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## The Aberration of Starlight and/in Postmodernist Fiction

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**Abstract.** Gilbert Sorrentino's novel *Aberration of Starlight* alludes to an experiment by James Bradley (1728), proving that the speed of light is enormously high, but limited. His technique consisted of a measurement of the angle, under which a given star could be observed. His experiments proved a tight connection between the direction of the Earth's movement and the angle of observation, resulting in a special angle of aberration of starlight; thus he could give a quantitative value for the velocity of light, taken from astronomical observations of a star, without employing any further technical device. Bradley's main idea consisted in the concept that an unknown speed might be measured by comparing it to the velocity of the observer, who has to fix his observations on one distant object. This idea may be traced in Sorrentino's novel, where he applies Bradley's concept to the description of 'moving subjects' whose only chance to register the developmental speed of another subject is to compare it – in a given coercive situation – to one's own rate of change. Analogous to Bradley's geometrical technique, Sorrentino applies methods of 'narrative triangulation', leading to a complex but systematically structured pattern of subjective interactions. Regarding this (rather technological) background, Sorrentino's novel is a neological fictional achievement, offering tightly knit correlations between the worldmaking of modern natural sciences and the narrative modes of (post)modern self- and world-composition.

### 1. Introduction

For obvious reasons, a novel entitled *Aberration of Starlight* suggests the author's intellectual invasion of a terrain where knowledge about natural sciences, especially physics, plays more than a sidelined role.<sup>1</sup> Adjusting

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Sorrentino, *Aberration of Starlight* (Fairchild Hall, 1980).

the critical paraphernalia to the (historic-)scientific backgrounds of such a narrative undertaking, the subsequent argumentation will take Sorrentino's novel as an example of an implementation of scientific structuring and pre-quantitative patterning into the narrative and aesthetic network of a novel's fictional tissue.

This affiliation between narrative and scientific modes of world-orientation will remain a leitmotiv in the background, supported by a simple idea: prototypical forms of postmodernist literatures, like those written by Thomas Pynchon, Gilbert Sorrentino, Don DeLillos and others, work with elements of scientific worldmaking in a systematic and narratively coherent way. It is one of the aims of the subsequent interpretations to elucidate that only by transgressing the surface-structures of a standardized interpretative approach, the subterranean levels and stratifications of postmodernist 'science-fiction' will become discernible and will confer a new dimension to the narratological apparatus.

This essay will proceed in three main steps. Firstly, the idea of aberration of light will be pursued through the history of optics from antique to modern times, resulting in an optical model adjustable to the demands of narrative transformations. In the course of this procedure, the problems of astronomical and terrestrial measurements of the speed of light will come to the fore and will have to be presented in an elementary fashion, to permit – in a second step – a compatible description of the basic traits of modernity's 'enlightened' world and self-awareness within the scope of these optical investigations. Velocity of light and rationality (the latter representing the foundation of the modern subject's enlightenment as a kind of trans-optical correlative) come into close hermeneutical contact. Above all, the question, in which way specific methods for measuring the speed of light may be correlated with concrete forms of the modern subject's self- and worldmaking and its inter-subjective activities, will characterize this introductory part of the essay.

Finally, the main part will attempt to give these preceding considerations a secure anchoring within the groundwork of Sorrentino's *Aberration of Starlight*.<sup>2</sup> In the present case, the strict accentuation of

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<sup>2</sup> Such a strict dismissal may even be found in discussions by versatile connoisseurs of postmodernism, like Christine Brooke-Rose. See her discussion of 'metafiction', 'surfiction', and 'science fiction', based on ideas of Mas'du Zavarzadeh and Ronald Sukenick in Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 351–53.

certain epistemological and aesthetic pillars within the argumentative construction is applied to make sure, at least, that a matrix, allowing for interpretative inter-connections between natural sciences and literature, will slowly gain the status of plausibility during the hermeneutical procedure of reading.

## 2. Optics and Worldmaking

### a. Hermetic Antiquity: Optics and Subjects

The hermetic world-view of classical Greece fixed the human being in a closed cosmos of rules and clearly defined procedures for leading one's life. Man was participating in a world, even occupying a central point in it, in which divine harmony had put a blueprint of perfect composition into scenes of cyclical repetition. In this world of eternal accomplishment, ideas of progress and linearity failed to make sense, enthroning the circle as the basic icon of this ideological completion, while man, as inhabitant of the sub-lunar sphere, was confronted with permanent imperfection exemplified by linear movements, changing velocities and the ultimate absence of perfect circularity.

