

## **"Terribly Bookish": Mulligan Stew and the Comedy of Self-Reflexivity**

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Although there has been much commentary about the mode of recent American fiction most frequently called "metafiction," almost all criticism and scholarly research have focused on what are taken to be the "serious" implications of such fiction. "Disjunctions" of various sorts— aesthetic, epistemological, political—have been described and duly assigned their place among the similarly selfconscious practices characteristic of the broader construct of postmodernism. There may indeed be much truth in this line of inquiry (I pursued it in my own doctoral dissertation), but a central feature of much self reflexive fiction that has been habitually overlooked is its fundamentally comic outlook. Of course, "outlook" does not seem at first an appropriate term to use in describing a form as inward-looking as metafiction. Indeed, that metafiction directs much of its comic energy toward mocking the conventions of fiction itself will be a focal point of this essay, but I will also argue that the comedic treatment of the formal assumptions of literary fiction implies a broader comic attitude toward all structures of authority.

What distinguishes that claim from the dominant analyses of metafiction, I hope to show, is that it does not construe a comic treatment of authority, admittedly "subversive" in the most general sense, as serving any larger agenda beyond the impulse to mock, lampoon, and travesty established patterns of thought and behavior. Among such patterns would have to be included the very practice of critical analysis, which can only be seen as an attempt to impose a rhetorical authority over the objects of its scrutiny. Thus, my discussion of the comedy of metafiction will additionally suggest that at its most outrageously self reflexive this brand of postmodern fiction embodies what Bakhtin has identified as the carnivalesque aversion to all forms of "straightforward seriousness" (401). Not only does metafiction in this view deconstruct itself in ways consistent with Derrida's critique of the conventions of rhetorical mastery, but it does so in a spirit equally consistent with the tradition of comic derision, rooted in "popular laughter," which Bakhtin shows to be an important legacy in the development of literary fiction. In short, it is the process of comically subverting presumed norms—the most immediate effect of which should be simple laughter—that is most prominently on display in metafiction; any interpretation that attempts to attribute any more discursively focused subversive effects is in danger of being subject to the same comic deflation set in motion by this process in the first place.

To some degree it should not seem surprising that American self reflexive fiction of the 1960s and 1970s—which provided the source of most early discussions of metafiction—exhibits an iconoclastic, carnivalesque humor. A distinctive feature of much American fiction of that period is precisely its comic edge, from the explicitly labeled "black humor" of Joseph Heller or Kurt Vonnegut to the equally mordant and provocative, if less easily categorized, comedy of writers such as Stanley Elkin, John Hawkes, or Thomas Pynchon. Furthermore, the period itself was certainly nothing if not iconoclastic and contrarian, characterized as it was by various specific manifestations of "street theater" designed to mock authority and official discourse and

by a more generalized sense that inherited beliefs and assumptions were being challenged in the most uproarious ways. However, because of what has long been an almost reflexive critical dismissal of humor and comedy as "serious" modes, most criticism or scholarly work on writers like the ones mentioned focuses on issues deemed to be of sufficient weight to merit analysis. That situation helps to create the impression that comedy in this fiction is a secondary effect, just as the 1960s are usually remembered (by its critics as well as its champions) more as a time of serious political and cultural change than one of heightened appreciation of the value of laughter. American metafiction, in the work of Robert Coover or John Barth, should seem a natural extension of the literary and cultural energies of the late 1960s and early 1970s, implicitly asking why the corrosive laughter being directed at other institutions and conventions should not additionally be directed at the governing conventions of fiction as well.

