where the "authoritative word[s]" (Bakhtin 342) have succeeded in silencing a polyphony of subversive voices. The carnival-like atmosphere that erupts with Fungo's return to prowess represents a perverse celebration of this communal unity. Sharing Rita Right's frantic condition, her "joy-racked flesh" (MS 214) writhing in ecstasy after viewing Fungo on television, the festive mob has been overwhelmed by a transcendent experience. Like the "hunnish joy of the voyeuristic" (MS 382) crowd, "rapt in a bedlam of . . . sadism" (MS 381) at the Zap Club, these people are enthralled by the basest of spectacles. Ward's confidence that this expansive spirit embodies the "true American way, when young people of varying minority groups can submerge their differences in the satisfaction of their raging lusts" (MS 215), reveals the success of the fiction that has been perpetrated. With "sexuality . . . on the side of the norm" (Foucault 269), the orgiastic freedom represents an ironic sign of a strenuously disciplined society. Investing in this fantastic illusion, Ward is

converted to a patriot; Harry the Crab is cured of his illnesses; Humphrey's physiological lack is compensated for as he grows "something approaching a real ass" (MS 213); and the symbolic wound of the war hero Lance Del Rio is healed. Paralleling the Walpurgisnacht segment in The Red Swan, where "participants change identities literally from moment to moment, until all is chaos, babble, and darkness" (MS 256), the characters in the "Masque" are subject to an equally unstable reality. Victims of complex forces, their identities have become fragmented, freedoms negated and lives determined by "relations" of power. In this seemingly rejuvenated America, people have joined to participate in a spectacular and elaborate fiction.

Opposing this movement towards unity is the disruptive figure of James Joyce, whose identity remains unchanged in the chaos that prevails. Paralleling the life of the historical Joyce, the fictional character challenges literary and cultural norms. His critical remarks earn him the opprobrium of the establishment, and he is singled out by Officer Killarney as a dangerous Red. Echoing Thomas McCoy's dismissal of Joyce as "Shame's voice . . . a man with a grocer's assistant's mind" (MS 39), the "Masque" reflects the isolation a writer endures in a culture that rejects art. Representing an "antilanguage" (McHale 168), a "specialized discourse of a deviant social group" (168), Joyce strives to maintain the condition of heteroglossia in the text. In opposition to the forces that have debased language art and baseball, he insists that a "few artifacts [should] fend in their own favour" (MS 215) and not be invested with false meanings. In this manner he conducts an "implicit polemic against the standard language . . . [and create:] . . . an 'anti-world-view'" (McHale 168) in opposition to official reality. As the centralizing forces exert more control, his comments become more absurd, reflecting the vast gulf opening between himself and the dominant discourses. His imprecation for the Lord to "heap miseries upon us yet entwine our arts with laughters low" (MS 216) embodies a harsh judgement on the events that have transpired. Attempting to

undermine the fictitious world the collective has embraced, Joyce calls for a return to reality and a cleansing of corrupting elements from art. Isolated and alone, he represents the sole voice critical of the bliss and harmony that has descended in the "Masque."

Identifying with Joyce's condition, Sorrentino similarly expresses himself in an anti-language that opposes the centralizing forces. The interaction of disparate and contradictory elements in Mulligan Stew produces a discursive environment that frustrates interpretation. Conflicting discourses, such as the Shakespearean travesty, "Like Blowing Flower Stilled," and the abstract prose of "Recent Studies in Contravariant Behaviour Processes in Complex Resolutions," embody antithetical world views whose coexistence in the text create hermeneutic problems. The chapter, "Like Blowing Flower Stilled," works to destabilize meaning by producing unanswerable questions, while the scientific essay acts as a monologic discourse reducing experience to formulas and individuals to counters in an equation. In the same manner, the footnotes to the scientific essay and the reviews of Lamont's novels maintain the dialogic relationship in language by acting as a censure and commentary on the voices of authority. This conflict between opposing discourses foregrounds the contest enacted beneath the surface of language and maintains a condition of heteroglossia. Sorrentino's manipulation of the boundaries of speech types, language and belief systems underscores the artificial nature of the linguistic reality in Mulligan Stew and adheres to Bakhtin's definition of a comic novel. Bakhtin writes that the literary "parody serves to distance the author . . . further from language, to complicate . . . his relationship to the literary language of his time" (309), changing the focus from what is told in the story to an exploration of the manner in which it is related. Through parodic stylization of the representative language, the comic novel subverts the linguistic constructs that determine reality. In this manner form and meaning are married in a deconstructionist enterprise.

The disparaging reviews of Lamont's detective novel, Baltimore Chop, reflect the manner in which styles, genres and discourses become objects for analysis and subversion. A mise-en-abyme to Mulligan Stew, Lamont's book is dismissed as "no more a search for reality than pottering about in a junk shop filled with ugly furniture is a search for antiques" (MS 90). Similarly, composed of shards of discourse and literary works, Sorrentino's novel also seems "unintelligible unless . . . seen as dependent on . . . the shiftings and permutations of the Zeitgeist of the past century, its rubbish and ephemera" (SS 263). As a "collection of written documents [it is] cut off completely from . . . being a story that reflects the real world" (RC 25). Nevertheless, Mulligan Stew is as representative of objective reality as a conventional novel. Sorrentino explains that it functions the way the real world works:

You go out into the street and you see things happen; you understand some of them, you don't understand others . . . some of them you don't understand because you pass by them and they are not interesting to you. (RC 24-25)

Consequently the text functions as a "junk shop" of the rubbish and ephemera of Western culture. Just as Sorrentino contends, "We don't have narrators in our lives" (RC 25), there is no one in the novel to interpret its chaotic reality. Void of many of the expected reference points, Mulligan Stew embodies an ambiguous intellectual and imaginative milieu.

Constructed of a vast and complex selection of materials, the novel functions in the same manner as the lists it incorporates. The rationale of these catalogues is the belief that once specific things are isolated by stripping away "all verbosity from the usual narrative" (RC 19) the "comedy in all our absurd pretensions towards civilization and intelligence" (RC 19) can be seen. Taking a word or phrase out of its context opens its meaning to inspection and "leads the writer away from narrative and signification" (CF 25). Ripped from the "web of discourse[, the words t]ake on their own reality" (PW

71) and cease to be carriers of information. In addition, by expanding the use of lists, Sorrentino creates a "dense and richly textured fabric" (RC 20) that functions as a "data bank" (RC 20) of language. He explains:

. . . if you use certain words or certain things in a long and complicated list on page twenty-seven, and you want to recall that on page ninety-six, you can do so by either repeating an item in the list verbatim, or . . . slightly changed, or . . . totally changed but with enough of its original nature to make it recognizable. . . . In other words, you have the possibility of creating an enormously layered fabric with the simplest substantives, which is the world of Mulligan Stew. (RC 20)

This world does not mirror a concrete social reality but reflects, in its selection of materials, a complex and dynamic, discursive landscape.

Imbricated throughout the rich "data bank" of language in Mulligan Stew are the tensions between centripetal and centrifugal forces. The "astounding, delightful and totally individualistic" (MS 19) answers in the brochure for "Writer's Helper Monthly" foreground this conflict. Capable of creating separate worlds through their imagination, the writers offer a variety of unique responses. Many, like the list of railroads or the Elizabethan prose, are destabilizing. An extreme example is the unidentifiable language that does not simply disrupt the logic of combinations or materials, nor upset the syntax of words or sentences, but embodies an autonomous realm of meaning. A separate world in a universe of language, it does not represent a negative closure of possibilities but an ironic opening by the frustration of ideological and linguistic norms. In contrast to these unsanctioned responses, the answer to the question, "Are the stars out tonight?" (MS 144), offers a prohibitive list of meanings that are culturally regulated. Illustrating the contest enacted between the creative impulse of the individual and the homogenizing processes of the collective, are the scrapbook fragments found after the "Masque." The "hysterical military fury" (MS 217) of the vacuous Colonel Shelley reflects the precisely ordered world at the end of the drama. An ironic play on the Romantic poet, he remains

imaginatively dead, incapable of deviating from the structures created for him. Exploding into a rage during inspection, he parallels Officer Killarney in his role of maintaining the "social syntax." Mirroring the discursive tensions in the novel, the incident foregrounds the ontological condition of all characters. Prisoners of language, the fictitious beings of Mulligan Stew inhabit a realm of linguistic and ideological constraints.

In the richly textured, discursive fabric of the novel, the tension between antithetical forces creates a multiplicity of collective and individual fictions. Distinguishing between the authorial voices and determining the boundaries between texts become problematic. Compounding the situation are the variety of external forces that share the power of the writer. For instance, in Splendide-Hôtel the narrator warns: "Believe it when I tell you that there are phrases of the President's that will change your life" (SH 12); this underscores the vulnerability of the individual to the currents which mold and form reality. Echoing this observation is the response in Mulligan Stew to the question, "If God be with us, who can be against us?" (MS 21): this results in a catalogue of disparaging forces that possess the ability to recreate the world as an author changes his book. Projecting a disquieting presence throughout the novel, history represents one of many texts that overlap in Mulligan Stew, compounding the ontological instability in the abstract world. Sharing this ambiguous space between fiction and reality, Sorrentino's letters of rejection serve as a framing device that undermines the illusions of conventional fiction and situates him in the novel's hierarchy of writers. Under the contrapuntal rhythm of opposing linguistic and ideological forces the text explodes into innumerable discursive fragments. In this form it reflects the postmodern condition of "an anarchic landscape of worlds in the plural" (McHale 37). Foregrounding intertextuality, Mulligan Stew represents a complex fabric of fictions that frustrate interpretation.

Baring the processes that construct reality, Mulligan Stew shatters sterile limitations imposed on literature and reveals a universe of possibilities to be explored in language. Throughout the text, a multiplicity of worlds collide, interact or remain wholly separate from an "all-embracing 'symbolic universe'" (McHale 37), whose unity is guaranteed by the "conceptual machinery of [such] 'universe maintenance'" (37) discourses as science, mythology or religion. Commencing with the ambiguous preface, the book proliferates into a multiplicity of separate realms of experience. Brief glimpses are given into the "oddly spacy world" (MS 387) of deviates in The Red Swan, the "publishing industry, sometimes known as a 'World'" (MS 298), and a vision of hell recounted by the ghost of Beaumont. Paralleling the "truly astonishing funhouse" (93) that John Barth's protagonist envisions building in "Lost in the Funhouse," Sorrentino's complex construction embodies an architectural model of a metafictional universe. Contemplating the radical indeterminacy of the world he inhabits, Barth's narrator concludes that the

... climax of the story must be its protagonist's discovery of a way to get through the funhouse. But he has found none, may have ceased to search. (92)

Confronted with the impossibility of escaping this realm, the narrator becomes determined to "construct funhouses for others and . . . [to] be their secret operator" (94).

Sharing this resolve, Sorrentino's protagonist is nevertheless stricken with a sense of desperation as he inhabits an environment which threatens to eradicate his creative impulse. Similarly, Sorrentino's borrowing of the Red Swan Hotel, Flann O'Brien's metafictional model in At Swim-Two-Birds, where the ideal has been proposed that characters "should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living" (25), works to foreground his darker vision. Reflecting the rich mythical history of Ireland, the basement of O'Brien's hotel is inhabited by leprechauns. In contrast, the

cellar of the Hotel Splendide houses colonies of rats that are "utterly destructive of all other forms of life" (SH 30). Lost in the vast "funhouse" of fictional worlds that constitutes his reality, Lamont is subject to sinister forces that possess the power not only to confuse and humiliate him but to efface his identity and destroy his imagination.

In Mulligan Stew, the "funhouse" of possibilities is overshadowed by the "cabin of death." Acting as a mise-en-abyme, Trellis' Dark Gemini alludes to the destructive forces at work in Sorrentino's imaginative landscape: his story unfolds in an "isolated house . . . of attars, dreams, paper corsages and silent murder" (MS 419). Making sense of this macabre and bizarre world becomes the reader's goal. Like the isolated poet in the ballroom of the Hotel Splendide, where a "false orchestra plays false music to which all are dancing" (SH 11), the characters in Mulligan Stew are incapable of differentiating between the numerous strands of fiction that make up their lives. Sorrentino is not only interested in creating a larger and more wondrous fiction, but in crafting a blueprint whereby all can realize the artificiality of their worlds.