Light, being the principal medium of divine existence and character, acquired an eminent role within this world-construction. It gave to earth a tinge of divine illumination, a hint towards the trans-terrestrial quality of worldly harmony. In this respect, light was divine ether. Consequently, human sight and vision, within antique conceptions, were not immanently combined with the properties of light. Seeing, in antiquity's opinion, started from the human eye, which was thought to emanate 'beams of sight', scanning the environment like a radar wave. According to this dominant antique model, light's stimulating presence triggered the scanning procedures of the human eye. Such a starting point (though critically undermined by the Pythagoreans and Aristotle, later on) excluded the physical phenomena of light from the context of terrestrial analysis.<sup>3</sup> Being of divine origin, light had to be omnipresent and instantaneous. Problems concerning the velocity of light did not exist for antique natural philosophers; they were incommensurate with basic pillars of their cosmological ideology.

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<sup>3</sup> Detailed accounts of this historical development and its sequels may be found in: A.I Sabra, *Theories of Light from Descartes to Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 46–68; David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision From Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 1–18.

As a result, there was no extensive experimentation with light in antique times. Closer investigations relate to straightforward daily experiences, like the law of reflection. Here we have an almost immediate correspondence between the symmetrical and repetitive behavior of light rays under reflection and the harmony of cosmological phenomena. But it was beyond the imagination of an antique observer that the refraction of (divine) light could be governed by non-symmetrical principles. They (mis)took it for a typical terrestrial phenomenon, stigmatized by imperfection.<sup>4</sup>

Resulting from these antique restraints, light – as a material phenomenon – was still beyond the scope of rational analysis at the dawning of medieval times. As a non-terrestrial substance it remained splendidly isolated within the realm of divine harmony, void of earthlike (ir)regularities. It was not before the beginning of modern times that light takes over a primary role, moving from godly distance into man's personal environment. This crossing of a deep ideological abyss brought light and its properties into the reach of human activity, advancing, finally, those formerly godlike characteristics to modern times' evolving concept of man as self-constructive agent. Modern models of subjectivity, based on the emancipation of the individual from outer authority, severed antique concepts of light from the divine sphere and integrate them into subjectivity. From now on, subject and light were connected in a tight, often precarious conjunction, characterizing essential strands of modernity's history of ideologies, metaphors, aesthetics and mentalities.

#### **b. Early Modern Times or Optics as Enlightenment: Galileo, Roemer, Bradley**

The basic ideas of modern times have been discussed repeatedly. In the present context, the Hegelian explanatory variant of 'modernity' seems to be an appropriate point of departure for further analyses, because of its precision and wide spread applicability. According to this model, modern times reached a state of maturity, when man separated himself from the outer authority of priesthood and religious rules to focus his preferences on an inner, subjective authority.<sup>5</sup> Following a kind of compensatory

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the very differentiated analyses in Vasco Ronchi, *The Nature of Light. A Historical Survey* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 7–29.

<sup>5</sup> An accessible variant of this conception may be found in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on the Philosophy of Fine Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

strategy, this authority had to be enhanced to counterbalance the rise of the heliocentric world-conception which moved man out of the center of the world, assigning him a cosmologically peripheral place. Descartes' *Cogito* put this process of subjective self-centering into an adequate epistemological form.<sup>6</sup> Here, man was interiorized, formally and self-referentially closed in and thus multifariously protected against assaults from outside. At the same time, the self-conscious network of rationality was coupled with metaphors of light – though no longer adherent to an outer divine authority but an inner formal one.

This rationalistic self-awareness of the modern subject found an appropriate externalized platform within modern empirical sciences, unknown to antique mentality: now all parts of the outer world were self-equivalent and thus accessible to the subject's rational authenticity. Transferred onto the function of light and its metaphorical role as a multidimensional figuration of reason, all optical analyses acquired an aura of rational self-analysis, comprised within the self-referential procedure of the *Cogito*.

Almost automatically, with the dawning of modernity, questions concerning the speed of light moved to the fore, intimately connected with problems of subjectivity and subjective dynamics. Different methodical and experimental answers to these questions from early modern times will be shortly scrutinized in the next paragraphs, revealing the significance of these analytical considerations for the subsequent interpretation of Sorrentino's postmodernist prose.