Perhaps the most provocative example of the uninhibited comedy of metafiction is to be found in the fiction of Gilbert Sorrentino, a writer somewhat less celebrated than Barth or Coover, who has been attacked precisely because of his purported failure to observe the unwritten rules governing the "proper" role of comedy in literature. Sorrentino is probably the most programmatically selfreflexive of contemporary American writers, as each of his novels (unlike Barth and Coover, Sorrentino focuses almost exclusively on the longer form) from *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (1971) to *Mulligan Stew* (1978) and beyond manifests an insistent, clearly intentional effort to "bare the device." Although *Imaginative Qualities*, a novel in which the "author" lets his readers in on the creation of his characters and their stories, remains a prototypical metafiction of the same period as Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* and Coover's *Universal Baseball Association*, *Mulligan Stew* takes the self-reflexive technique to its most outrageous extreme. As with other large-scale comic or satiric novels of the midto late-1970s such as Gaddis's *JR*, Coover's *The Public Burning*, and Barth's *Letters*, Sorrentino's magnum opus, however, appeared at a time when critical attention was beginning to shift toward the various forms of minimalist neorealism that would dominate the 1980s and 1990s. Thus the *Stew* was too easily dismissed as a vestige of a waning era, a wildly excessive book that seemed increasingly out of step with the sour and sober fiction of the minimalists.

The problem of finding a suitable audience for a novel like *Mulligan Stew* is in fact directly addressed in its own initial pages-although an unwary reader could be snookered into taking at face value what seems to be a series of rejection letters received by "Gilbert Sorrentino" (rejecting the book we are about to read). "Lookit," writes one "Edgar Naylor," a "Senior Editor," "you are talking to a man who would have turned down 'Aunt Lydia Plurabelle'-and with no regrets." "Alan Hobson," a "Managing Editor," observes: "The book is far too long and exhausts one's patience. Its various worlds seem to us to lack the breadth and depth and width as well to sustain so many pages." Even defenders of the book seem pathetically unable to articulate their reasons. Comments "Horace Rosette":

Not the least compelling aspect of this book is that it has, far beneath the tortured story told by the author (one should say, "authors") a dry, subtle and deliberate humor, a humor so fragile and evanescent that one reads it while almost literally holding one's breath lest too gross an apprehension of it should make it scatter to the black winds that sweep and roar through the "fiction:" For some reason, I kept thinking of the question that Dickens had his old mad gentleman pose in *Nicholas Nickleby*: "The young prince of China. Is he reconciled to his father-

in-law, the great potato salesman?" Sorrentino's gentle humor is of the same tenor as this angst-laden query.

Because the humor of Sorrentino's novel is anything but gentle-I argue that its comedy is of the broadest kind possible-one must finally take this fictional correspondence as simply the first comic ingredient in his outrageous literary Stew. Although the gatekeepers of the literary establishment are clearly satirized in these opening pages, it would not be appropriate to assume that *Mulligan Stew* is an essentially satirical novel. One of the things being here set up for comic treatment is the novel itself, and thus implicitly the very idea that a novel, satirical or otherwise, is a form suited, as Sorrentino has put it elsewhere, "to say something."

The desire to have fiction reflect, if not reality then some serious moral purpose, is voiced in several of the rejection letters. "Sheldon Corthell" declares the manuscript "totally lacking in that moral commitment that is, and always has been, the novelist's responsibility." Further *Mulligan Stew* "seems to be a rather slapdash collection of notes, gibes, and needlessly elaborated jokes." Simple confusion would be perhaps the most predictable response to a novel like *Mulligan Stew*, but it is not hard to imagine criticism like this being voiced by actual readers. No doubt such readers believe that judging a work of fiction in those terms counts as the severest kind of criticism, but anyone familiar with Sorrentino's aesthetic philosophy would know that the author of *Mulligan Stew* might take statements like Corthell's as compliments. Sorrentino's passion for style, for formal experimentation, his "love of digression and embroidery" (*Something Said* 265) mark an approach inherently hostile to "moral fiction," as defended most recently by John Gardner. Although the book is hardly "slapdash," its fragmentary nature has been well described by Sorrentino himself, who deliberately avoided "using a narrator who would allow us to look at the characters from the outside, to look at the situation, to look at the movement or the lack of movement. [. . .] The book is artificial and is meant to be artificial ("Interview" 24).