Determining the boundaries and structure of Sorrentino's metafictional maze remains difficult. Functioning on numerous levels, it lacks a stable reality to evaluate its chaotic structure. Beaumont's discovery that Lamont has stolen his cabin from another book triggers his conclusion that "he didn't mean for us to find these rooms . . . he doesn't know that we are as real as he is" (MS 242). Outside of Lamont's script, his characters lead separate lives and enjoy a modicum of liberty. Shifting between several realms of experience, they change roles from authors to objects of fictions. Echoing his refrain from the first chapter of Lamont's novel, Halpin writes of his adventures: "To begin at the beginning. (I must be turning into a novelist)" (MS 152). This ironically reveals his own position in the hierarchy of stories that unfolds in the novel. Contemplating the "cabin of death," he addresses the ontological instability that characterizes the metafictional world of Mulligan Stew. He writes:

Even more curious (I might even say chilling) was that the upper story, viewed from the outside, was no more substantial than the same story inside. The house simply fades away into a vague indeterminate blueness that I suddenly realized was the sky. It was as if the upper story of the house was there, but made of seamless glass, so that one could 'sense' it, but not actually see it. (MS 152)

In this landscape, where trees look "amazingly like drawings" (MS 152), buildings shift dimensions and individuals are "one-dimensional" (MS 22) cardboard beings; reality is made to appear humorously ambiguous. The vague blue that Halpin ponders symbolizes the transparency of all stories as linguistic constructs that do not reflect truth, but only one of an infinity of interpretations of experience. Drawn from a multitude of fictional worlds, the characters share the ontological condition of the English professor Roche; they are all "lost in the muck of what we have hilariously come to call 'the world of letters'" (MS 322).

In this indeterminate realm, identity is an artificial construct. Contrasting his bizarre existence in Lamont's novel to his previous employment in the serene world of Joyce, Halpin contemplates the peace he enjoyed, content behind his name, where he "was the letters" (MS 25) and nothing more. Now, subject to the tyrannical rule of a new author, he shares the condition of all characters who are manipulated as figures in a "game o' mum-chance" (MS 393), lacking the freedom to control their fates. Drawn into this world where theatre is the model for existence and "characters (or their varied personae) shift faces, costumes and personalities as do clouds change their shapes" (MS 255), he becomes involved in a multitude of social and personal dramas. Asking for consideration of his "role . . . in the social world . . . [and as an] important leader of the business community" (MS 104), Tom's letters to Beaumont illustrate the numerous scripts which the characters must follow. Just as the ghost of Beaumont envisioned the "penumberous future as a stage 'pon" (MS 392) which to play out his fantasies, all individuals inhabit a variety of worlds and create others in their imagination. Similarly,

by drawing from the collective fiction, Halpin contemplates "Miss D Dream," the chameleon-like star of all men's desires. Contrasting the "little plays" of male sex fantasies against the "confused and explosive drama" enacted at the Zap Club underscores the complexity of individual and social performances that constitutes reality in Mulligan Stew. Authors or objects of fictional worlds, all beings are actors in the theatre of American consciousness.

Discontented with their predicament, Halpin and Beaumont consider the lack of possibilities available to ameliorate their condition. Delighted to "play a small role, even an anonymous role" (MS 26), Halpin is outraged at starring in Lamont's absurd drama. Burdened with the "grossly vulgar 'life' that has been invented" (MS 88) for him, he feels compelled to escape the ludicrous world where he speaks unnatural English and performs ridiculous acts. Like Lamont, he is caught in a desperate situation and must confront the overwhelming question of how to escape and end the "charade" of his existence. Paralleling the condition of the waiters in a painting in Splendide-Hôtel, the characters in Mulligan Stew are involved in a despairing illusion. The narrator of Splendide-Hôtel writes:

I assure you these are not "real" waiters. . . . By an act of the imagination, the artist has driven through the apparent niceties of restaurant dining to reveal the bewildered rage and madness therein. One who has seen these pictures can never again dine out without suspecting that the waiters are all involved in a terrific charade. Their irrational behaviour and broken spirits do exist: in the imagination, purified against all change: in the Splendide. (SH 56)

Like the waiters, the characters are not "real" but share the same devastating predicament. Lost in a "funhouse" of fictional worlds, they are subject to an inimical environment. Puppets of language, they are condemned to imaginative prisons, fated never to step outside the repertoire of roles that defines their existence, nor to exercise the freedom to write the scripts of their own desires and destinies.

Chapter Three

Babylon Reconsidered

How many miles to Babylon?

Approximately as many from Yonkers to Ebbets Field. (Figure in light years.) (MS 289)

"Hats off! The flag is passing by." And may God help you if you don't whip your bowler from your scone in such circumstance! One waits for the brave spirit who will paint the inner meaning of the nosepicker who stands bemused before the drum majorette's teeny skirt and panties. . . . (MS 351)

In Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things, Sorrentino's narrator insists that the distance between fiction and reality seems like a "million light years" (IQ 216). For him, individuals in novels do not "represent anything anywhere[; they] have no counterparts in life" (IQ 216). Consequently, the two realms must remain separate, for everything fiction "teaches is useless . . . [in] structuring [one's] life" (IQ 215); to attempt to "employ its specific wisdom is a sign of madness" (IQ 215). He identifies this aberrant behaviour with those people who stand mesmerized by a

. . . girl . . . with a lithe, strong body and luscious bottom [who] skates in [a] window facing Madison Avenue. She goes through her boring acrobatics and dance routines, graceless. She is on a sheet of real ice. Incredible. Outside . . . the wretched of the earth, the people Robert Kennedy felt bad for, gape at her in their total ignorance, and wait for her leotard to tear at the crotch. . . . (IQ 216)

Performed in the heart of the advertising centre of America, this spectacle has captured the attention of a crowd who mistakes a sales display for a figure-skating performance. These are the "nosepickers" who unquestioningly perform their roles; they salute the passing flag, bow to wealth and become transfixed by the prospect of a glimpse of

titillating flesh. Imaginatively dead, sensationalism, sex and violence hold them in thrall. Blinded to reality, these people have become subject to incapacitating illusions.

Through all the lists, facts, lies and borrowings incorporated into his book, the outraged narrator of Imaginative Qualities hopes to capture the "curious essences" (IQ 34) of his characters' lives: he wants to reveal "Babel's famous period, its exact placement" (IQ 34). Similarly, in Mulligan Stew Sorrentino addresses the processes that have disabled the moral and imaginative vision of America. He is the "brave spirit" who paints the diseased hearts behind the masks of vitality and dynamism. Concerned with destruction, he reveals a world where the artist is isolated, human relations governed by power and language debased. Describing America's imaginative landscape, Mulligan Stew offers a desolate vision of a modern Babylon in the process of dissolution.

Addressing this decay, this chapter explores the ontology of the character Lamont, to whom Sorrentino assigns responsibility for the materials in Mulligan Stew. Representing a roman-à-clef of Lamont's experiences, the novel situates him in the world of avant-garde artists examined elsewhere in Sorrentino's work. This particular environment forms a "heterotopia," an intertextual space within a number of books that shares similar materials. The ideology of the inhabitants of this realm is the second aspect investigated in this section. Incapable of discerning the difference between fiction and reality, these beings inhabit a debased world of the imagination. Products of a marriage of myths and prejudices central to American identity, their lives are defined by literature. Finally, this chapter examines Lamont's inept attempt to exact revenge and expose the plot he believes precipitated his failure. Misusing metafictional devices and misinterpreting a vast number of literary sources, he strives to write an avant-garde masterpiece that will save his career. Yet, like his protagonist whose fall mirrors his course towards disaster, he does not produce a unique work of the imagination but transcribes a plethora of cultural codes. Believing he is creating literature, Lamont

succeeds only in recapitulating the narrative of loss and defeat central to American mythology.

John O'Brien contends that in the roman-à-clef presented in Imaginative Qualities Sorrentino cast himself in a "carefully selected tone and style. . . . [In effect he] made himself into a character of fiction" (76). Using an ascerbic and cynical voice, he comments on the art world. Approaching this environment from a different perspective in Mulligan Stew, Sorrentino offers no narrator to order events but invents a voice to match its surroundings. O'Brien observes that "there are two Lamont's at work" (69) in the novel: the one working on Crocodile Tears is a failure while the "Lamont who writes the novel of the failed writer" (69) is a success. Just as Sorrentino had transformed himself into a character in Imaginative Qualities, Lamont makes himself the narrative voice in his book. Unfortunately he is not a success but is as lacking in talent and imagination as his protagonist. As Max Eilenberg contends, Lamont is a "recognizable, if grotesquely parodied Sorrentino" (91). Reworking his materials, Sorrentino places all his "knowledge in the hands of a character who then proceeds to make his own novel" (O'Brien 77). Consequently, Lamont's Three Deuces is patterned on The Sky Changes. Rayon Violet mirrors Steelwork and Fretwork parallels Imaginative Qualities. Like the description of Halpin, manipulated into a "fool . . . [and] liar . . . [who] has not spoken a word that is not a cliché" (MS 58), Sorrentino has invented a perverse caricature of himself utterly lacking in talent and whose artistic integrity is gradually eroded.

Addressing the ambiguity surrounding the narrative mode, Sorrentino insists that the basic intent of Mulligan Stew is "not parody but the erasure of the 'author'" (FM 10). Primarily interested in what is considered "good writing or bad" (FM 10), he abandons Lamont to his own designs. Consequently, because the "character named 'Sorrentino' who created Lamont nowhere shows his hand" (FM 10), any attempt at parody becomes

problematic as "Lamont has no idea that he is being hilarious and/or ridiculous" (EM 10). Yet, through Lamont's misuse of metafictional devices and misinterpretation of a disparate number of literary sources, he creates a monumental failure. Like his protagonist, who is solely capable of displaying the "'gestes' of the avant-garde" (MS 321), he lacks "consistent 'engagement' with those subjects germane to the 'contemporary'" (MS 321). Producing a poor derivative novel, Lamont's book represents a humorous indictment of all that Sorrentino finds destructive to literature and language.

Arrogantly convinced of his own talents, Lamont remains torn between satisfying selfish plans for success and prestige and writing honestly. In contrast to Sorrentino's desire to efface himself from his texts, Lamont, in his egotism and quest for recognition, makes himself the star in his own book. Similarly, believing he is transforming "real life" into art, he disguises his ex-wife in the "flimsiest masques [as] a basely depraved stupid whore" (MS 261) in order to exact his revenge. Unlike previous works that commented directly on what Sorrentino views as a meretricious artistic world, this novel, as Max Eilenberg remarks, unfolds within the "rooms of the Splendide" (90), a realm that serves as a microcosm of the corruption in contemporary American life, thought and aspirations. Lamont is one of the denizens of the closed world Sorrentino addresses in his novels that deal specifically with writing, art and culture. This realm constitutes what Brian McHale terms a "heterotopia," an intertextual "space . . . capable of accommodating . . . many incommensurable and mutually exclusive worlds" (44), all held together by shared materials. Through the persistence from book to book of particular characters and concerns, Sorrentino's work forms a single-continuous text. Possessing both congruencies and contradictions, his novels create an uneasy juxtaposition of worlds, yet form a "super-text" (57) that explores from multiple perspectives the imaginative landscape of the avant-garde art world. Taken alone,

Mulligan Stew poses many hermeneutic problems; but, once placed within the greater context of the "heterotopia," Lamont and his ontology become easier to evaluate.

In Odd Number, Lamont reprised the role he played in Mulligan Stew of the "drunken fifth-rate poet . . . who puts his arm around all the women" (MS 222) at parties. Financially ruined and an alcoholic, he frequents events where the social elite he perceives as his persecutors gather. As a matter of gossip the narrator reveals that the conspiracy engineered by Vance Whitestone, alluded to in Lamont's book, was successful. Through a negative review of Lamont's novel, Synthetic Ink, Whitestone finally destroyed his career. In addition, the narrator reveals that Lamont had incurred the wrath of the art community by modelling his character Daisy upon Lolita, a character from Imaginative Qualities who, in this case, is derived from Nabokov's novel, Lolita. This event causes him to remark: "People are really amazing, can you imagine believing in a novel?" (QN 120). Incapable of distinguishing between fiction and reality, these beings inhabit an imaginative landscape defined by literature. Believing fiction represents reality, they have come to share the ontological status of its inhabitants; they have become characters themselves.