Doubtlessly, the groundbreaking idea concerning the measurement of the speed of light – as many other basic concepts of modern sciences, too – was put forward by Galileo. At least, he was the first to line out the logical and methodical skeleton of this problem, reducing it to a simple experimental device, described in his *Dialogues*. Galileo's ingenious experiment included two observing and interacting subjects, each carrying a simple lamp. He conceived of a situation, where the first observer opened the shade of his lamp, thus emitting light towards the second one; and the latter answered by proceeding in the same way, the very moment the first rays of light met his eyes. Conducting this experiment within a short distance, they end up on two adjacent hilltops. Galileo's results were unequivocal: as both participating observers did not register any temporal delay between short and long distance experimentation – he stated that 'no conclusion can be drawn as to the

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<sup>6</sup>Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* (Leyden, 1637), pp. 87–105.

instantaneousness of light; but if it is not instantaneous, it is enormously fast'.<sup>7</sup>

Extremely simple realization and consistent limitation to a mere terrestrial arrangement characterized Galileo's experimental concept, repeated and improved more than 200 years later by the Frenchmen Fizeau and Foucault who substituted the second observer by a mirror and included a rotating element simulating the manual operation of the lamps.<sup>8</sup> But another decisive point in Galileo's conception was the avoidance of celestial optical phenomena: what had to be shown, had to be demonstrated by two interacting subject's on earth's surface. In this way, never applied before in the history of occidental approaches to nature, Galileo's subjects had the terrestrial authority to analyze a formerly divine phenomenon.

It was Olaf Roemer who succeeded, almost forty years after Galileo's clever experimental proposal, to give an order of magnitude for light's velocity.<sup>9</sup> But he had to refer to astronomical observations concerning one of Jupiter's moons, Io. He compared the emergence of this moon out of the planet's shadow in two different situations: first, when Earth was approaching Jupiter, and second, when it was – half a year later – moving away from this planet. Realizing that in the first case two eclipses of Io followed one another in a slightly shorter span of time than in the second case, he concluded that light's longer path (in the latter situation) from Io to Earth caused the delay. Drawing on celestial phenomena, this experiment fell behind Galileo's terrestrial concept and put the observing subject, once again, into a subjugated position.

In a letter to Edmund Halley, in 1729, James Bradley explained how he made use of the aberration of starlight to measure the velocity of light. To understand the basic idea of his method, it is advisable to conceive of light as an ensemble of falling 'light-drops', similar to raindrops, approaching Earth with a certain constant speed. Due to Earth's own orbital velocity around the sun, a telescope, registering these 'light-drops', has to be inclined in the direction of the observer's motion, the same as an

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<sup>7</sup> Galileo Galilei, *Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1939), p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> See Hyppolite Fizeau, 'Sur une expérience relative à la vitesse de propagation de la lumière', *Comptes Rendues hebdomadaire de l'Académie de Sciences*, (Paris, 1849), Vol. 29, pp. 90–94; Léon Foucault, *Sur les vitesses de la lumière dans l'air et dans l'eau* (Paris, 1853).

<sup>9</sup> Ole Roemer, 'Démonstration touchant le mouvement de la lumière', *Journal des Sçavans* (Paris, 1676), no. 20, pp.233–36.

umbrella in vertically falling rain – as long as the person carrying it is moving.<sup>10</sup> By measuring this angle of inclination and Earth's orbital velocity, Bradley calculated the speed of light by using an extremely simple, straightforward equation.<sup>11</sup>

Comparing Roemer's and Bradley's method, it becomes evident that both – though primarily occupied with celestial effects – take the moving observer into the focus. In Roemer's model, the subject is moving parallel to the path of light and all information about light's properties stem from a radical conformity with light's kinematical principles. Thus, Roemer's experimental situation ignores the subject's own, autonomous movement and veils its 'transversal capabilities'.

With Bradley we have, for the first time, a terrestrial observer, moving in a perfectly autonomous transversal mode to the movement of light. Observer and light (figuratively speaking: subjective autonomy and reason) constitute an orthogonal system, presenting velocity of light and speed of observer as equivalent motions. The aberration of starlight correlates directly with the observer's aberration of movement, that is, light's aberration vanishes in the case of a motionless observer. Transferred onto a hermeneutical plane, Bradley's concept implies a moving subject on an independent level, perpendicular to the activities of light.