It is worth lingering on the prologue to *Mulligan Stew* because it so accurately (and hilariously) anticipates some of the real objections to it-and implicitly to the kind of fiction it represents-made by reviewers and critics. Although contemporaneous reviewers were guilty of their fair share of obtuse remarks about the novel, the more interesting critique of the Stew comes from those approaching it from the perspective of academic critical theory. Perhaps the most notable such appraisal is that of M. Keith Booker, who has interrogated the text of *Mulligan Stew* for indications of its relative degree of "transgression." Booker's assessment of the novel's usefulness in this regard is stated immediately if not altogether candidly: "Clearly the book is technically impressive, but one is tempted to ask if it is not almost too impressive.' Placing it in severe danger of collapsing into an empty formalism that is all style and no substance" (111). Although such a comment seems to rehash the same old shopworn criticism frequently made of formally innovative fiction (it is essentially the same point Gardner makes about many of his colleagues), Booker's analysis deserves some attention if only because his notion of "substance" is so typical of much professional literary theory and so representative of prevailing attitudes about comedy.

Booker's initial interest in *Mulligan Stew* comes from its status as "postmodernist metafiction" and the opportunity it presents "to explore many of the fundamental questions that constantly arise in regard to the efficacy" of the form (111). As it turns out, Booker is indeed concerned about the "efficacy" of the novel, defined in very narrow political terms. The value of

metafiction, in that view, is in its disruption of discursive norms, which could be seen as an implicit questioning of all established norms. "Works that interrogate their own modes of discourse call existing value structures into question at a fundamental level, and thus have the potential for instigating significant changes of attitude and viable social reform" (113). Unfortunately, Booker finds Mulligan Stew woefully inadequate as a tool for carrying out the revolution. What should be "subversive" of political authority in the Stew remains at best misdirected, at worst myopically literary. Even worse, Sorrentino is too willing to indulge his obvious talent for creating comedy in what Booker finds to be socially useless ways. That comedy in his analysis has no intrinsic subversive force (political or otherwise) is clear from Booker's telling reiterations: "It is simply too easy to recuperate Sorrentino's characters as amusing artifacts or textual play" ( 120); "In Mulligan Stew one never even tries to put the pieces of the text together; its fragmentation is amusing, but not ultimately troubling or challenging; [. . .] Readers who read conventionally for plot are apt to reject the book out of hand; more sophisticated readers-those who are 'in on the joke'-are apt to be amused, but little else" (123-24).

Booker's reluctance to be amused is perhaps extreme, but his analysis is otherwise entirely typical of the reductionism of much current thinking about literature. Booker represents in particular that forced union of poststructuralism and Marxism that cleverly (although superficially) exploits the insights of Derrida to support an otherwise familiar indictment of any fiction that does not forward "viable social reform." It is astonishing that a critic would think an approach so transparently utilitarian ("socialist realism" seems lurking nearby) at all relevant to a writer so openly hostile to the idea that a literary text is "good for" anything external to itself. However, Booker's comments are most revealing in the way they restate a longstanding antipathy among "serious" critics to comedy and humor as ultimately inferior modes of expression. The notion that a work like Mulligan Stew is "amusing but" has long prevented truly serious inquiry into the textual and contextual implications of literary comedy (defined as the presence of devices clearly designed primarily to provoke the reader's laughter). Such incomprehension especially limits an assessment of postmodern American fiction, because such a large proportion of that fiction-from John Hawkes to T. Coraghessan Boyle-so obviously encompasses comedy of one variety or another.