Lamont's novel records the ideology of these beings. Reflecting their environment, Lamont situates the chapter, "Painful Digests," in the restaurant Rocher de Cancale. Once part of the Hotel Splendide, the "Canc" represents part of the cancer Sorrentino believes has stricken America. Frequented by such celebrities as Bart Kahane, one of the fake artists in Imaginative Qualities, the "Canc" serves only the fortunate and sophisticated. Identified as the "extremely hip," Sorrentino believes these are the "really dangerous people . . . who know everything . . . worthwhile . . ." (RC 14). Like Barnett Tete, who possesses the "critical vocabulary" to discuss art, anyone who goes to "art films and knows what to say about them . . . or has become a Blakean because Blake is having a resurgence in popularity" (RC 15) embodies a threat. These

people are not interested in art but in creating fashions and following trends. Under their influence, the tastes of a nation are formed.

Closed to the "virulent and pandemic virus of 'democracy'" (MS 53), the "Canc" is not governed by the ideals of freedom and opportunity but by the concrete realities of power, class and wealth. Inhabitants of this privileged domain, Beaumont and Halpin are "men on the roof, the very penthouse of that building some label Success, but others . . . call Honest Work" (MS 52). Knowing the difference between a "coaster and a caster," a phrase used by the character Beshary in Steelwork to describe his architectural model of American society, they represent for Lamont a loathed, yet coveted world. But under Besharyism they belong on the lower floors filled with "diptera and coleoptera and felines" (SW 174), where they spend their "money on rubbers and dirty books of ladies in underwear" (SW 174). In this world the working classes grovel in the basement where they expend their lives chasing wealth and, as he puts it, "[d]evoided of culture" (SW 172-73), believing they are happy while hoping for an opportunity to progress upwards. Occupying the penthouse necessitates acquiring "culture and language," obtaining control of the commodities that bestow status and prestige. Delineating a vision of an America structured upon money and power, Besharyism explodes the myths central to the national identity.

Wishing to evoke this world, Sorrentino produces in Mulligan Stew a novel written by a character who shares the prejudices and aspirations of the culture Beshary rejects. In this manner Sorrentino achieves what he believes Hubert Selby accomplished in his fiction: to reveal "people [who] are real because their acts . . . are acts utterly true to the environment they inhabit" (SS 118), a statement Max Eilenberg asserts stands as a "rubric for all Sorrentino's novels" (89). By rigorously excluding the literary from his language and offering no commentary, opinions or ideas, Sorrentino concludes that Selby disappeared into his own book. Effacing himself from his text, Selby related in a

"vulgar, cruel, and mad tongue, the vulgarity, cruelty and madness of his closed world" (SS 131), a goal Sorrentino achieves in Mulligan Stew where the selfish, greedy and unimaginative voice of Lamont offers a vision of a debased artistic world. Yet, in contrast to the exclusion of the literary from the language of Selby, Lamont works solely in the clichés, fallacies and ideas of his milieu. Unconcerned with exposing an inimical reality, he reproduces it in his language.

By registering the stereotyped diction of his world, Lamont represents one of the writers Sorrentino designates as "popular." These figures are not interested in revealing anything of their characters or environment but only in manipulating words as "gimmicks" to exhibit their cleverness. In this manner, wishing to evoke the "world of action" of commerce, Lamont describes Beaumont as a "LEADER OF BUSINESS," reproducing euphemisms that shield a brutal reality. Unquestioningly accepting the mythology that surrounds the "dog eat dog world" of business, he uses such terms as "captain of finance" that accords rank and prestige to what is a mercenary task. Similarly, the brochures for special "HE-MANS' HOT PHOTOS" (MS 105) that promise the "ULTIMATE IN BIZARRE BEAUTY" (MS 109) to "sophisticated connoisseurs of the UNUSUAL" (MS 109) parallel the letters Lamont wishes to reproduce in "exact duplication" (MS 336). Believing this language reflects the real conditions of existence, he fails to see a world where sexuality is debased and women transformed into fetishes. Void of irony, he describes Daisy as a "lover . . . mistress . . . companion . . . fabulous whore [and] 'little' homemaker" (MS 120), a catalogue of stereotyped roles that reveal his own expectations. Ironically, the erotic polaroids Daisy takes of herself, that she claims are to help see herself "objectively" (MS 116), define Lamont's condition. Incapable of standing outside his world, he reiterates all its prejudices, illusions and myths.

Borrowed from Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, Daisy, despite being a fictive creation, symbolizes for Lamont an example of the ideal American woman, pure and alluring. Using her as an embodiment of tarnished innocence, he reproduces a system of beliefs that he has accepted as natural. Dismissing Fitzgerald's novel as a classic manual on how one can learn to climb the ladder of success, Sorrentino identifies the book as part of the debilitating romantic tradition in his native literature. Its impact he attributes to the poverty of the inner lives of Americans which he believes are dull and torpid. Because of this, he insists, they look for

. . . writers to tell [them] these states are tragic, romantically heroic, that [their] lives are gloriously blasted from the start, [and] that [their] defeats mean something. . . . (SS 29)

Consequently, because the "national state of American life is featureless" (SS 30), it has been given a romantic face. Donning this mask, Lamont describes the narrative of his own failure as part of this tradition.

Working within the reassuring contours of myth, Lamont represents a product of a culture that is not interested in literature, in that "rarest American fiction that details the defeat that is neither 'principled' nor even understood as defeat" (SS 32), only in the production of a marketable book. He inhabits a world where economic contingencies have determined the value of an artist as "nothing, zero" (PR 236), if he does not write to satisfy the public. Representing for Sorrentino a "vast empyrean of greed and stupidity" (RE 109), the publishing establishment only manufactures "fake writers who produce fake books" (RE 109) that he terms "bookoids" (RE 98). In Splendide-Hôtel he attributes to their influence a state of cultural destruction: "Babel, Babble. The false poet has written a false novel, the language further corrupted. This rubbish will sour and destroy the soil" (SH 9). Nourished upon these contaminants, Lamont personifies for Sorrentino the popular novelists who have come to dominate American literature.

Part of this corruption, the character Thomas McCoy represents for Lamont a master of contemporary fiction. But, as Sorrentino notes, a "McCoy" in the publishing world is a manuscript that possesses the potential to be transformed into a marketable product. Personifying the values of this establishment, McCoy is not concerned with literary merit, only profit margins. Interested in his bankbooks, spelling and syntax, he does not possess a voice to address the realities of American life but considers himself "CELL!-o-phane!" (MS 39), a mirror to the synthetic quality of his culture. Attacking Joyce, labelling him "Shame's Voice," he embodies the commercial forces that threaten to silence literature. Like the mail order pornography in "Burst Loveletters" that promises the "Real Macoy" (MS 106), he offers a fantasy world in his fiction. His work represents a pathway into the netherworld of illusions that characterizes America's imaginative landscape.

Indicative of his nation's cultural entropy, McCoy's novel, The Mounted, which he associates with "taxidermy," captures the barren and lifeless world about him. It provides a record of "life in death--or death in life" (MS 38), an ambivalent vision that delineates the ontological condition of his audience, a society of walking dead. Desiring that his characters speak directly to the minds of comparative literature professors and intelligent book reviewers, he perpetuates the condition of stasis that has drained the vitality from art and language. Contrasting McCoy's aesthetic, Sorrentino believes that the artist, "by the use of language, a record of sensibility, attempts a revelation" (SS 57). In this manner he contends "Joyce . . . allowed us to understand the filth of nineteenth-century Europe . . . [and W.C.] Williams has pushed our faces into an America that blindly roared [upon] its corrupted and corrupting way" (SS 56-57). By attempting to separate words from life, Sorrentino wishes to use language as a "means of dismantling illusion and discovering the origins of meaning in actual things" (Schaub 443). Believing that the "imagination's power to liberate is also the power to debunk" (444), he

seeks, like Williams, the "'isolate flecks' that [can] suddenly reveal the quality of . . . an entire community" (SS 36). In contrast, McCoy perpetuates, through his lifeless prose, the pretensions, self-serving assumptions and myths that have created the desolation Mulligan Stew seeks to expose.

Addressing the origins of this corruption, Sorrentino notes that only Williams in the thirties discovered that America was dead and its people ruined. His understanding that "success in America presupposes loss . . . misery and destruction . . . [revealed] exactly why [his nation] is as it is--not happy, not really sad, certainly not tragic, but desolate" (SS 38). Daisy's questions--"But were we really happy? . . . Who can interrogate the face of happiness?" (MS 236)--foregrounds the emptiness concealed behind the confident smiles of Americans. Associated with materialism or sexuality, happiness in Mulligan Stew does not lead to peace or fulfillment, but to oblivion in the fantastical, the erotic or bizarre. This is a manifestation of the "ineradicable sickness in America's soul" (SS 22) that Williams identified with the belief that "[p]rogress is to get" (159), to acquire wealth and position. Fixated upon these rewards, Americans do not "wish for truth, but for action" (SH 10), nor for literature and art but "useful skills" (SH 9) to attain prosperity and comfort.

Like the mythical Babel, the nation has achieved great progress but is in the process of dissolution. The language of the artist has become "undecipherable [and] untranslatable" (SH 10) for a public inundated by commands to "Sign this petition! . . . Salute the flag! Believe in schools! And do something!" (SH 10). In the midst of this confusion the artist is silenced. Splendide-Hôtel describes this debacle:

. . . [the] clamoring audience says, it wants answers, it wants action. The language it employs to make these demands is dead, a smell of putrefaction hangs over it. The poet, idiot of artifact, punches his face, babbles, b-b-b-b. (SH 10)

In this chaotic atmosphere, Sorrentino concludes: no "good American can accept [the] hilarity" (SS 22) of trusting in the artist's voice. Above the clamour, the words of the false poets, politicians and businessmen prevail.

In Mulligan Stew Sorrentino describes the degeneration of America into the postmodern "culture of the simulacrum" that Frederic Jameson describes in Postmodernism. He writes that the "past as 'referent' [has found] itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (18). In this dehistoricized present, where meaning has been destroyed, culture is driven by a "consumer's appetite for a world transformed into sheer images" (18): the only scale of value is that of exchange. Reflecting these perverse appetites of a society whose intellectual diet is artificially stimulated and controlled are the book reviews that act as mise-en-abymes to the processes that have led to this degeneration. The Wrong Food Buy is an assault on "the 'foodmongers' who have subtly turned [America] into a nation of nutritional sleepwalkers" (MS 269). Similarly, The Ample Heart of Werther recounts the tale of an immigrant who comes to America to make his fortune but is victimized by meat cartels who desire his sausage recipe. As Werther discovers, there is a vast discrepancy between reality and the factitious myths of America as the land of freedom and opportunity. Rather, it is a nation where people unquestioningly consume the information, ideas and art presented them. In this world governed by market forces, Americans subsist on a meager diet of illusions and myths.

The Mecca of this sterile and depthless culture is Las Vegas where Daisy discovers "[t]otal liberation with lg rms, swmg pl, tv, air cond, and baby stg" (MS 281). In this realm babble has infiltrated and corrupted all aspects of living. As described in The Sky Changes, the city is a paradoxical oasis surrounded by "death and sterility" (SC 114); it is a nightmare creation of a diseased imagination:

... a wilderness of lights, every color, all moving, a Times Square

of unbelievable vulgarity, unbelievable cupidity and greed. The people walking the streets were corpses, they moved along to some distant drummer who was a psychopath, it seemed. Were they really alive--the neon on their faces turned them blue, white, red, they moved . . . waiting for the machines to blow them up and shower them with gold. (SC 114).

In step with the same "drummers in black hoods" (MS 87), whose "renowned compositions" (MS 87) set the rhythms of quotidian reality, the characters in Mulligan Stew participate in a process of frenzied debasement. Part of the walking dead, they are products of the same imaginative vision that created Las Vegas.

Personifying one of the sinister figures in "black hoods" is Barnett Tete, "America's most famous collector and all around patron of the arts" (MS 339). He embodies the destructive potential of advanced capitalism to replace traditions and institutions with a complex web of economic relations. With his most profound desire to see the world "alive with unrestricted trade" (MS 349), he seeks the collapse of all differences in the homogenizing processes of ever-increasing commercial activity. Confident that the "melding of a vocabulary . . . with symbolic action" (MS 352) has been accomplished, he affirms that art and life have become emptied of meaning. Illustrating this debasement is Halpin's comment that for many, greatness in literature finds its "quintessence in the sight of a large bowl of limp lettuce leaves" (MS 433), an observation that echoes Tete's remark that "basic human relationships flower when the sound of crisp lettuce" (MS 352), money, is heard. This reduction of all experience into a scale of exchange reflects Jameson's conclusions that in postmodern culture aesthetic production has become "integrated into commodity production generally [resulting in a] frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel seeming goods" (4). Humbly describing himself as a "mere fringe figure huddled on the edge of [a] great volcano belching fashion" (MS 353), Tete directs this transformation of art into fetishes. Under his guidance, desires and beliefs are packaged and sold like the corrugated boxes

he manufactures. Artificially stimulated and controlled, life in America has become characterized by changing fashions perpetrated by cynical interests.