### 3. Modern Enlightenment: the Novel and the Speed of Light

A structural transfer of this optical constellation into a modern and finally postmodernist worldview (like Sorrentino's), has to take the subject's severing from the directivity of reason into account. Being permanently on the move is one of the unifying traits of subjectivity and light. This dynamic persistence is the isomorphic glue, binding subject and reason into an indifferent union. As a second consequence, light turns out to be an interactive agent between luminous places, metaphorically representing the communication between subjects. Due to this concept,

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<sup>10</sup> Banish Hoffmann explained the aberration phenomenon very lucidly by using the umbrella-example. See: Banesh Hoffmann, *Relativity and Its Roots* (New York: Dover, 1983), pp. 46–49.

<sup>11</sup> James Bradley, 'IV. A letter from the Reverend Mr. James Bradley Savilian Professor of Astronomy at Oxford, and FRS to Dr. Edmond Halley Astronom. Reg. &c. giving an account of a new discovered motion of the fix'd stars', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 35, no. 406 (1729): pp. 637–61 (pp. 637).



interacting subjects will only get into contact by these 'exchange currents' of light/reason, aside from catastrophic, but extremely rare, direct collisions.

Remaining within the structural matrix of this 'Bradley-picture', we have the straightforward consequence that all luminous objects (rational autonomous subjects, respectively) can only communicate by adjusting their 'telescopes' to well-defined places where the 'other' is *not*. Transferred onto postmodernist concepts of inter-subjectivity, this implies to position the other in virtual localities, which deviate from the real places they find themselves in. Virtual misplacement of the communicative partner is, according to this picture, not a faulty dislodgement within communicative processes, but a cardinal precondition of its existence – and perhaps: success. Expanding Bradley's model figuratively, it becomes clear that a subject's dynamic progression cannot be precisely registered within this subject's own system, making the inter-subjective adjustment of the communicative 'telescope' an erratic procedure, dependent on the subject's own kinematics of change, the other's evolving dynamics, and the speed of interaction. These interactive dynamics take place in a triangle consisting of the real place of the subject, the virtual place of the other and its (presumed) real position. In this inter-subjective, oscillating triangle, communication is to be understood as a constitutively erratic mode of exchange.

Constructing subjectivity within a novel means to take this phenomenon of virtual displacement into regard, even more: to advance it to a basic element of composition. Aberration of starlight thus stands for the aberration of inter-subjective interaction, missing the real position of the subject concerned. As a result the narrative technique of a novel has to consider the idea of perspective in a new light. The focus is not restricted to different viewpoints concerning a certain event, which would only be a static aspect; above all, the narrative alertness concerning perspective has to accentuate that the dynamics of a given world – and self-making are the cardinal components of the subjective world-construction under scrutiny. Differing descriptions, realizations, interpretations etc. do not only result from different standpoints, but from the fact that these localities are never at rest, always bound up in the subject's inner and outer issues of orientation.

Following these presuppositions, classical narrative criteria like 'space and time', 'character', 'plot and story' become virtual, persisting no longer in a quasi-classical scenario. Which is one of the leading aspects of postmodernist prose, demonstrated by Sorrentino in his novel *Aberration*

of *Starlight*. The subsequent detailed analyses are intended to elucidate how Sorrentino applies the aberration-model within narrative scenery, in which Bradley's basic experimental setup gets appropriately transformed into some kind of fictional vector diagram, in the form of a narrative triangulation.

#### 4. Sorrentino's *Aberration of Starlight*

##### a. The Conceptual Framework

Backed by the above considerations, Sorrentino's *Aberration of Starlight* will be given an analysis of narrative and stylistic elements. In accordance with the foregoing argumentation, direct inclusions of astronomical topics into the novel's content seem quite implausible. It is not the thematic concern with optical phenomena, but the strategic constitution of figurative means, which will be put into the center of critical interest. Such a procedure comprises contextual transfers within iconic, metaphorical and – as a whole – compositional tools of narration. The tight connection to the epistemology of the Bradley-model implies that some marked aspects of the novel's constructive framework will move into the analytical center.