Booker's devaluation of laughter is put into even more pronounced relief by his frequent references to Bakhtin. What seems to be declared most important in Bakhtin's widely varied writings can be narrowed down to their focus on "subversion," a concept repeated almost like a refrain over the course of Booker's essay.<sup>2</sup> Although one could certainly construe Bakhtin's discussions of the "carnavalesque" as valorizing the subversion of authority in a general sense, his analyses of the development of the novel celebrate the "polyglossia" that defines that form in contrast to those forms of writing that convey a more monologic sense of rhetorical control-a questioning, if not subversion, of specifically discursive authority and norms. Abstracting from a modification of literary practice to a rebellion against social and political constraint is a common move among academic critics, but it is not sanctioned by Bakhtin, whose interest in such essays as "Discourse in the Novel" is in showing the novel to be the most capacious and supple of the major literary forms.

It is hard to imagine a more polyglossic novel than *Mulligan Stew*, consisting as it does of a multitude of letters, notebook entries, and interpolated texts of various sorts composed by a dizzying assortment of characters (including a "fictional" character ostensibly created by the novel's protagonist). Where Bakhtin might see in this novel the fulfillment of the form's capacity to hold discourse in radical suspension, Booker, however, sees the book's hermeticism as a refusal on Sorrentino's part to clearly signal his polemical intentions. That misreading of *Mulligan Stew*-not to say Bakhtin-is compounded by the absence of attention on Booker's part to Bakhtin's most explicit discussions of the role of comedy in fiction. In keeping with his lack of interest in what makes the *Stew* "amusing," Booker highlights the elements in Bakhtin's thought that abet a focus on metafiction per se but ignores the arguably more profound insights Bakhtin provides into the tradition of "popular laughter" and its legacy in modern literature.

In the evolution of the novel as a literary form, Bakhtin traces manifestations of the comic spirit as represented by the "rogue," the "fool," and the "clown." These iconic figures are closely associated with the carnival tradition delineated at length in Bakhtin's writings and can be seen both as character types in literary fiction and, more significantly, as roles adopted by some especially resourceful writers as part of their authorial personae. What unites the various "images" of carnival laughter is a common attitude toward the world that Bakhtin identifies as "radical skepticism." Employed against all forms of "straightforward seriousness," that attitude motivates the various forms of mockery-both explicit and implicit-associated with the jokester in whatever guise. If there is anything inherently serious about comedy, it is here, in the thoroughgoing skepticism implied in the act of designating a given target worthy of laughter. Such power, according to Bakhtin, has long been wielded by the familiar agents of humor in Western cultural history.

Although the most obvious way in which popular laughter finds its way into literary genres is through the adoption of explicit character types (the rogues and fools of the picaresque novel, for example), radical skepticism informs not merely the epistemology but also the aesthetic assumptions of the novel in its most provocative forms. Bakhtin reminds us that a writer need not be explicitly humorous to draw on the resources of comedy (Dostoevsky is Bakhtin's chosen exemplar of such a writer), but the most direct examples of radically skeptical literary fiction would logically be from the extensive tradition of specifically comic fiction in modern European literature. And, indeed, Bakhtin cites the representatives of this tradition frequently, from his full-length treatment of Rabelais-the epitome of the comic writer for Bakhtin-to his invocation in "Discourse in the Novel" of Sterne, Fielding, and Dickens. The latter, for example, not merely creates funny characters but incorporates at the level of style and structure a "varied play with the boundaries of speech types, languages, and belief systems" (308). In other words, the comic novel, by its very nature, has the potential to hold all discourse in maximum suspension, conveying final authority on none and holding up for ridicule any that would presume such authority.