In his rise to success, Tete enacts the narrative central to American mythology. Born in poverty, he becomes a magnate of an industrial empire. Presiding with a "huge and spectacularly insincere smile" (MS 353) over the art world, he is a manifestation of the enormous damage incurred in living the American dream. Only the imagination, Williams says, "will free us from the waste and despair that America has hidden under its continual smile" (SS 24). Author and object of illusions, Tete remains as subservient to the fictions he creates as the masses who invest in his sterile vision. As his name suggests, he is intellectually alive but physically and imaginatively impotent. In contrast, his wife is "all heart" (MS 341), yet she suffers from an internal corruption manifested in her sexuality. Like Daisy and Tom Buchanan, they represent another "American marriage of the beautiful affluent" (MS 232), beings whose atrophied conditions mirror the stunted growth of a nation. This perfect couple joins the brutal play of cold intelligence to a mindless, perverse sexuality. Blissfully happy, they are morally and imaginatively dead. Describing the irreversible consequences of this condition in the poem, "Anatomy," Sorrentino warns:

Certain portions of the heart
die, and are dead. They are
dead.

Cannot be exorcised or brought
to life.

Do not disturb yourself
to become whole. (SP 150)

In his fragmented condition, Tete personifies the desolation of his culture. Irrevocably damaged, his heart rots behind a radiant and rapacious smile.

Infected with the same disease that has destroyed Tete, Lamont pursues his vision of the American dream. Through his protagonist and his characters, Beaumont and Halpin, is enacted what Lamont believes are the circumstances of his failure. Wishing to dramatize the conspiracy that has destroyed his career, he inadvertently reveals the psychological tensions responsible for his fall. Foregrounding this internal battle is the contest between Halpin, who is borrowed from Joyce's Finnegans Wake, and Beaumont, from Dashiell Hammett's The Glass Key. Representing opposing poles in the literary spectrum, their conflict is a projection of Lamont's confusion and faltering concern for literary merit. His ambivalence is manifested in his brutal treatment of Beaumont, reflecting his antipathy to the world of commercial literature, and his reduction of Halpin to a fool mouthing clichés that reveal his inability to free himself from the banal language of his milieu. Yet with the change of titles from Guinea Red to Crocodile Tears comes a decisive transformation in his intentions and an alteration in Halpin and Beaumont's roles. No longer concerned with simply showing his protagonist, Lamont, as a belaboured yet honest writer, he begins to describe him within the narrative of the lonely and wounded American hero. With this shift the book moves beyond being an awkward attempt at experimental fiction into the realm of myth.

The theatre enacted between the warring factions of Lamont's psyche ironically mirrors Freud's topology of the subject. In this model, Halpin, who is associated with reason and common sense, personifies the ego which is governed by the reality principle; Beaumont, who operates at the behest of the pleasure principle, represents the id. Paralleling the role of the ego in providing guidance and restraint over the volatile energies of the id, Halpin attempts to draw his partner out of his spiral towards self-destruction. Calling himself in "tragic jest, the 'Emperor of Ice Cream'" (MS 81), a reference to the character in Wallace Stevens' poem of the same name who remains fixated upon the thought of "concupiscent curds" (79) in the midst of a wake, Beaumont

resists. This conflict mirrors the tenuous relationship of the id and ego in Freud's model, where they "speak different languages and operate on the basis of conflicting imperatives" (Silverman 132). Constituting an uneasy marriage of "brute strength and superior wisdom" (134), they remain in a state of constant struggle. Unfortunately for Beaumont and Halpin, this union shatters, dissolving their partnership and propelling their tormentor, Lamont, into madness.

The chapter, "Making It Up As We Goes Along," illustrates the dissolution of the bonds between Beaumont and Halpin that mirrors Lamont's growing schizophrenia. Reflecting the fragmentation of his psyche is the deterioration of his style into disconnected fragments of discourse. Harmonious interaction is no longer possible with Beaumont's rejection of Halpin's suggestions to "stop trying to avoid reality" (MS 437) and to let the "trivia . . . act as the catalyst for honest thought" (MS 438). Like his characters, who stand as "idiots in the face of the mass devastation" (MS 437) that surrounds them, Lamont must get "past all the clatter in [his] head" (MS 438) and expunge the dead language that locks him in a world of illusions. Foregrounding his ontological condition, the chapter reveals the destruction resultant when the barrier between fiction and reality has collapsed. Representing these two antithetical realms, Beaumont and Halpin dispute the nature of the world they inhabit. Halpin's insistence that "there is no tragedy here" (MS 434) is countered by Beaumont, who claims that he senses the "wearying victory of heroes, the exact romance of failure" (MS 434) about him. Incapable of communicating, their conversation collapses; and Beaumont, enraptured by his fantasies, is lost in the babble that ensues.

Though Halpin's efforts to save his partner are highlighted throughout Crocodile Tears, it is Beaumont's loss that is at the centre of the tale that unfolds. Identifying profoundly with this character, Lamont bestows him with the "triple American flaws of greed, carelessness and romantic nostalgia" (SS 29), attributes associated with such

figures as Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby. Solely concerned with the sensual and carnal aspects of being, Beaumont's obsessions are manifestations of Lamont's own moral dissolution. As the "Emperor of Ice Cream," responsible for devising contracts that "scrambled, boiled . . . and basted [his] faithful authors" (MS 82) and for transforming language into a semiotics of pleasure in the chapter "Painful Digests," he personifies the gross materialism and exploitive spirit of his nation. Sharing this voracious appetite for happiness and success, Lamont suffers under the same illusions as the characters in Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things who are at a "loss to comprehend the true anguish of the flesh" (IQ 17). He is like the woman who will not

. . . allow her imagination to yield up the clear image that death
is the reward and life no preparation for it [because it is] a pleasure
to lose like Frank Sinatra. . . (IQ 22)

Like the characters who identify with the narrative of romantic loss in Sinatra's songs, Lamont is unaware that the pretence of myth must yield to actuality. Consequently, Beaumont's loss and Lamont's decline into madness, projections of his own desperate condition, do not constitute tragedies as he desires but manifestations of the banal ease whereby the spirit and imagination are eradicated in America.

Paralleling his protagonist's mental collapse, Lamont succumbs to the alluring yet sinister promise of success embodied in the American dream. Incapable of acknowledging that his failure arises from his own inadequacies, he identifies it with a corrupting presence in his environment. Through Beaumont is enacted this narrative of evasion, a story resonating with the myths central to his nation's identity. Embodying the source of corruption in Crocodile Tears are the characters Corriendo and Delamode. As "European Artists," they perform a particular role as the foreign contagion that contaminates a healthy and virile America. The rejection of the "idea [that] getting rich quick or 'making it' is . . . exclusively American" (MS 127) is a manifestation of the

myopia that characterizes any investigation of the nation's heart. Though foreigners, Corriendo and Delamode's lust for money, power and position is uniquely American. Their nihilism characterizes the bankruptcy of a culture where the "crush of business . . . simply won't allow . . . time for . . . emotional and 'moral' complications" (MS 120). As "true pornographers of the spirit" (MS 126), they personify the reality of America's identity void of its illusions of righteousness, purity and innocence.

Portrayed as two "heartless, gold-digging and perverse women" (MS 3), who cause the "sinister tragedy" of Beaumont's fall, Corriendo and Delamode embody a particular persona in representative American literature. Sorrentino writes that Williams had discovered that because American life is "dull [and] its losses . . . silent, inexpressible [and] obscure" (SS 30), its evil must be given a "face or else [the nation would] be forced to accept the fact that it has no face, that [its] corruption is diluted so thoroughly that" (SS 30) all must possess a little within themselves. To obscure the roots of this decay the "fictional bitch" (SS 30) was created. Stereotypically, she appears as an "upwardly mobile, conniving and mindless wife who pushes her sensitive husband until he is . . . rich" (SS 30) or destroyed. Illustrating this myth, Lamont's sirens, "Corrie, the strong, and Dark Delamode" (MS 161), embody a grotesque caricature of the historical heroines of American fiction--the pure fair "Maiden [and] the Dark Lady [who is the] sinister embodiment of sexuality" (Fiedler 296). They represent the ironic face of evil in Mulligan Stew and form the image in the puzzle of the "beautiful destroyer" Halpin played with as a child. In America's imagination, Corriendo and Delamode are the "destroyers of happiness and peace" (MS 431); they are the impersonal force that manipulates lives and destinies. Omnipotent and inflexible, like "God, or Fate" (MS 3), they symbolize the tyrannical mentality that governs America's collective consciousness and toys with its subjects forcing them to "fit where they [don't] belong" (MS 3).

Within this carefully choreographed script, Corriendo and Delamode prey upon the "little man," a "sentimental figure understandable only as a victim of abstract powers of government, business . . . politics [or] destiny" (SS 32). Ironically alluded to as the "archetypal 'fatman' of all great fiction" (MS 439), this individual is described as dressed in "thin white socks, a rumpled gabardine suit, his mouth an obscene joke" (MS 439), an identical portrait to Abe North in Lamont's Baltimore Chop. The alcoholic composer in Fitzgerald's Tender is The Night, North epitomizes the conception of the stereotypical little man who seems the victim of inscrutable forces. Performing in this role in Mulligan Stew, Beaumont is the romantic loser whose success is marked by a ravaged psyche and whose loss is caused by an inimical environment. In his failure, he performs the role of the gifted man manipulated and destroyed by history.

Playing their parts within this drama, Corriendo and Delamode ruin Beaumont, making him "less than a man" (MS 359). Emasculated, he takes his place in representative American literature as the scarred male whose symbolic wound is related to the phallus. Sorrentino writes that for characters like Jake Barnes and Stephen Rojack, their "loss is almost always redeemed because we insist on imputing to the losers the knowledge of their own heroic pathos" (SS 32). Exemplifying this cultural narrative is Mailer's An American Dream where Rojack's wife personifies the "Great Bitch [who] delivers extermination to any bucko brave enough to take carnal knowledge of her. She . . . fails in her role . . . if the lover escapes without being maimed" (16). Writing within this tradition, Lamont echoes Mailer, whose character attempts "with both hands . . . to find [her husband's] root and mangle" (35) him. Giving Corriendo and Delamode "artificial shafts" (MS 328), he has them usurp the phallus, the "very cult" (MS 328) of male identity in America. Working to capitalize upon the myth of sexual relations as a contest for power, Lamont inadvertently reveals the symbolic impotence to be one of the imagination. Wishing to fulfill all his readers' expectations, he is one of the writers

Sorrentino describes as "intent upon telling you something, . . . getting a story across to you so that you will be moved or warmed" (RC 21). Burning to relay a "message across to [their readers], . . . to tell [them] the truth of life, the truth of their own lives and experiences" (RC 21), these writers are uninterested in the possibilities of prose or fiction. Consequently, Beaumont's loss remains unredeemed. His confession from beyond the grave that his "raging powerful piece o' male equipage . . . 'twas none o' mine, but a charm those two had put o' me for use i' their own carnalities" (MS 397), serves to highlight the bathos of his fall. Working within a context of sterile clichés, emasculation becomes a means of denoting not heroic loss but the imaginative impotence of a culture enraptured by illusions.

In Sorrentino's novel, The Sky Changes, the wife of his protagonist functions as a caricature of the "fictional bitch" to foreground this bankruptcy. Described as a "vampire," she draws out of her husband what he thought was vitality. Characterized by a negation of emotions, their sexual lives are brutal and mechanical. Sorrentino comments that the novel reflects the "desperate sterile quality [of American life through] . . . the desperate, sterile quality of [the] marriage" (RC 9). This despairing tone contrasts the absurdity in Mulligan Stew; nevertheless, both books address the same condition of destruction. The hyperbolic descriptions of Halpin's genitalia, that seek to give the impression of mythic potency but obscure the debasement of sexuality, complement those of the unnamed husband whose organ is "dead and limp, sausage meat, by Dunderbeck's machine" (SC 118). Similarly, Lamont, as a victim of Vance Whitestone, the "King of Emasculation in the publishing world" (MS 356), has been drawn into the "Dunderbeck's machine" (MS 289) that produces beings who are essentially dead yet believe themselves vital and alive. Clarifying this process is the book review of The Ample Heart of Werther. Denounced as a "threat to [the] native cuisine [and accused] . . . of phallus worship" (MS 270), the immigrant Werther becomes

a victim of vicious plots. Drawn into America's cultural machine, his fate is to be processed into one of the "mindless . . . devourers of chic, the people who follow trends" (MS 356). As one of these ciphers, Lamont finds solace and stability in the imaginary world he inhabits.