One focus of interest is the *idea of a moving subject, unfixed in space and system*, but regularly building up connections – often virtually – to external instances, especially to other subjects. As a follow-up to this centering, two additional aspects will be highlighted: the *adequate placing of other subjects*, regularly coinciding with virtual localities of the other and rarely identical with real points in interactive space; and the question of *communicative exchange currents between subjects*, which is related to the ability to localize otherness or, even more, to internalize ongoing interactions with the help of familiar patterns. It should be kept in mind that light's constant speed is a topic to be transgressed and transfigured within the narrative topology of subjectivity. Thus, critical approaches in this field will have to deal with varieties of interactions, including their narrative and aesthetic dynamics as well as the subjects in question. Getting from Bradley's vector-triangulation to evolved forms of Sorrentino's narrative triangles will lay bare some of the additional difficulties implicit in this methodical conception.

So, finally, the last of four cardinal points has been reached. It pivots around questions which touch on *triangular patterns*, yielding the narrative information about the dynamics, interactions and positioning on different levels and within differing layers of the fictional process. The subsequent considerations will only yield a first insight into the

complexities of a transfer between scientific modes of world-construction and narrative forms of fictionalizing. In order to illustrate, within the limits of a clear cut scenario, modern sciences' cognitive world-construction as a relevant contribution to narrative world- and self-production, the rest of this paper will be restricted to a discussion of these consequences allied to Bradley's model. Such a reduction may be suitable to illuminate the expansive potential literary criticism has generally ignored in the realm of narrational and fictionalizing techniques.

#### **b. The 'Bradley-Pattern': About Optical Schemas and Narrative Transformations**

Bradley's experimental arrangement gives an almost ideal constellation for narrative transformations: there is an observer, a distant object within the bearing-line, though laterally displaced, and the real place of the object, not to be discerned directly by the observer.<sup>12</sup> Such a triangular arrangement, reappearing notoriously in Sorrentino's narrative matrix, becomes the constitutive foundation of his scenario, where the fabric of problematic interactions between four closely related persons occupies center stage in the aesthetic development of the novel. Right in the middle, so it seems, there is a love affair between two divorced persons, Marie Recco and Tom Thebus, entangled in the turmoil of an intimate relationship. During a vacation in a New Jersey boardinghouse, 1939, their loving interactions take place under the eyes of two closely related male persons, Marie's ten-year-old son Billy and her father John McGrath. As the scenery starts to evolve, it becomes clear that reminiscences and not actions will remain the basis for the novel's plot. So, after several pages of reading, this novel looks basically modernist, presenting evolved tableaux and streams of psychic activity.

Considering these criteria, Sorrentino's novel is a 'novel of observation'. Not from the perspective of an outer observer as omniscient narrator, but with regard to the four protagonists, who describe their self- and world-awareness in different states of subjectivity. Being primarily confronted with their inner dynamics, they also register the dynamic verve of others and their differing velocities of interaction. Additional characters expand the frame of these multiple interactions, producing

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<sup>12</sup> See James Bradley's iconic representation – a triangle – in his letter to Edmund Halley. What is surprising, at first glance, is the extremely simple triangular pattern which allows to calculate the speed of light on the basis of a trivial equation. See James Bradley, 'IV. A letter from the Reverend Mr. James Bradley', pp. 637–39.

unstable constellations between an auto-locomotive observer and his observations of moving others. Applying several strategies of composition, Sorrentino succeeds in inducing specific forms of aesthetic control into this hyper-complex narrative grid. His central theme in *Aberration of Starlight* is an investigation into a given subject's efforts to correlate the permanently deviating trajectories of other subjects.

One of Sorrentino's means for controlling divergence is the limitation of the novel's main events to a period of two days, culminating in an erotic crescendo at the end of Marie's and Tom's night at a dancing hall. Another of his strategies is the application of clear structural principles. As a consequence, he divides the novel into four equivalent parts, assigning each of the four protagonists an entire chapter. Subdividing each of these chapters into 10 parts, he follows a strict structural matrix, reorganizing the differing subjective versions and fictional reconstructions of a supposedly objective reality into a rigorous sequential scheme. Thus, the novel acquires basic traits of a veritable experimental device, which is normally supposed to subjugate one variable – here: subjectivity – under the normative conditions of a given and preconceived arrangement.<sup>13</sup> These highly subjective observations, combined with imaginations and correlative effects linking icons, words and objects within the narrative tissue, constitute the fictional space of the novel. The result is a novel about the necessary deviations between subjective versions of self, world and otherness, and even about the dynamics of interaction, not primarily controlled by specifically social modes of coercion, but framed by principles of (almost abstract) inter-subjectivity.