A truly comic representation of the world, however, would have to include its own discourse as one subject to be "dialogized," and the novel-from *Don Quixote* to *Tristram Shandy*-has shown itself capable of the requisite selfmockery. The latter in particular provides a model of literary comedy that takes the "literary" itself as a practice in need of comic interrogation. Appearing as it did very early in the development of the novel as a distinctive form, *Tristram Shandy* does not

simply parody formal conventions (such conventions were not yet well developed) but submits the fundamental assumptions of narrative fiction to the unrelenting scrutiny of Sterne's thoroughgoing mockery. Although the humor of *Tristram Shandy* is often taken to be essentially benign, ultimately a reflection of Tristram's fond amusement at his father and his Uncle Toby, I would argue that the book is less a good-natured celebration of "Shandyism" than an all-out travesty of the very notions of "plot," "character," "point of view," and the like as the stable undergirding of fiction as a fixed form. The legacy of works like *Tristram Shandy* makes available to future novelists the rich heritage of radically skeptical laughter described by Bakhtin, although the subsequent history of the modern novel shows at best only a fitful appreciation of that heritage. In fact, the dominance of realism and naturalism until well into the twentieth century amounts to a repudiation of the kind of comic fiction so central to the rise of the novel in the first place.

Of course, from one perspective the direction taken by the literary novel is entirely predictable. In the evolution from the comedy of Sterne and Dickens to the realism of Flaubert and James can be seen the implicit devaluation of comedy I have previously noted. The aesthetic principles associated with literary realism provided the novel with an identifiably "serious" purpose-to reflect life as it really is-that was less clearly at the center of the older comic tradition with its necessary exaggerations. Although the fiction of a few of the important modernists-Joyce and Faulkner, for example-is enlivened by an appreciation of the possibilities of comedy, most modern fiction is defined by the extent to which it implicitly rejects amusement as a proper goal. Clearly, although M. Keith Booker addresses the changed conditions facing the postmodern writer, his fundamental assumptions about the place of comedy in literature are derived from the same desire for high seriousness that culminated in modernism.

In perhaps the first in-print reference to "metafiction," William H. Gass disparages as "drearly predictable" (24-25) the prototypical self-reflective novel about a novelist writing a novel-precisely the form that *Mulligan Stew* appears to take.<sup>3</sup> Yet no one reading the *Stew* could conceivably find it predictable-especially if the reader's expectation is that the narrative will ultimately cohere into some recognizable whole, whether formal, stylistic, or thematic. Surely no literary text that refuses to so cohere deserves to be considered "literary" in the first place; as Booker has it, the *Stew* does indeed go "too far," "leaving nothing to transgress against except [itself]" (129). If it is true that comedy can exceed its proper bounds, can "go too far," *Mulligan Stew* could plausibly be adduced as illustration. There is no doubt that this is a novel that undermines its own pretensions, that, in disparaging itself, seems to disparage the whole enterprise of novel writing. Indeed, the *Stew* seems particularly derisive of the avant-garde or experimental novel, the mode to which it clearly owes its own closest allegiance. The novel's protagonist, Antony Lamont, is an outrageously inept avant-garde writer who understands nothing of the avant-garde; his disintegration, both personal and professional, is chronicled through the profusion of multivarious documents that make up the text of *Mulligan Stew*.

The nadir of Lamont's collapse, although perhaps the height of the novel's comedic inspiration, occurs when the second of Lamont's characters decides to leave his book, literally "walking off the page" in a flourish on Sorrentino's part that sends up perhaps the most vacuous cliché about "character" ever accepted into critical discourse about fiction. As Lamont finds his work (and his life) coming apart, so too does *Mulligan Stew* itself literally seem to fall apart before the reader's

eye. Further, not only does this moment of self reflexive collapse undo whatever conventional narrative sense the unwary reader might still make of the story of Antony Lamont, but it is also clearly a comedic deflation of facile experimentalism. The Stew does call into question all of the assumptions about the novel to which most readers are accustomed, but it refuses equally to valorize the assumptions commonly associated with contemporary "innovative" fiction. As it turns out, Lamont is just as eager to "say something" as any social realist, except that he wishes to convey his message through his deliberate violations of convention. In other ways his notions about writing are utterly familiar: "the black ink of the recording pen sets down the rhythms of life itself, rich nuggets of symbol, image, both clear and mysterious, deep, lie buried, waiting for the moment when they will be rescued from their temporary home. Meaning is held in an almost unbearable tension on the dizzying edge of the meaningless, and there! There lies the quicksilver truth that makes one's life as a writer meaningful and endlessly rich" (47).

