

# ‘a poignant alertness’

*Something Said*, essays by

Gilbert Sorrentino, Dalkey Archive, 2001



*Ian Brinton*

I recall some twenty years ago that the Cambridge poet J.H. Prynne offered advice to his undergraduates, men and women in their early twenties, concerning the act of reading. He suggested that texts both ‘conceal’ and ‘reveal’ not only within the short historical time of writing an essay about some particular one of them but also ‘over a lifetime’. The importance of critical analysis was emphasised by his fundamental assertion that readers of literature will sooner or later find themselves ‘involved in deep questions of humanity and powers of understanding and matters of memorable, significant work’. In the Preface to the 1984 revised edition of his *Something Said* essays Gilbert Sorrentino wrote that the literary critic often found himself in a ‘curious’ and even ‘awkward’ position:

What a fine ambiguity arises when we read that critic who is most gifted, most serious in sense of his vocation. His writing, as it strives toward the most precise and unique subtleties of revelation in the writing under review, begins, oddly, to detach itself from its cause, and to float free of it. It begins to move, that is, toward the literature that it purports to be “talking about.” It is as if it wants to be literature too, as

if it cannot countenance its function as that of the useful but wishes to approach the condition of the useless.

Seventeen years later in his Preface to the enlarged second edition of this powerful collection of essays and reviews Sorrentino took up the cudgels again over the idea of literary criticism in order to make it clear that not only were the added twenty-five essays not “really” criticism but also that they were simply ‘reactions to works and writers that interested me for one reason or another’. When I first read that an echo kept sounding through my mind of the voice of Jessie Chambers in her autobiographical sketches written in 1935 in which she recalled the Thursday evening walks to the Mechanic Institutes Library in Nottingham that she and D.H. Lawrence had taken in the early years of the twentieth century. They went to choose books, to read them and then talk to each other about what they had read during the past week:

During the walk we discussed what we had read last, but our discussion was not exactly criticism, indeed it was not criticism at all, but a vivid re-creation of the substance of our reading.

The close connection between criticism and discussion, that ‘vivid re-creation’, is what one might think of as related to storytelling and one is bound to remember Hugh Kenner’s opening to *The Pound Era* which in 1971 had lifted the curtain on Modernism and presented a world that brought the power of the literary critic back into focus:

Toward the evening of a gone world, the light of its last summer pouring into a Chelsea street found and suffused the red waistcoat of Henry James, lord of decorum, *en promenade*, exposing his Boston niece to the tone of things.

It is no coincidence perhaps that Kenner, writing about Sorrentino should have said ‘If I were a poet, he’s the man I’d want to be reviewed by.’

In the fall of 1974 the sixth issue of Barry Alpert’s magazine *Vort* was partly dedicated to the work of Gilbert Sorrentino and in the opening interview the editor had asked him about the motive behind

his critical writings. In reference to his contributions to *Kulchur* Sorrentino had replied that he had ‘a terrible drive in those days, a sense of duty, as it were, to lacerate what I thought was rotten writing, thinking it might disappear. Of course that doesn’t happen. Most of the people I put down plod on – they seem indefatigable.’ He went on to call his critical work a ‘moral imperative’ and the urgent sense of movement behind that statement accounts perhaps for the continuing power of Sorrentino’s criticism: after all there is no final answer as to what something is about or indeed to its enduring worth and it is with both care and deliberation that he will have chosen a quotation from Maurice Blanchot as epigraph to this book of essays:

No sooner is something said than something else must be said to correct the tendency of all that is said to become final, to insinuate itself into the imperturbable realm of objects.

The need to express that vivid recreation of the experience surrounding what one has read requires an audience, a sense of who one is in relation to the world around one, and the debilitating absence of that room for shared discussion can be felt in the opening of the 1970 essay, ‘Black Mountaineering’, first published in *Poetry*, as it brings a sense of isolation sharply into focus:

It is difficult to remember the isolation a writer such as I felt in the fifties. The sense, the absolute insistence upon the fact that one had no peers that were of use or interest seemed depressingly clear. There were magazines, of course: they made the young writer even more depressed. Not only was there no hope of being represented in their pages, but that writer whose learning had come from the tradition of Williams and Pound knew that his work, scattered and inchoate, had no relation to the narrowly conceived policies of these respected journals.

Pointing out that he felt as though he was working in a kind of ‘numb solitude’ he recalled that it was only the appearance of Robert Creeley’s *Black Mountain Review* that gave one ‘a ground to walk on’, a force, an encouragement for all young writers who felt

themselves to be disenfranchised:

It was indeed a subversive magazine, partly because its thrust into letters was positive; that is, the sense, the entire tone of the magazine posited the value of its own concerns; it was not a journal that devoted itself to a derogation of that work against which it was set; rather, it gave you Olson, it gave you Duncan, it gave you Burroughs, it gave you Rumaker and Selby.

In the Alpert interview Sorrentino went on to emphasise the isolation of the 1950s and the only contact he had had with a kind of writing that interested him was through books. It was here that the central importance of Carlos Williams can be felt and in a 1962 reflection on *Spring and All* he could not have made the issues more clear:

If modern poetry, or the new poetry, or the non-academic poetry, is a return to the essential logic of the imagination (which is absolutely antithetical to the logic of the philosopher, or scientist), and if “one perception must immediately and directly lead to another perception”—as Olson says, then it all started, for American poetry at least with the poems of *Spring and All*.