### **c. Concrete Realizations in the Novel**

#### **c1. A Novel in Four Parts or: Historical Logic and/as Parody of Modernity**

The four chapters of the novel are connected with four dominant views and voices, the perspectives of Billy, Marie, Tom, and John. Using this straight mode of structuring, Sorrentino includes a large variety of well-

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<sup>13</sup> What may be registered here, already, is a fundamental difference between Sorrentino's and Faulkner's conception in *The Sound and the Fury*, the latter conceding each of the fictional subjects a typical form and idiosyncratic way of conceiving of the world and others. In Sorrentino's novel, we have an enhanced mode of outer control. Though his subjects still dominate the substructures of their direct narrational environment, they act within the framework of a non-subjective outer givenness of facts and fictions.

known narrative elements. Among them, we have a technique of framing, directly accessible in that loving pair, Marie and Tom, interposed between Marie's father and son. This confronts the reader with a formal coherence of almost classical rigidity, not in the least to be called modern, let alone postmodern. But on second glance, the formal self-endangering verve, touching on the horizons of parody, comes to the fore. On the one hand, Tom breaks the inner logic of this developmental symmetry: he is not Billy's father and thus does not elongate the natural line of kinship connecting Marie, Billy and John. On the other hand, Tom and John represent masculine standards of imagination, filled up with sexual fantasies which do not foster a sensitive relationship between Marie and Tom, the lovers.

So, from the very beginning, the reader is entangled with the procedures of a Bradleyean aberration. All assignments to space and time with regard to these four protagonists stand out from a virtual place, composed of modes of observation, binding son, mother, lover, and father together in a confederacy of expectances. In the reader's horizon, all of them are localized in narrative constellations as (pre)fixed stars of a traditional topology, ranging from Oedipus to Mother Courage, from Orpheus to Sister Carrie. Implicitly projected onto such traditional patterns, these characters induce stereotypical reader responses, centered on virtual positions, which have to be taken into the line of observation, in order to approximate the whereabouts of a character's 'authentic place'. Within such a tableau, mainly consisting of these virtual localizations, protagonists implement themselves as veritable aberrations from their own (and the reader's) expectations: Billy, the son, imagines his father Tony being beaten up by his new fatherly friend Tom;<sup>14</sup> Marie, mother and lover, is driving herself and her lover mad, because of her final resistance to make love;<sup>15</sup> Tom, the manic lover, seems to be less in love with Marie than he pretends to be, permanently deviating to wild sexual fantasies concerning his sister-in-law Susan;<sup>16</sup> the grandfather, John, is showing and feeling no real interest in his grandson, indulging, instead, in reminiscences of his secretary.<sup>17</sup> All of them do not reside in the

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<sup>14</sup> "When Tom is my real Father soon I will ask him to go and punch you and Margie in your face." (Sorrentino, *Aberration*, p. 19)

<sup>15</sup> "You should have *made* me do it. Made me fuck and *fuck* you. Oh, God, forgive me, what will I do?" (Sorrentino, *Aberration*, p. 94).

<sup>16</sup> Sorrentino, *Aberration*, pp. 131–35.

<sup>17</sup> "He looked at Jean's thighs and bottom and felt ashamed of himself. His lust for her had helped to kill Bridget." (Sorrentino, *Aberration*, p. 210)

ideological and emotional places, they are supposed to hold in their own and others' eyes.

Furthermore, other elements of aberration and parodic displacement may be found within Sorrentino's four-fold way. Taking, for example, recourse to the classical ideas of modern philosophical anthropology – Vico and Herder may be mentioned here – he adjusts his narrative progression to the ontogenetic line, leading from child to adult and then to old age, an idea even present in the famous riddle of the Delphi oracle.<sup>18</sup> Integrating the protagonists' subjective world- and self-awareness into a stereotypically schematized history of mankind, this fictional reconstruction of a given, but perspectively dislodged world, turns out to be no more but a history of variable deviations, a potpourri of the incompatible, only partly reconcilable in the field of sexuality. While the historical continuum of early modern times still procured a unitary space of undisplaced evidence and inter-subjectivity, Sorrentino's scenario presents a multilateral miscomprehension and dys-placement of the other. History as a personal history of human beings, supported by a matrix of trans-individual structuring, is no longer relevant for Sorrentino's fictional worlds. What is left of historical logic and reason, is an individual certainty of being driven, a mania for self-development and self-(de)formation, a kind of world-scanning impetus, face to face with monadic loneliness.