Thus, although Lamont is content to rearrange and recombine the familiar elements of fiction-his work-in-progress is a spaced-out detective novel, his superficial deconstruction of the formal structures of fiction fails to clear the ground for a renewed appreciation of writing as writing that would be the goal of any literary practice truly receptive to the liberation of language attempted by Jacques Derrida. If Bakhtin identifies a tradition to which the comedy of a text like Mulligan Stew can usefully be referred, Derrida's critique of "logocentrism" helps to clarify the specific strategies that Sorrentino used to carnivalize the discursive authority exercised by the modern novel in all of its forms. Considering Bakhtin and Derrida together in this context not only reveals affinities between the two but also illuminates the path by which the novel moved away from its early comic inspiration to become a form that tempts those who embrace it to the kind of grandiose thinking exemplified by Antony Lamont.

The impression a reader might have that Mulligan Stew is formless chaos is, of course, an illusion, an illusion deliberately induced by Sorrentino through the complete removal of what might be called narrative "presence." As Sorrentino himself described it, "there was a conscious attempt to refrain from using a narrator who would allow us to look at the characters from the outside, to look at the situation, to look at the movement or lack of movement in the book in terms of Lamont and his hopeless life" ("Interview" 24). Unlike such writers of metafiction as John Barth or Robert Coover, whose work deliberately calls attention to its narrative artifice, Mulligan Stew does not reflect back on the manipulating author; as Sorrentino says, all vestiges of such an author have been erased. The result can certainly be disconcerting, as the reader is denied the discursive anchor provided by a conventional narrator. However, the removal of that anchor must be taken as an aesthetic strategy designed to carnivalize the authority implicitly exercised by the novel as a historically fixed narrative form and to bring language itself to the foreground of the reader's attention. In effect, in the same way that Derrida attempts to expose the metaphysical assumptions behind the traditional conception of language viewed in the broadest sense, Sorrentino makes the reader conscious, through their absence, of the customary formal elements that otherwise obscure the creative play of literary language.

Even in an era when self-reflexivity has been elevated to a kind of first principle, Mulligan Stew is remarkable in the degree to which it insistently brings the reader back to writing as both its vehicle and its subject. Although it might initially be characterized as an epistolary novel gone berserk, the Stew is so-named because it is finally a book of such heterogeneous styles and

modes of writing. The ostensible protagonist, Lamont, is himself a literary chameleon, albeit frequently an unwitting one. The first few chapters of "Guinea Red," Lamont's novel-in-progress, are first person accounts, in the style of a crime novel or detective story, of the murder of one Ned Beaumont—except that the narrator, Halpin, suspects that he might be the murderer. Halpin's tin ear, combined with Lamont's hopeless "comic" touches often produce genuine, but usually unintentional, humor.

After a few chapters of trying to flesh out his one-note idea—did Halpin kill Ned Beaumont or not?—Lamont begins to rely on stylistic "experiment." Most of that experimentation consists of various attempts at "poetic" prose, ranging from a sober but typically illiterate dramatic monologue in which Halpin imagines what may be happening to the police as they close in on the murder scene, to the absurd Chapter 12 that begins: "How not, Master Halpin! What? Can it be fear that thrones itself in those bright orbs that were wont on a day to flash as bright as those of a gentleman in pleasant surfeit o' the good Rhenish or a gen'rous flagon o' sack?" (389). Manifestly, Lamont has no feel for the aesthetic possibilities of language. Despite all of his desperate stylizing, Lamont's prose is never more than an inept imitation of literary stereotypes, themselves only dimly understood. Intent on what he (mistakenly) believes to be the interesting story he is telling, Lamont never sees style as more than an excuse for outrageous similes and metaphors, skewed clichés, and other bloated rhetorical devices and never demonstrates the experimental novelist's ability to challenge settled notions about the limits of writing.