The novel, Gypsy Midnight, reveals the processes that have led to Lamont's condition of impotency. Described as a "veritable stew of lust, a soup of pleasures various, [an] unholy ghoulish" (MS 300), it represents his attempt to capitalize upon the popularity of South American fiction. Devised to function as a mise-en-abyme, its protagonist is victimized by "two phantom succubi who have purloined [his] broken organ that pumps, now, only bitter acids" (MS 300). Based upon a misinterpretation of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," Gypsy Midnight recounts a tale of loss of innocence and initiation into the mysteries of human nature. Paralleling Brown's experience, the protagonist is drawn by those of "wistful perfidity . . . from the glittering face of [his] innocent maiden" (MS 300). In despair, he concludes: "I am lost" (MS 300), echoing the cry in Hawthorne's tale of "My Faith is gone! . . . There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name" (157). Like Brown, Lamont is paralysed by the discovery of the base hypocrisy upon which his society functions. Overcome by a cynical awareness of the innate corruption of human nature, he shares Brown's failure to acknowledge that the decay resides equally in his own heart.

Wishing to expose the evil that surrounds him, Lamont elaborates upon the allegorical journey undertaken in "Young Goodman Brown." Leading his characters into the "great, dark, thrilling city, that no one ever know the heart of" (MS 226), he delineates the contemporary equivalent of the nightmare world of the forest that haunted the Puritan mind. Witches and devils are replaced by the denizens of the modern imaginative landscape--the wealthy, cultured and powerful. Like "three lost babes in

crepusculous woods" (MS 363), Beaumont, Daisy and Halpin venture into the core of darkness in America's soul:

. . . the fash'nable place, [full of] phoney people dressed in the latest styles, never moved by the meaning of love, nor by far stars, nor by a thought of heaven. Darkest night infected these wretched natives. . . . (MS 161)

Within this den of "inequity or iniquity" (MS 361) is celebrated the "unholy sabbath" that parallels the pandemonium that transpires in "The Masque of Fungo." Wishing to reveal his nemesis in this realm, Lamont ironically depicts his kinsmen. Indulging in cryptic allusions to demonology and titillating sexuality in order to mesmerize his readership, he is, like Corriendo and Delamode, guilty of pandering to debased appetites. The "mot juste" (MS 384), the "buzz word" "powers" (MS 384), that he appropriates to describe the women's sinister abilities, ironically defines his own position. In Foucault's ontology of the modern soul, power produces reality; it creates desires and discourses and "penetrates and controls everyday pleasure" (299). A subject of these processes, Lamont, in his effort to expose the evil that he believes infects his world, succeeds only in reproducing the conditions of its existence. Author and object of fictions, he is incapable of escaping the narratives that define his reality.

As a manifestation of representative literature, Lamont's text shares the qualities of its milieu: it represents the product of a materialistic, narcissistic and misogynist culture. In Mulligan Stew is revealed an imaginative entropy concealed beneath a mask of health and vitality. Like the Babylon Fitzgerald found in Montmartre, where vice and waste characterized a life of ferocious activity, ending in "slower and slower motion" (215), Sorrentino describes a culture driven by a hunger for material development and an insatiable desire for success. To "dissipate, . . . to make nothing out of something" (Fitzgerald 214), is the process identified in Mulligan Stew. But no aura of romance

surrounds this realm--only a desperate and absurd pall. Blinded by illusions, its inhabitants enact their roles, a nation of somnabulists graced with vacant smiles.

Returning to the scenes of his dissipation, Fitzgerald's protagonist in "Babylon Revisited" is stricken with nostalgia and desires to "jump back a whole generation and trust in character again as the eternally valuable element [as everything] else [had worn] out" (214). Echoing this profound sense of loss in Mulligan Stew, a character "receives a box of the most fantastic stuff from home, [where each item] . . . conjures up the most hopeless, yet agonizingly sweet memories of a simple and dead America" (MS 56). Countering Fitzgerald's sentimentality, Sorrentino rejects the notion that America is suffering from a loss of innocence. Examining the innate failings of the qualities Fitzgerald wishes to recapture, he concentrates upon the objects and language that resonate with the force of reality, the "isolate flecks" that he believes possess the potential for renewal. In this manner, Mulligan Stew functions as a literary antidote to the corruption that has infected a nation. A novel about characters stranded in a world defined by American fiction, the book proffers a vision of an imaginatively desolate and exhausted culture, a Babel in decline.

Chapter Four

The Death of the Author?

And then I confront the terror of it all. Have I made up
Corriendo and Delamode? Do they exist? Does Daisy exist?
How marvelous a piece of machinery is the human brain.
What is truth? What is reality? Have I invented this entire
tale? Were the bizarre people I have been involved with all
inventions to excuse my terrible deed? (MS 414)

Can life, true life, be honestly thought of as just a bunch of things
put together that you do or not? (MS 237)

Wishing to let the "machinery [of his novel] be as wild and absurd as a Rube
Goldberg contraption" (MS 127), Lamont aspires to construct an autonomous literary
device like the book, Bobbed Hair. Written in 1925, this experimental group project was
noted for its incoherence and the traps set by its creators for their collaborators. Filled
with contradictions and paradoxes, Mulligan Stew mirrors its form with its own
polyphony of contentious voices that frustrate interpretation. Ironically, Lamont does not
create such a literary maze but becomes lost in the confusing labyrinth of his collective
fiction. Spiralling into insanity, he becomes apprehensive that everything he writes is
"being dictated to [him and that] all [his] people are laughing at [him] behind [his] back
as they go through their paces" (MS 125-26). Destroyed in the "Dunderbeck's machine"
of the literary world, he becomes part of the mechanistic reality he sought to escape. His
fall describes the death of the author in contemporary society: no longer a God ruling
over his fictive domain, he becomes reduced to a cog in the linguistic and discursive
contraption that constitutes American culture.

The enigmatic aphorism, "If you make a better book the world will build a
mousetrap at your door" (MS 242), foregrounds the contest delineated in Mulligan Stew
between the individual creative impulse and the collective myth-making machine. Baited

with money, glamour and the promise of success, the snares sets by the "publisher-retailer-critical-academic machinery" (MS 252) seek to entrap the unwary writer in a web of illusions. Avoiding these dangers in order to produce autonomous artifacts represents the greatest challenge Sorrentino envisions facing the artist. He shares Umberto Eco's conception of the role of the writer as a maker of texts that function as "furniture [in] the world in which the reader also lives, and [as] machine[s] for producing possible worlds" (246). Illustrating this dynamic relation, Lamont announces, "It's the reader's problem, sez I , in my best Rube Goldberg voice" (MS 127), thus dramatizing the reader as an active participant in the elaborate word games of Mulligan Stew. Structured upon tensions arising from the psychological collapse of Lamont and the machinations of the seemingly absent Sorrentino, the novel explores the possibilities of literature in relation to Roland Barthes' conclusion that to restore writing to its future the "birth of the reader must be requited by the death of the Author" (59). Elaborating upon the potential embodied in the concept of a "novel about a writer writing a novel" (MS 224) endlessly telescoped to present a hierarchy of fictive worlds, Sorrentino describes both the demise of the traditional conception of the author and a dynamic new role for the writer in the postmodern world.

Addressing the function of the writer in Mulligan Stew, this chapter discusses the roles of Sorrentino and the character Lamont in the light of Barthes' essay, "The Death of the Author," and Foucault's "What is an Author?". Assenting to the body of their arguments while opposing their conclusions, Sorrentino offers a vision of the postmodern writer that entails discarding the traditional costume of the author and assuming an altered role in the production of the text. This change foregrounds the second aspect investigated in the chapter: an ontology of writing. Moving beyond the limitations set by Barthes and Foucault, Sorrentino delineates a fiction of possibilities that offers the writer freedom in an oppressive cultural environment. The function of the artist is "not

to interpret, explain, soothe, reveal, teach [nor] lead" (FM 3) but to construct autonomous artifacts whose existence might challenge the established order of meanings. Finally, this chapter explores Lamont's "catabasis" as representing the death of the author. His deterioration follows the cultural narrative of a writer in an advanced capitalist society where the erasure of personality occurs with the investiture in empty ideals and values. By giving up "fictioneering," Lamont is drawn into the madness that surrounds him; he ceases to be a creator of alternate worlds and becomes a character in a debased cultural drama.

Sorrentino's comment that the basic intent of Mulligan Stew remains the "erasure of the author," the concealment of his own voice behind the apparatus of his Rube Goldberg contraption, underscores questions concerning the role of the writer in postmodern society. The "battered, skewed, corrupted, and grammatically and syntactically insane language" (FM 10) of the book, he insists, represents the product of "Anthony Lamont and a host . . . of others" (FM 10). Constituted of clichés and references, the novel remains for the "most part badly written" (FM 10), a narrative mode that effectively obscures Sorrentino's intent. Nevertheless, Halpin's apprehension of a "'presence'" (MS 409) in his cabin suggests the existence of an ambiguous authorial power. Like Lamont, Sorrentino flickers between absence and presence, transgressing ontological boundaries as illustrated in the framing device of the parodic letters of rejection that precede the novel. Despite his efforts to efface himself from the book, Sorrentino remains in the background of his drama, a silent stage manager to its chaotic scenes.

Echoing Barthes' conclusion that writing represents that "neuter, that composite, that obliquity into which our subject flees" (55-56), Mulligan Stew depicts, through Lamont's loss of identity, the erasure of the author. Jettisoning romantic notions concerning the writer as the sole source of a work of art, Sorrentino shares Barthes' belief

that in literature it is language that speaks, not the author. Acknowledging that it is a "linguistic truth . . . that content . . . is determined by form" (EM 3), Sorrentino nevertheless ascribes a level of autonomy to those writers aware of language's capacity to obscure reality. Circulating freely in the prison-house of language, he seeks to undermine its foundations by upsetting its order of meanings. This subversive impulse is embodied in Mulligan Stew which functions as a linguistic labyrinth to entrap readers and force them to question their reality. Severing Ariadne's thread, Sorrentino leaves those who confront his text to discover a means of escape or to languish, like Lamont, in a state of imaginative entropy.

Frustrating interpretation, Mulligan Stew does not reveal a single "theological" meaning but offers a multitude of alternatives and traps. Superficially, the novel parallels Barthes' definition of a literary work as a

. . . multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture. . . . [T]he writer can only imitate an ever anterior, never original gesture; his sole power is to mingle writings, to counter some by others. . . . [I]f he seeks to express himself . . . he knows that the interior "thing" he claims to "translate" is itself no more than a ready-made lexicon, whose words can be explained only through other words. . . . (57-58)

Aware of these linguistic and ideological limitations, Sorrentino does not feel constrained but embraces the possibilities they embody. In his essay, "Ross Macdonald: Some Remarks on the Limitations of Form," he refers to Victor Shklovsky's "Art as Technique" to explain how a writer can "reveal 'new techniques' . . . [while working in the] highly artificial and difficult form" (SS 224) of the crime novel. Shklovsky concludes that the "more you understand an age, the more convinced you become that the images a given poet used and which you thought were his own were taken almost unchanged from another poet" (SS 224). Like Flann O'Brien, who humorously believes the novel should be a work of reference, Sorrentino shares the notion that the "entire corpus of existing

literature should be regarded as a limbo" (25) from which to acquire characters, plots and ideas. Consequently, Mulligan Stew embodies an intricate weave of discourses self-consciously constructed to frustrate interpretation. Offering few reference points to determine meaning, the novel constitutes a game of possibilities whose object remains the liberation of the maker and the reader of fictions.