Those twenty-eight short lyrics, ‘lanced through with light and space,’ carried for Sorrentino the emotional range of a man ‘intent on recording the mayhem of life in urban, despairing, profuse America of the twentieth century.’

*Something Said* collects together a range of Sorrentino’s important reactions to the poetry of Carlos Williams and he moves from that 1962 article on *Spring and All* in *Kulchur* to an important account of Williams’s prose work from the *New American Review* ten years later. His focus shifts from a glance at *The Collected Later Poems* (Kulchur 1963) to a recognition of the importance of *The Knife of the Times* collection of short stories in a short piece written for Carroll Terrell’s ‘Man and Poet’ volume twenty years further on. Looking back over early Williams poems Sorrentino had noted that by the time *Spring and All* had been published in 1923 the literary world ‘was dancing in mock despair to the tune called by *The Waste*

*Land* and poetry was back in the classroom:

Who wanted to bother with an obscure American who grappled with the problems of his own language, its cadences and barbarisms, when here was a twentieth-century Laforgue to tell everyone how miserable life is, in elegant verse that could be picked apart with the aid of a dictionary and several reference books?

Williams gave a 'way through,' a new voice, a method of composition to bridge the gap between the dull and the specious but, in Sorrentino's bitter words, poetry readers turned instead to 'crossword puzzles and literary anagrams':

It is not until we come to the early work of Olson and Duncan, and later, Creeley, that we find the energy of *Spring and All* made use of.

With a tone that rings of direct open debate he goes on to challenge the manner in which some modern poetry, the world of Donald Allen's *New American Poetry*, 'is held in contempt by the "academics" as mere flash-in-the-pan poetry' whilst failing to recognise that ironically enough it is merely a return to 'a valid and tough-shelled technique that lay dormant for more than twenty years'. In *Spring and All* the 'clean edges of the words glint against each other' and 'the imagination is given its utmost play within the limits of a magnificent concern for form'. This links of course with a comment made in that 1974 interview in which he had also made clear his views about the relationship for him between literature and life:

Surfaces, I'm interested in surfaces really. For me, life is right in front of you. Mysterious because it is not hidden. I'm interested in surfaces and flashes, episodes...

Writing about Charles Reznikoff in *Kulchur 9* Sorrentino had noted that 'R sees the world with a fresh eye, an eye which instantly perceives the image before it, and he writes these images down in clear language. He does not describe, he presents'. It is with a similar humble recognition of the power of important poetry that *Something*

*Said* contains the short piece that Sorrentino wrote for *Paideuma* in 1981 about the George Oppen poem ‘from a Photograph’ that had been published in *The Materials*. After quoting some of Paul Valéry’s thoughts about poetry Sorrentino goes on to look at Oppen’s second stanza:

In a way, poets possess within themselves infinitely more answers than ordinary life has questions to put to them; and this provides them with that perpetually latent, superabundant, and, as it were, irritable richness which at the slightest provocation brings forth treasures and even worlds.

*Paul Valéry*

it is the child who is the branch  
 We fall from, where would be bramble,  
 Brush, bramble in the young Winter  
 With its blowing snow she must have thought  
 Was ours to give to her.

Recognising the power in the calm and quiet stanza of Oppen’s five lines Sorrentino acknowledges the almost depthless metaphor which is both mysterious ‘and yet so clear’ whilst also acknowledging that his ‘attempt at explication is doomed to murkiness.’ This is criticism that opens doors for the imagination rather than closing them by offering neat little answers as to what a poem is about and the short piece concludes by recognizing that this quoted fragment of a small poem ‘brings forth treasures and even worlds’ and is ‘justly representative of Mr. Oppen’s finest work’.

*Something Said* looks at Jack Spicer and Dan Rice, Paul Blackburn along with Ron Loewinsohn, William Bronk, Kenneth Rexroth, Lorine Niedecker, Jonathan Williams, Charles Olson and Andrew Hoyem and many, many more; an ‘in memoriam’ for Douglas Woolf sits beside an essay on Robert Creeley and the comments on Zukofsky’s prose works sits intriguingly after noting about Basil Bunting that ‘To engage him is to walk out of the front door again and yet again, always for the first time, always into a wholly new world’.

That issue of *Vort* 6 had revealed to the reader that one of

Gilbert Sorrentino's nightmares consisted of having to teach for a living, 'surrounded by earnest students and professors with answers.' In contrast to that fear of reduction and enclosure it is uplifting to read the opening lines of his 1966 review in *Poetry* of Jack Spicer's *Language*, the book published in the same month that the *poète maudit* died:

In sense of linguistic necessity, the poet's task, finally, is to make his words real, make them, that is, things as certainly as things of the earth are that, i.e., things. The language itself must be the final cornerstone of his strength, stripped language, a way through image as surely as imagism found a way through metaphor; or, the dense fabric, that meticulous notation of Zukofsky, against free verse.