This is not to say that Lamont's writings fail to maintain a sort of interest. Parts of his novel do come to life, in ways that amusingly reveal its author's true interests. Chapter 10, "Nameless Shamelessness," describes an encounter between Halpin, Beaumont, the woman of their dreams Daisy Buchanan, and Mesdames Come Corriendo and Berthe Delamode, a pair of pornographers—prostitutes our heroes have become entangled with—literally, as in the following;

I saw Madame Corriendo lie back on the couch, entreating Daisy to forbidden pleasures with a look so flamy that I quaked with lust. And Daisy, who still talked haltingly on of our moral obligations toward dear Ned Beaumont, suddenly ceased, and gently lowered herself to the floor; on hands and knees, cooing softly and deeply in her ivory throat, she crawled toward the lush rose that Madame Corriendo; panting, proffered her, while I helplessly began to undo my curiously constricting trousers. (324)

That chapter has the virtues of enthusiasm and brevity, but its creator would likely be no more successful as a porn writer than as an avant-garde novelist. His penchant for the trite phrase ("cooing softly," "ivory throat") and the gauche euphemism ("lush rose") is arguably even less effective in a genre that requires a minimum of obfuscation. In a telling way, however, Sorrentino is able to evoke more sympathy for Lamont in chapters like that, as the reader suspects that such a display is more the result of Lamont's own desperation—in this case, sexual than an attempt to integrate pornography and innovative fiction. Here, as elsewhere in Lamont's writing, the curious effect is that the reader, while compelled to laugh at Lamont's general ineptitude, can also understand his need to express himself.

Antony Lamont thus enacts a doubly provocative role in *Mulligan Stew*. He is the object of the novel's carnivalesque satire, yet he is also the closest thing in the book to a conventional source

of reader identification. However, Sorrentino has conceived "character" as inseparable from the language in which it is conveyed. Character, like speech in Derrida's analysis, does not precede or exceed writing, but emerges from it; Lamont does not threaten to walk off the page because he is so much of the page. In essence, Lamont is his writing. Moreover, that dual impulse can be seen as the animating principle behind Mulligan Stew as a whole. The text mocks the idea of "development," of a fixed novelistic discourse, through its seemingly chaotic accumulation of "other" texts, but its insistence on the primacy of writing comes to substitute for the conventional elements. The profusion of documents has the effect of placing Lamont in a world, although it is a world made entirely of writing.<sup>4</sup> Additional characters are introduced; but as with Lamont, we know them only through the voice and style that emerge through the writing presented.

And the range and variety of writing presented is ultimately quite astonishing. More directly related to Lamont's ongoing project are his notebook, scrapbook, and letters. The notebook gives us the most direct access to Lamont's strategy as he composes his new novel, as well as occasional excerpts from his previous work that bear on current "problems." "Guinea Red," it becomes clear, is not an unfortunate aberration. The scrapbook is itself a kind of mulligan stew, containing everything from advertisements (e.g., one from "Writer's Helper Monthly") and other clippings to a collection of bizarre question-and-answer exercises, presumably written by Lamont. Some of them show rather more imagination (or at least more humor) than his fiction:

Are the stars out tonight?