Breaking from the tyranny of discourses, Sorrentino believes a writer's language should come "out of the market [and] be poetic . . . contemporary [and] as specialized as [that] . . . of mathematics" (FM 10). To become "totally free in [their] work" (FM 10), artists must not become "trapped by other people's aesthetic desires" (FM 10). In response to Barthes, who contends that to write is to reach a point where "not 'I' but only language . . . performs" (56), Sorrentino accedes that this state is attained only by those who work to produce marketable products. Writing for a waiting audience in opposition to making what one pleases represents the crucial difference between maintaining a modicum of freedom and the erasure of personality. Though sharing Barthes' assertion that the "author is a modern character" (55), Sorrentino differs on what role this individual plays. Countering the conception of writers as functions, he perceives them as capable of utilizing language as a tool to unmask the structures that lead to subjectivity. The artist must become a maker of artifacts, not simply a transmittor of discourses.

Like Barthes, Foucault believes that the point of writing is to create a "space into which the writing subject constantly disappears" (102). He perceives the traditional conception of the author as an ideological product, one that remains responsible for impeding the "free circulation . . . manipulation . . . composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction" (119). Consequently, he wants to redefine the critical agenda in order to end those analyses of literary works solely concerned with determining

"[w]ho really spoke" (119). What becomes necessary to ask, he proposes, are questions concerning the "modes of existence of [a] discourse" (120). For example,

. . . Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? (120)

Sharing this impulse, Sorrentino mixes and parodies numerous discourses. Nevertheless, his ironic portrayal of Lamont's fall from a god-like creator to a disseminator of signs is underscored by an ambivalence in accepting the complete erasure of the artist from the production of a literary work. For Sorrentino, Barthes' and Foucault's theories do not define the sole function of a writer in contemporary society but help delineate its ontological status. Precariously balanced between a realm of possibilities and one of estrangement, the artist remains torn between contradictory worlds.

Brian McHale describes this paradoxical state of the postmodern artist who seems aware of being a "function [yet] chooses to behave, if only sporadically, like a subject, a presence" (201). Concluding that writers can move beyond acting solely as linguistic and discursive performers, he proposes that they can become "tool[s] for exploration and exploitation of ontology" (202). McHale believes that the writer functions upon two theoretically distinct levels of ontological structure; these are

. . . the vehicle of autobiographical fact within the project fictional world; and as the maker of that world, visibly occupying an ontological level superior to it. . . . (202)

In this context, Lamont's desire for the perfect "marriage of fact and imagination" (MS 386) ironically addresses the problematic status of the writer. Similarly, the insertion of parodies of Sorrentino's name and works--"Imaginary Jollities of Factual W' rks by Gilberto Soteroni" (MS 32), "Plagiarism in Gilberto D. Ricardo's Tinta Fabricada by Laszlo Syntax" (MS 33) or McCoy's denigration of the latest "Soterroni novel, Fake Skrip" (MS 41)--compounds the ontological confusion. As both maker of fictional

worlds and part of a greater discursive context, Sorrentino wavers between antithetical universes. Halpin's assertion, "I must be turning into a novelist" (MS 152), along with his acknowledgement that he is "not real" (MS 152), exacerbates the difficulty of determining what is reality in a metafictional universe. For Sorrentino, this indeterminate state represents the condition of the postmodern artist.

The discovery and incorporation into the text of various books and periodicals found in the cabin by Beaumont and Halpin ironically reflect the way Foucault perceives the production of a work of fiction unfolding. The confession that they have "no idea what [the presence of these materials] means" (MS 35) underscores this conception of a literary text as the nexus of an infinite number of linguistic strands. Yet the final cryptic list, possessing a unitary and hermetic quality and ending with the writer's best wishes and the date of the book's completion, destabilizes this notion. Similarly, the ambiguous reference to Corriendo and Delamode as "objective correlatives to Lamont's growing and uncontrollable lust" (MS 126), that appears as a seemingly careless slip by the producer of the text, alludes to the existence of a higher ontological level. Ultimately responsible, the "character named 'Sorrentino' who created Lamont" (FM 10) manipulates the language and images in a manner that indicates all materials are not contingent but self-consciously selected. The strategic use of singular images and phrases, such as the "man with no buttocks," originating in The Sky Changes, a "whale with a thumb," the euphemism of "prong" for penis or the word "anent," utilized exclusively by Lamont except for once by Barnett Tete, denotes a meticulous ordering of the language of the text. Shifting the puzzle pieces of his metafictional universe, Sorrentino asserts, through elaborate linguistic games, a level of autonomy unrealized by Barthes and Foucault.

In exploring the role of the writer in a historically determined discursive environment, Sorrentino is led to confront questions of imaginative freedom. In addressing similar concerns, Linda Hutcheon concludes that the lesson of postmodern art

is that "we must not limit our investigations to just readers and texts; the processes of production too cannot be ignored" (80). Especially with "ironic . . . texts where the receiver does indeed posit or infer an intent to be ironic" (80), the role of the producer must be considered. Faced with the ambiguity surrounding the function of the artist, Sorrentino elaborates an ontology of writing in Mulligan Stew that juxtaposes the freedom to invent fictions against the confusion and alienation experienced in quotidian reality. In art can be discovered a measure of autonomy negated by the established order of meanings. Up-ending the accepted dictum that "'form is never more than an extension of content'" (SS 200), Sorrentino affirms the theories of the formalist critic Victor Shklovsky who insists that the ideas of a literary work do not "constitute its content but rather its materials in their combinations and interrelations with other aspects of the work . . . create its form" (SS 201). Sorrentino's methods parallel the techniques of "defamiliarization" expounded by Shklovsky in "Art is Technique." Art's purpose remains to remove "objects from the automatism of perception" (Shklovsky 21); it must

. . . impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (20)

Through "defamiliarization," the ordinary experiences of reality are restructured to allow one to see the "world instead of humbly recognizing it: or at least . . . [to design] a 'new' reality to replace the (no less fictional) one" (Hawkes 62) that has been inherited. The ambiguous aphorism, "On the sheer and trembling edge of meaninglessness phenomena you find Art" (MS 246), echoes this aesthetic and foregrounds Sorrentino's ontology of writing. Mulligan Stew manifests the postmodern impulse to question the meanings given to the real within a signifying system. Through the creation of a world that is self-consciously an illusion, he exposes the ease whereby meanings change and

can be manipulated. Demonstrating the possibility for a multiplicity of worlds, Sorrentino subverts the authority of the reality all share.

Lamont's efforts to write the pre-eminent avant-garde novel and become a successful writer illustrate the difference between an aesthetic of "defamiliarization" and those called into question by metafiction. His fumbling attempts are structured to invite a "rethinking of the entire notion of reference that makes problematic the traditional realist transparency" (Hutcheon 229). In the trajectory of his mental collapse, Lamont's perceptions evolve from a desire to change the world through art to an obsession with making a sellable product. Trying to "'cash in' . . . on the 'Jewish novel'" (MS 22) or including the "obligatory sex scene that has become a necessity in all modern novels" (MS 331), his work deteriorates into "kitsch, art [that] panders to the confusion that reigns in the 'taste' of the patrons" (Lyotard 76). Lamont's life parallels that of the protagonist in his story, "Belated Adjuster," whose "cynical, yet romantic ideals are meaningless in a world of 'polite' criminality and evil which he faces as his career fades" (MS 65). Described as a "Beckettian attempt to come to grips with the void" (MS 65), he fails to adapt to an altered paradigm of existence where life and culture have become completely determined by commodity exchanges. Having grown up in post-war America, he remains ill-equipped, with his modernist aesthetics and romantic illusions, for the postmodern world. Writing, for Lamont, represents an opportunity

. . . [to] recast [his] chaotic life as purest art. . . . That is what [his] life and work "mean." [He] would like to achieve full expression of [his] inchoate and sinewy self. [Certain that in] one's self, in the dark shed of the untamable mind lies the truth. . . . (MS 47)

Believing that he represents the sole source of his art, that he is an "author," leaves him vulnerable in a culture where all values have become relative and personality represents a

linguistic artifice. Despite his clumsy efforts at adapting, Lamont has become an anachronism in the postmodern world.

Balanced on the edge of meaninglessness, Lamont eventually falls into the absurd realm where social relations are characterized by alienation. Functioning as another mise-en-abyme, The Red Swan embodies a "roster of oneiric possibilities" (MS 255) that reflect the realm in which Lamont becomes subsumed. Unlike Halpin, who claims that the best disguise in an inimical environment is an expression of "oneiric bewilderment" (MS 17), Lamont becomes truly engrossed in the debilitating "lethean exercise[s]" (MS 60) his culture induces. The disintegration of his sanity parallels his growing obsession with sexual fulfillment, a compulsion manifested in the chapter "A Bag of the Blues," where Halpin, "terrified and happy" (MS 288), remains lost in a dream world of blinding desire for Daisy. Similarly, Lamont's illusory quest for a perfect love is reflected in Halpin's somnabulistic search for a tiny gold heart in the "whiteness . . . purity [and] terrifying spotlessness" (MS 413) of a box of confectioner's sugar, a nostalgic allusion to a time when life and love were simpler. Voicing Lamont's ontological confusion are Halpin's questions, "Is life a 'dream'? Am I 'mad'?" (MS 413). Ill-equipped for a new world, Lamont eventually succumbs to its manifold temptations and becomes morally and psychologically shattered.

Warning of the dangers of this cultural wasteland, the advertisement in "WRITER'S HELPER MONTHLY" concludes: "We think, we reason . . . but our imaginations are asleep" (MS 19). In this realm, imaginative vision has become an impediment and material success the measure of health and vitality. Acting as a shaman in this perverted world, Mrs. Ashby, "Healer, Reader, Advisor, Seeress, Prophet" (MS 62), personifies its corruption. Promising to cure the "Sickness That's In You" (MS 63), her advertisement appeals to those crushed by the "tyranny of reality"; she extends an invitation to the Eden in America's imagination where all can find comfort and

prosperity. Crediting her with awarding them health, happiness and success in business, the letters of response reflect the desperate desire of her audience for order and security. Cured of material concerns, they are infected with a more ruinous illness that destroys their inner beings. In this morally bankrupt realm, living the American dream entails the eradication of the imagination.

In opposition to this process Sorrentino elaborates an ontology of writing that foregrounds the tension between the deadening of sensibilities in a world of illusions and their heightening through artistic activity. Distinguishing these contradictory experiences are the languages of the poet and the "technocrat" (MS 364). Vacillating between the two, Lamont comes under increasing pressure to adopt the diction and syntax of his environment. Solely concerned with profits and efficiency, his society shares qualities described by Jean-Francois Lyotard in his report, The Postmodern Condition. Lyotard posits that Western culture has become dominated by technocracies that have redefined the norms of life in order to enhance their "system's competence for power" (64). Believing contemporary knowledge to be governed by a "principle of optimal performance" (44), he concludes that the postmodern social subject has become ensnared in a labyrinth of language games determined by changing technological innovations. With the collapse of unifying meta-narratives, the liberation of humanity and the speculative unity of all knowledge, these games no longer pertain to the "true, the just, or the beautiful . . . but to efficiency" (44). Wishing to transform life into the "sheerest beauty" (MS 47) through art, Lamont is lost in this radically altered paradigm of existence modeled on the logic of the machine.

Sorrentino believes that the effects of this environment are disastrous. Overwhelmed by streams of "hard information" (SS 32), Americans "know everything and nothing" (SS 32) and possess no way to counter the meaningless flood. Writing of Williams' fiction, Sorrentino comments that the

... waste ... violence and loss in American life [are] partially accounted for by the fact that we cannot assuage our miseries ... [and] look for relief in the products of the imagination, but we have no heroes except the romantic losers. (SS 32)

Addressing this problem in The Great American Novel, Williams contrasted his nation's industrial and technological development with its limited imaginative growth; a sterile environment had produced a stunted literature. He dismisses the representative American novel as a poor commercial product that is ordinarily structured upon a "dozen good smelly names and ... some reason for murder" (159). Elaborating upon this format in Mulligan Stew, Lamont's "'absurdist' mystery story" (MS 28) inadvertently reveals that knowledge in contemporary society does not concern questions of morality or identity but epistemological problems. The "modern detective story" (MS 90), that epitomizes for Williams the static quality of his native literature, becomes for Sorrentino a "vehicle for [a] serious" (MS 90) investigation of ontological questions.