On the whole, Sorrentino's novelistic 'quadrille' resides under the auspices of syncretistic tensions from the very beginning. Seen in this light, the line of narrative construction, leading from child to old man, now turns into an idiosyncratic history of sexuality, far away from personal and historical coherence. In the novel's ending, these different lines converge in a displaced, aberrating picture, melting erotic, incestuous and visionary illusions into a single, strangle false tableau of incompatibilities:

Her full bosom. Her thick coppery hair. Her slender ankles in taut black silk. We'll make a family, Poppa, you see, a real family. Oh, Skip, Skip. He reached out for Billy and he hugged him tight around the waist, his other arm around Marie's shoulders. A real family, he said.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Johann Gottlieb Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, (Karlsruhe, 1792); Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, (London, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Sorrentino, *Aberration*, p. 211.

Such a 'real family', consisting of grandson, daughter and father (or, in a shifted perspective: son, mother and grandfather), is, firstly, incomplete because of the boy's missing father; and gives, secondly, several intertwined versions of false placing, where the father becomes a desiring male ('full bosom', 'slender ankles', 'taut black silk'), representing his bodily needs by two exchanged symbolical acts, concerning his grandson (treating him like a woman: 'around the waist') and his daughter (treating her like a grandson: 'around Marie's shoulders'). And, ending in a lopsided bodily pose, resulting from taking daughter and grandson 'diagonally' into both arms, the way described in the text. So the novel ends in a stratification of virtual levels, aimed at throughout the whole plot, culminating in a planfully missed approach to reality – its presented past, authorized displacements and accessible unassailability.

### **c2. The Fictionalized Bradley-Sorrentino-Model: Aberration, Virtualization, Subject-Dynamics**

Concentrating on dominant aspects of Bradley's model and its narrative adaptation in Sorrentino's *Aberration of Starlight*, the following topics stand out. First, the main idea of aberration, installing all forms of reality – temporary, spacious, narrative – in a terrain of displacement, where concepts of presence, past and simultaneousness become problematic.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the ten-year-old Billy positions Tom Thebus in the field of fatherly care and love, assigning him a place on the basis of his own naïve ways of world-orientation. Within this virtual – and necessarily misplaced – projection of a child's emotive rationality, Tom is an adequate father,<sup>21</sup> though he himself, in his own evaluations, keeps a well-adjusted distance to this role.<sup>22</sup> In accordance with his own self-constructive dynamism, Tom moves his standpoint into the territory of a manic sexist, wooing for Marie, without being capable of contouring his desires in the fashion of a

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<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to note that Sorrentino's (and Bradley's) correlations are *not* immanently connected with argumentations based on the Special Theory of Relativity. The Sorrentino case, as many other postmodernist adaptations of physical theories too, is generally pre-relativistic, i.e., 'classically modern'.

<sup>21</sup> 'How did Billy think of Tom Thebus? As a hero; as a movie star; as a possible new father...' (Sorrentino, *Aberration*, p. 16)

<sup>22</sup> 'God knows what he and Billy talked about, the kid went on and on about everything, Jesus, he could talk you to death, he could be a pain in the ass.' (Sorrentino, *Aberration*, p. 139).

future husband.<sup>23</sup> Marie, on the other hand, shifts him, within the scope of her own dynamic self-placing, into the zone of a desirable husband, a role he could never fill appropriately.<sup>24</sup>

Concomitant with aberration, virtualization appears, mainly manifest in the assignment of persons, actions and experiences to positions, only accessible to a registering apparatus, inclined in the direction of the observer's own motion. In this sense, Tom represents – in John's eyes – a simple-minded salesman. To a certain degree, this is a projection of John's own unfulfilled professional (and even sexual) wishes onto his daughter's lover. In a similar fashion, Marie feels forced to reflect her own strategies of evasion as a blueprint for understanding her father's disapproval of her actions. For her, they set off resonances of John's suffering from his belated wife. In this case, virtualization may ensue the attribution of one's own point of projection onto another's position.