They are. But before dawn some of them will have found places in various eyes, some settle on flags and banners, still others will take up residence in Hollywood and other film capitals of the world, many will be wished upon, one will be born, a handful will shimmer, gleam, shiver, glitter, tremble, or shine, a few will either shoot or fall, dozens will cluster together, dozens more give off dust. [. . .] (144)

Lamont's letters are in some ways even more impressive. Many of them, especially those addressed to his sister Sheila (married to Lamont's archrival Dermot Trellis) are full of ill-conceived sarcasm and outright invective, the latter of which really seems to be Lamont's metier. The letters to "Professor Roche," who is planning a course in the "American experimental novel" and is thinking of including Lamont on his syllabus, are particularly scabrous. The early letters to Roche, written when Lamont believes that such exposure might revive his career, are relatively obsequious; gradually, as it becomes apparent that Roche does not intend to include him after all, Lamont loses his fragile composure, a process that culminates in a surprisingly cogent tirade:

Not to painfully mince words, your truly and quintessentially shithead decision not to use any selections from any of my works is not surprising, now that I check back through your last few letters. The scrawl was, even then, on the wall. But how can you [. . .] say that my work, while displaying many of the "gestes" of the avant-garde, is not "truly" avant-garde and lacks a consistent "engagement" with those subjects most germane to "the contemporary." My dear old bumbling Roche, I suspect that you would not know an avant-garde work were it to grasp you by your academic tool. (321) Again the reader can almost find support for Lamont at this point, especially as his indignation has enabled him to write forcefully (and competently) for a change.

Other writings more tangential to Lamont find their way into Mulligan Stew as well. One of the most outrageous texts to be found is a phantasmagoria called *Flawless Play Restored; The Masque of Fungo*. Set in "a major league ball park, the home of a team of disconcerting ineptitude," this "masque" is a work of complete surrealism in which for over forty pages a multitude of characters shout, declaim, and apostrophize on subjects from baseball to feminism, in language of every tenor and idiom. Indeed, this "play" at the heart of Mulligan Stew is almost literally a carnival, perhaps the most uproarious travesty of literary convention in a book systematically devoted to that purpose. Combined with an inserted collection of poems entitled "The Sweat of Love" by "Lorna Flambeaux" (which turns out to be as comically bad as its title would suggest), such a text could be seen as confirming Booker's contention that Mulligan Stew subverts "only itself." Yet reading Sorrentino's deconstruction of narrative in the additional context provided by Bakhtin reveals that the liberated play of language that results is not aimless but celebrates implicitly the purposeful overturning of customary practices and established norms characteristic of carnival laughter.

Perhaps the time has come to drop such terms as "transgression" and "subversion" from the critical vocabulary, especially as they are applied to comedy and humor. In addition to Booker, such book-length studies as Steven Weisenburger's *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980* fail to appreciate the full scope of comedy's power to mock and ridicule. Although some might feel that Mulligan Stew takes self-reflexivity to the edge of an abyss of senseless frivolity, it does so in the service of the ultimately serious task undertaken by all comic art influenced by the carnival tradition: to hold all human endeavors subject to the suspicion that they are finally laughable. Because such art in effect subverts subversion (an endeavor as deserving of comic deconstruction as any other), to value it for its potential to be politically subversive except in the most obvious sense (e.g., explicit political satire) is at best self-defeating and at worse itself a laughable proposition. Mulligan Stew may be the most radical American metafiction in its use of carnivalesque devices, but it would indeed be a mistake to extrapolate from this that it has any special relevance to radical politics. At best one might say that the Stew (and postmodern comedy in general) unleashes a kind of anarchy that, superficially at least, lends support to a broader iconoclasm—although not necessarily of the left-wing variety. But finally the laughter-inducing iconoclasm of both Mulligan Stew and carnivalesque comedy seeks not to reform society but simply to refocus attention on the inevitable limitations of any form derived from fallible human constructs. Perhaps a work like Mulligan Stew might lead to a reformation specifically of the novel, making readers more aware both of its generic constraints and its formal possibilities. Of course, the altered assumptions that then arise are themselves subject to the comedically corrosive effects of Bakhtinian mockery.

#### **[Footnote]**

3. The writer protagonist of Mulligan Stew himself states: "The idea of a novel about a writer writing a novel is truly old hat (224).

4. So, of course, are the fictional worlds created by all novels. Mulligan Stew seeks to ensure that we henceforth never forget this truth.

#### **[Reference]**

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