Subverting modernism's "epistemological genre par excellence" (McHale 9) in the detective story, Sorrentino parodies themes related to the "accessibility ... circulation ... [and] limits of knowledge" (9). Like the "magic-lantern show" (MS 142) of Plato's cave, "truth" remains a matter of perspective. Halpin's insistence that the police's "ceaseless and unimaginative probings for ... the 'facts' could [not] possibly explain what [had] happened" (MS 13) suggests the inadequacy of the modernist's aesthetic in dealing with an indeterminate reality. His "[o]dd and ironic epiphany" (MS 9) underscores the epistemological failure in Mulligan Stew: he does not experience a "frozen moment of rare access into the heart of things [or] an unexpected synthesis" (Saltzmann 499), only confusion before a "welter of unconnected things" (MS 9). All of Halpin's inquiries end in bewilderment, leaving him with the apprehension that he is a fragment of an incomplete jigsaw puzzle. Demonstrating that "revelations are primarily linguistic rather than spiritual [and that words] do not commemorate the experience [but]

constitute it" (Saltzmann 499), Sorrentino calls into question notions of a stable, unified reality. Foregrounding ontological questions, the detective story becomes a means for investigating the mysteries of a linguistically constructed reality that remains in a state of flux, promising truth to anxious searchers but only providing a succession of chimeras to pursue.

To counter the flood of meaningless prose used to disseminate information, Sorrentino utilizes the "corrosive language" (MS 261) of poetry, an agent for destroying and refining as suggested by the title of his volume, Corrosive Sublimate. Shaping his materials into "sculptures arsenically gay" (MS 260), he works to subvert the established order of meanings. Demonstrating this impulse, Lamont, twice nominated for an award for the "poetic quality inherent in [his] fiction" (MS 46), concentrates on the "'noun phrase'" (MS 66) to reveal his protagonist's "fluctuations as a persona [thereby calling up for] the reader his own nostalgias, surges of despair [and] wild joyous memories" (MS 66). In this manner Sorrentino's aesthetic parallels Bakhtin's belief that the "poet is his language . . . [for] he makes use of each form . . . word [and] expression according to its unmediated power to assign meaning . . . as a . . . direct expression of his own intention" (285). Countering this, the sterile language of technocrats seeks to smooth over contradictions and present a stable and unified reality. This linguistic conflict is manifested in the opposition of the fallacious "poetically written" (MS 240) books like Cellophane Soldier to the "poetic novel[s]" (MS 432), Gypsy Midnight and Beware! Harlequins!. The latter echoes the warning issued in Splendide-Hôtel to discriminate between what is authentic and false. Describing the transformation undergone by a man who has become a politician, the narrator counsels that though he seems

. . . completely whole . . . he has become a sham and a fake. By some mysterious law . . . he was a more legitimate figure when he

lived a manipulated life. As soon as he became real he became fake.
Beware him. (SH 32)

Excluded from the "real," Lamont's collapse signals a similar metamorphosis towards a state of completion. Yet, in Mulligan Stew, where personality consists of a composite of conflicting impulses, this promise of wholeness entails a debilitating exchange. To partake of the stable reality managed by the technocrats demands the annihilation of identity.

Like Halpin, who feels himself to be a "harlequin, a smile on [his] lips and [his] heart broken beneath" (MS 408), Lamont becomes a fake once he has lost his remaining freedom. Investing in beliefs antithetical to his own, he shares the condition of the narrator of Dark Gemini, who seems fine but has suffered irreparable damage. This man acts like an automaton, his

. . . brain, reeling in the lists of memory, has no control over [his] technician's body, which goes on and on and on with the sneaky skills it has mastered [in] . . . snooping and rummaging through the sad, soiled laundry of humanity . . . (MS 418)

Trying to make "order out of [the] carnival of death" (MS 419) that constitutes history, the protagonist is confronted with a paradoxical situation. Incapable of accepting that "all of human endeavour [can be] . . . filed away as merely corollary data on the planar values of a simple Moebius Strip" (MS 416), he continues to search for a design in the disorder of his world. Paralleling its use as a framing device by John Barth in Lost in the Funhouse, where it is demonstrated on a slip of paper made to be attached end to end to form the endlessly repeated phrase, "Once upon a time there was a story that began," the Moebius strip represents the "metaphorical key" (MS 411) to the apparent chaos of Sorrentino's text. Originating with Einstein's "recognition that space and time are one dimension" (Nadeau 84), this model of the universe as a seamless continuum suggests that humanity has "perpetually been engaged in . . . the [creation] of paradigms that

condition if not determine [their] view of reality" (84). No position exists outside of the twisted spiral to ascertain what is true or false, fiction or reality.

Lamont's repeated reference to his work in progress as "MS," an abbreviation that may signify manuscript, Mulligan Stew or Moebius strip, reflects a complex web of intertwined narratives whose origins are impossible to distinguish and suggests the potential for an infinite proliferation of stories in a universe governed by the laws of the new physics. Consequently, a shift of perspective from epistemological to ontological concerns is necessitated, as proposed by the character in Sorrentino's novel, Odd Number. This man compares the line of questioning his interrogators pursue to a Moebius strip and concludes: "maybe if you asked different questions we'd get to the bottom" (ON 49) of the mystery. Yet, significantly, this option is negated in Dark Gemini with the murder of the doctor. Dismissed as a "charlatan from the Red Swan Hotel" (MS 417), he personifies the paradigm shift resulting from Einstein's theories that explode the cosmology constructed upon the Newtonian model that presupposes the "existence of transcendent absolutes and the ability of mind or reason to know its essences" (Nadeau 78). Burdened with this interpretation of reality, the protagonist of Dark Gemini remains blind to the inconsequentiality of his quest. Incapable of accepting indeterminacy, he is condemned to search for clues to a teleological design in the flux that surrounds him.

Acknowledging the assumptions of the new physics, that "all human constructs are subjectively based events" (77), Sorrentino facetiously proposes to transform the "absolute falsehood of artifice . . . by magic into truth" (MS 137). Art becomes an opening, a mode of perception to deal with a universe ruled by chance, where the imagination, as the maker and transformer of the reality of everyday experience, is celebrated for its inventive potential. This position represents the contradiction Gerald

Graff, in Literature Against Itself, believes rests at the core of the anti-realist's enterprise.

He argues that in order to

... call attention to the radical unintelligibility of our unreal reality
is to propose a kind of understanding of the way things really are,
and to propose it as an objective hypothesis, and not as myth. (11)

Describing a world in which the criteria for objectivity have themselves become equivocal, Sorrentino does not seek to provide answers to a paradoxical condition but produces a "book of questions" (MS 255). Mulligan Stew manifests what Linda Hutcheon describes as a need to problematize the real in order to "force a rethinking of the entire notion of reference" (229) that underpins the realist's notion of transparency. Consequently, the narrative of Lamont's disintegration does not unfold logically but explodes into a multiplicity of contradictory shards.

Unlike mimesis, that seeks to represent a permanent reality, Sorrentino's text reflects a world where what seems

uncontrolled chaos atop chaos . . . is revealed . . . to be the continual stitching and unstitching of almost instantaneous metamorphoses.
Things are not only what they seem to be, they never were. (MS 256)

Paralleling the "Theatre of the Absurd" (75) created by a family in John Barth's Letters, whose lives are characterized by a "funhouse quality . . . wherein no-one and nothing was what it seemed" (75), Mulligan Stew embodies a dynamic realm where the lack of constancy is not an impediment but a liberating factor. This awareness of the absurdity of the human condition does not lead to a nihilistic surrender to events but a resolve to seize the possibilities for freedom resultant from the refutation of traditional conceptions of identity and reality. Neglecting this opportunity, Lamont fails to adapt to his inimical environment and succumbs to the entropic forces that surround him.

A world turned upside down, Mulligan Stew humorously embodies a realm Kafka's "whimsical Gregor Samsa would feel at home in" (MS 256). Having rejected the

deadening routine and order of everyday existence, Samsa's transformation into an insect in "The Metamorphosis" epitomizes the dehumanization the modernists identified with urbanization and industrialization. Ironically, Lamont's transformation from a state of "living like bugs" (MS 200) reverses this process. Drawn out of the alienated condition Kafka believed represented the reality of the contemporary individual, he is enfolded in the illusory world of the "real" that constitutes a more profound state of estrangement. Personifying a model for enhanced awareness, Kafka's anti-hero represents an aberration in a society characterized by uniformity, conformity and stasis. Leaving his isolated condition of paradoxical freedom, Lamont's personality mutates into a more grotesque and sinister form.

The parallel drawn between Samsa's and Lamont's existential conditions, both isolated in a highly rationalized and bureaucratized mass society, underscores the displacement of the autonomous, self-constituting subject of modernist literature undertaken in Mulligan Stew. Up-ending traditional conceptions of alienation and the self, Sorrentino foregrounds the transformations impressed upon identity in postmodern culture. Parodying Samuel Beckett's Molloy in "O'Mara of No Fixed Abode," he juxtaposes the "irrational clashes and antitheses that make humankind so inexplicable" (MS 65), thereby frustrating interpretations that seek a logical explanation of a character's motivations and actions. By arraying "jarring qualities one against the other" (MS 66) in two lengthy and contradictory lists, he undermines the idea of a "unitary psychology of the self" (Tuttleton 3) central to modernism's representation of the

character-in-the-process-of-change [that is] . . . understood to manifest the freedom of . . . will actualizing the potentialities of that core of stable identity. (6)

This model, with its promise of an authentic self, represents an unattainable ideal for Lamont. Succumbing to disparate pressures, his personality fragments into a composite

of linguistic strands, a process paralleled in Halpin's disintegration in the chapter "Spilt Ink." Feeling words settling "around [his] neck like a noose" (MS 143), he becomes aware of his lack of possibilities and the inadequacy of language to explain his condition. Foregrounding his incapacity to address or answer ontological questions, he exclaims in bewilderment: "I am lost here. Where did I come from? Where did we all come from?" (MS 143). Confronting a similar predicament, Beckett's Molloy determines that the only possible response to the enigma of existence is "confabulation" (20): that is, to be "content with paradigms" (172) and remain aware of the artificiality of the stories that constitute history. Unable to share this resolve in the face of meaninglessness, Halpin retreats to the familiar line of thinking in seeking truth and meaning, and trying to "objectify [his] horror . . . guilt . . . unrequited love [and] wretched botch and stain of a life" (MS 143).

Mirroring the circumstances of Lamont's catabasis, Halpin's resolve that it is better to "keep [his] mind off speculation" (MS 142) severs him from the possibilities confabulation possesses. Ironically, the ridiculous combinations of events he envisions the police experiencing in "Spilt Ink" represents a tentative exploration of the open-ended system found in Jorge Lois Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths." This story describes an inchoate novel that replaces the traditional narrative form where

. . . each time a man is confronted with several alternatives he chooses one and eliminates the other . . . [with the possibility of choosing] simultaneously--all of them . . . [creating] in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which . . . proliferate and fork. . . (26)

Manifesting metafiction's quality of being a "chaotic system created by [a] text's limitless potential for interpretation" (Stoicheff 88), Mulligan Stew, like Borges' story, subverts traditional forms by providing a "narrative in reverse . . . [that does not] unfold specifics [but] suggest[s] alternatives to unspecifics" (MS 255). Fiction becomes an inventive and interrogative process: making, destroying and rebuilding worlds becomes an effort never

to stop rethinking the provisional nature of reality. The "vertiginous mise-en-abyme of metafiction [which is sustained] . . . by its perpetual dialectic of interpretation and deconstruction" (Stoicheff 90) does not offer knowledge but a multitude of meanings and choices. Seeking revelation and closure, Lamont, like his character Halpin, rejects this flowering of potentialities for the stability traditional narrative provides. Desperately wanting to know and gain control of his fate, Lamont rejects speculation and confabulation for the hope of attaining a certainty.

Choosing not to violate what Brian McHale defines as the system of "linear sequentiality" (108) in order to look for alternatives beyond the rigid polarity of truth and falsity, Lamont, like Halpin, becomes resigned to an order of thinking antithetical to the one that underlines metafiction. Though a poor and derivative writer, Lamont's psychological collapse represents the condition of profound shock upon discovering himself in an alien and threatening reality. Experiencing the sensation of becoming ensnared in "[w]ebs [and] [m]azes" (MS 253), he feels compelled to "finish [his] book--the only hold on reality . . . [t]heir reality, at any rate" (MS 253), an anxiety that emphasizes the disparity between the antithetical realms of the personal and the social. Beaumont's apprehension that Lamont has lost control of his book and its language, which he considers an indication of insanity, underscores that the boundary defined in psychological terms ultimately refers to opposing linguistic realities. For Lamont, the spiral into madness becomes a metamorphosis from his state as a solitary artist to a disseminator of babble.

Sharing the fate of the protagonist in The Ample Heart of Werther, who is driven to the "edge of insanity" (MS 270) by corporate America, Lamont is caught in the vacuum created by advanced capitalism. He becomes a subject in what Lyotard describes as the "vanguard machine dragging humanity after it, dehumanizing it in order to rehumanize it at a different level of normative capacity" (63). Overwhelmed by the

prospect of the collapse of his world, Lamont acknowledges that in his work it is no longer his "self" that speaks but madness, as he has lost his grip on "reality, or perhaps it is unreality" (MS 354). This ontological bewilderment is a result of capitalism's capacity to "derealize" reality: that is, it eliminates familiar objects, social roles and institutions. Reducing all people to the one-dimensional cardboard figures that populate Lamont's fiction, it redefines his personality in terms of function. Consequently, in ceasing to be a creator of alternate worlds, Lamont becomes part of the apparatus that demands the suspension of "artistic experimentation [while issuing] . . . a call for order . . . unity . . . identity [and] security" (Lyotard 73). Under the pretense of offering stability in a chaotic world, this system destroys all social and cultural bonds, replacing them with a facade of shifting images and a web of economic ties.

Beginning to feel like a "character himself" (MS 257), Lamont is drawn to perform in the script delineated in "The Masque of Fungo." Professing to have "given-up 'fictioneering' [which] seems . . . irrelevant in today's world" (MS 307), he is gradually pushed off the stage of avant-garde art to enact his role in the theatre of American consciousness. The "wonder is that any artist stays sane" (SH 10), the narrator of Splendide-Hôtel concludes, contemplating the condition of writers in contemporary society. Comparing reality to the "camouflaged scaffolding of metaphor" (SH 19) that constitutes an actor's part in a film, he concludes:

It is incredible to me that one can devote an entire life to such a precise recording of the unreal. Perhaps it is what keeps actors sane. For I submit that all actors are totally sane, their sometimes bizarre facade is merely another developing role. For myself, when the real is insupportable, I act fairly well. . . . I rarely slip into aberrant behaviour--yet I think myself to be crazy. (SH 19)

In this realm madness and sanity have become inverted. Sharing the ontological condition of the actors, Lamont becomes incapable of discerning between the real and the

unreal. Subsequently, he begins to covet the privileges Trellis possesses. Tempted by the promise of "name fame and history making status" (MS 149) in the business proposal by Beshary, Lamont's descent towards insanity accelerates. Discovering that he is "willing to give up [his] ink-stained life for one of interesting business ventures" (MS 405), he feels the "slow shuffle off the stage" (MS 149) of artistic fulfillment towards more glamorous, yet sinister rewards.

Conscious of a "tightening net of supernatural inevitability" (MS 355) settling about him, Lamont becomes apprehensive that he shares the ontological status of his characters who suffer under his tyrannical rule. Convinced that he has become a pawn in an indeterminate game, he ascribes his failure to a conspiracy. Engineered by the "cynical machinery" (MS 252) of the publishing industry, he is a victim of a process Lyotard describes as the "reign of terror" dominating contemporary science. By terror is meant

. . . the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game. . . . He is silenced or consents, not because he has been refuted, but because his ability has been threatened. (64)

Acknowledging that the only way an author can become rich and successful is to "sell himself and his work" (MS 403), Lamont concedes that to remain an active participant in the literary world demands a radical change. Coerced into a different role, he joins the cast of the tragicomedy that constitutes his new reality.

Suffused by a "paranoiac wind" (MS 13), Lamont's novel reflects the pressures exerted upon an individual in a culture whose maxim has become: "'Adapt' your aspirations to our ends--or else" (Lyotard 64). The ridiculous fate of Beaumont, "machinated 'gainst by all the hellish forces the two hags [could] alchemize t' destroy his soul" (MS 398), addresses Lamont's concern for the plot he believes is directed against his "well being [and] even sanity" (MS 400). These fears echo Richard Hofstadter's

observation in The Paranoid Style in American Politics, quoted by John Kuehl in the book, Alternate Worlds, that the exponents of paranoia

... regard a "vast" ... conspiracy as the motive force in historical events. History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power. ... The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of this conspiracy in apocalyptic terms--he traffics in the birth and death of whole world. ... (232)

Perceiving himself within this context, Lamont is balanced on the border of antithetical realities. He remains vacillating on the borderline between the contradictory ontological realms of the real and unreal created by advanced capitalism. His confusion concerning why he poses "such a threat" (MS 400) and attracts such violent attention can be explained by Lyotard's observations of the reaction directed against what was labelled the avant-garde's "reign of terror in the use of language" (71). To end this cynical eclecticism of experimentation, a call was issued for the restoration of a "condition for ... fruitful exchange ... [that could be achieved] by imposing on ... intellectuals a common way of speaking" (71). In this context Lamont's poor attempts at "fabulation," that indirectly ascribes to the interpretation of the "world as a fabrication of competing semiotic systems which never correspond to material conditions" (Waugh 19), becomes a target for normalization. Metafiction's conception of reality as constituted of an infinite number of realms of experience comes into conflict with advanced capitalism, which professes to provide a stable reality. At the nexus of this confrontation, Lamont experiences an apocalyptic transformation. With his descent into insanity comes the end of the infinite possibilities of "fabulation" for a single deadening reality.

In Mulligan Stew, madness signifies both a psychological and ontological condition. The pressures to transform his "basically schizoid personality in a constructive, money-oriented way" (MS 405-06) lead to Lamont's catabasis and the

collapse of his world. Like Trellis, who was taken over by "some sinister 'other' [who then pursued] . . . his own base ends" (MS 224), Lamont's imagination has been destroyed and he has become a writer of commercial fiction. Paralleling the murder of Doctor Moebius in Dark Gemini, the death of the writer, which enables the birth of the entrepreneur in Lamont, embodies an inversion of the traditional doppelgänger tale where the "better self wins out over the monstrous self" (Tuttleton 10). Having become nothing more than a composite of fragments of speech and literary works by the final chapter of his book, Lamont's fate signals the death of the author in Mulligan Stew. But with his demise, Sorrentino reasserts his ambiguous "presence" with the humorous and destabilizing catalogue of acknowledgements that end the text. Though Lamont has dissolved into language, Sorrentino demonstrates that possibilities for freedom exist. Subverting traditional notions of closure, the final cryptic list provokes the understanding that though the prison-house of language seems indomitable, there remains a vast space for exploration and experimentation within its treacherous confines.

Chapter Five

An Area of Darkness

It seems quite clear to me that this book will establish me as the most interesting spokesman for the American avant-garde, and for Sur-fiction, as well as Ur-fiction, and Post-modern fiction to boot. (MS 358)

If there is tragedy, it is the tragedy of trying to live as a human being in this kind of milieu, which is not particularly degrading, but which is deadening. (RC 13)

Ironically succeeding where his protagonist Lamont fails, Sorrentino produces in Mulligan Stew what many critics have acclaimed as an extraordinary achievement. John O'Brien contends that in its capacity to challenge literary and imaginative boundaries, it "will change the way we read, and no doubt the way we write" (80). Despite the attention the novel has attracted, Sorrentino has resisted all efforts to label or categorize his work. Preferring to define himself simply as an artist and not as a spokesman, he seems solely interested in working with language to produce things that he claims are beautiful and permanent. Unlike the perverse caricature of himself, whose voice dominates Mulligan Stew, Sorrentino remains unconcerned with the chimeras of success but consistent in his attention to integrity in his art.

Experimenting with a vast range of forms and styles, Sorrentino insists that his books are not directed at a specific audience but are made for his own pleasure. Regardless of their intimidating and abstract quality, he believes they are "'accessible,'" even though [he says] it is proven over and over to [him] that this is apparently not the case" (EM 10). Using this paradox to foreground what he sees as the pernicious influence of mimetic literature, he ironically maintains that his real audience must be "ill-

educated or uneducated" (PW 70). This stance is designed to counter those critics of anti-realist fiction who claim that the attempts by writers, like Sorrentino,

. . . [to] overturn consciousness of the objective world, ordinary language, and the canons of representational realism will inevitably lead to their social marginality [and] will insure their own unimportance to readers. (Kuehl 311)

This contest with the critical academic establishment is at the heart of Sorrentino's work. Subverting the foundations of realism, he seems comfortable on the margins of the literary world. What is at stake, he believes, are not sterile principles and forms but the very future of fiction itself, which he describes as an "art which more and more finds its audience narrowed" (RC 22). Rejecting the idea that fiction has destroyed its own audience, he attributes the decline to a general passivity and a lack of both curiosity and literary intelligence in contemporary culture. Turning the mirror on his critics, Sorrentino reveals a literary establishment seemingly unconscious of the problems or the potential of fiction.

Emphasizing that fiction is a realm of invention and experimentation, Sorrentino considers himself a follower of the tradition of Laurence Sterne, Rabelais and Fielding. This lineage, he insists, was interested in "absolute form" (RC 6); and anything that looked like digression, carelessness or lack of cohesion was not that at all. Consequently, he claims his novels are "unintelligible unless . . . seen as dependent on the work of Joyce and Flann O'Brien" (SS 263), and that Mulligan Stew can only be understood when seen as the endpoint "in the sequence of forms known as the modernist movement" (SS 263). For Sorrentino, the continuity running from Sterne to Joyce, and between modernism and postmodernism, rests in the maxim "form invents content" (PW 70).

Concerned with how to succeed Kafka, Beckett and Joyce, Sorrentino shares a similar position to John Barth in contemporary fiction. Both profess a disdain for all the writers who write "as if the twentieth century didn't exist . . . [or] as if the great writers of

the last sixty years . . . hadn't existed" (Barth 1975 22). Working in an era that he claims has announced the death of the novel, Barth continues to concentrate on the techniques employed in writing fiction, finding, in experiment, a means of rejuvenating what is considered a moribund form. In describing the apocalyptic aura that surrounds the novel, Barth compares the predicament of the contemporary writer to Theseus in the labyrinth. In this area of darkness, he contends, there are two choices for the artist: "defeat and death, or victory and freedom" (32). To pass through this perilous maze necessitates embracing the potential found within literary form. Working to explore the imaginative possibilities of fiction and to reveal the fictitious aspect of his own world, Sorrentino is one of those who have negotiated the labyrinth. Through technique and stylistic experimentation, he has contributed to a literature of replenishment.

Writing from this position, Sorrentino has been condemned, along with other anti-realists, of "aesthetic hedonism" (Kuehl 310) and of playing literary games at the expense of critical social issues. Acknowledging the creative excellence of these writers, their critics nevertheless condemn what they perceive as a strain of philosophical nihilism. Placed within this context, Sorrentino is regarded as a descendant of the line commencing with

. . . Nietzsche [and running through to] Derrida, which subverts Western metaphysics, logic, causation, order, and authority, [and] errs when postulating a linguistic universe alone, a world merely of texts. (308)

Foregrounding contradictions and disparities in his world, Sorrentino shares the methods and ethical impulse of the deconstructionists. As Linda Hutcheon concludes, the anti-realists do not contribute to "the 'simulacration' process of mass culture . . . [but contest it] by problematizing the entire notion of the representation of reality" (223). Faced with destruction, Sorrentino has chosen to interrogate the processes that have neutralized reality in contemporary culture.

In this manner, John O'Brien contends Sorrentino's work began by "defining an epoch (America from the 1930s to the present), [and continued by] defining an art" (79). By using the language and the products of imagination of his milieu, Sorrentino addresses the origins of the pathology he claims has disabled his nation. As Robert Creeley observes, his work reflects a profound "moral disposition" (157), one that "markedly and persistently cares, and in that feeling makes language the instrument of response and judgement it must . . . be" (158). Negotiating the labyrinth Barth identified, Sorrentino moves to confront the area of darkness he finds corrupting the heart of America. For him, art can be a weapon for destruction, to dismantle illusions and myth, and an instrument of replenishment, a rejuvenating force capable of resuscitating a dulled and exhausted imagination. In this manner, Sorrentino is not evading the critical issues that face his culture but approaching these problems from an alternate direction, from the margins of the literary establishment. Addressing the destruction that surrounds him, he is, as Barth writes of the artist who is in touch with his times, "speaking eloquently and memorably of our still-human hearts and condition" (1975 22) in a voice that is both passionate and challenging:

To love is to go consistently into the dark, perhaps even whistling. All the songs, poems, and novels that the mind drags with it testify to the fact that others are there in the blackness as well: sighing, groaning, or as it may be, howling. Yet the recording of these testaments goes on. We will never be done with it. (SH 59)

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