Finally, Billy incorporates the Bradleyean principle in its purest form. As to him, the modes of subjective intentionality are still transparent in an elementary way; his penchants and interests are not camouflaged or psychologically displaced. They are sensuously given and almost obtrusively present. On the one hand, Billy is the fastest runner among his peers ('they couldn't catch him'<sup>25</sup>), his personal skills reflecting high speed, almost adjacent to the speed of light, without any metaphorical transformation. And in the same way, the aberrational tendency, implicit in all protagonists, is almost blatantly written onto his body: it is his ability, to look into two directions simultaneously, though only one direction gives a real picture, while the other remains in a virtual space: '...we cannot see that his left eye is crossed'.<sup>26</sup> Billy's strabismus is another – only slightly displaced – equivalent of Bradley's principle of aiming at one object along an inclined line, while the real object would have to be looked at along another 'real' line. This aspect of Billy's personality is only slightly transformed and well established in the optical terrain. With the same directness, the first section of the Billy-chapter connects him with an optical instrument, closely related to a telescope:

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<sup>23</sup> 'If Tom succeeded in seducing Marie, any ideas he had of marriage would fly right out the window.' (Sorrentino, *Aberration*, p. 138)

<sup>24</sup> These conclusions, drawn from the virtual projections of a reader's mind, cannot claim to be nearer to 'objectivity' than any protagonist's personal view - a concept, Bradley/Sorrentino would subscribe to without any considerable restrictions.

<sup>25</sup> Sorrentino, *Aberration*, p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> Sorrentino, *Aberration*, p. 3.



'There is a photograph of the boy that shows him at the age of ten. He is looking directly into the camera... '.<sup>27</sup> Even Marie's first-section-appearance shows remnants of this optical directness. Regarding herself in the mirror, the modes of self-observation remain primary. Tom, in his first section, has already enhanced this strategy of a beginning introversion, by a pondering pose of self-complacent humming, where the abstractness of a musical sound reflects the parallel process of deviating more and more from a given sensuous reality. John, at last, seems meditatively introverted in his introductory part, but the poise of his head ('slightly inclined') shows signs of a direct bodily influence of Bradley's arrangement. Old age and childhood manifest a near, almost untransformed relationship to Bradley's mode.

In accordance with this basic structuring, all other protagonists show similar, though figuratively different, traits of implemented physical elements. In Bradley's concept, the velocity of light causes aberration and virtualization of the observed location. For obvious reasons, the interactive dynamics and auto-locomotion of the protagonists may be installed on this axis of interpretation. Again, Billy and John are almost direct representatives of such a 'weak' transformation. Billy is a speedy runner and fast learner, too, as long as Tom, Marie and John are concerned. Accordingly, the virtual places where he locates the other protagonists are considerably dislodged. John, on the other side, seems slowed down, without dynamic impetus. This leads to an almost 'objective' evaluation of his fellow men, but his new love, Helga, urging him into hectic inner activism, destabilizes this inert balance. His pondering reflectivity becomes a pose, culminating in a hysteric outbreak during the night, when his daughter comes home late with her new lover.<sup>28</sup> Tom, on the other hand, is a man with almost constant inner and outer activity, from the very beginning. Which results in constant and almost identical virtual displacements of others, normally bound up in sexual and erotically laden scenarios. He incorporates Bradley's model in a very simple modern form of narrativity: constant auto-dynamics and constant interactions lead to constant aberrations and thus to standardized virtual positions of his partners.

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<sup>27</sup> Sorrentino, *Aberration*, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> 'There they were, and it one-thirty in the morning! The nerve, the *nerve* of them! He opened the window screen and leaned out, shining his flash across the road, oh, he was yelling, you're goddamn tooting he was yelling, and he didn't give a damn what they thought of it or what anybody the hell else thought of it either.' (Sorrentino, *Aberration*, p. 199)

These basic figurative modes of aberration, virtualization and protagonist dynamics are held together by a narrative concept, best described, perhaps, by the notion of 'narrative triangulation'. This emblematic notion sums up most of the aspects mentioned above in one iconic representation. Narratively transposed, this means that the novel is adjusting, in a form unknown to modern and pre-modern predecessors, its angle of observation to the movements of its own fictionalized and fictionalizing agents.

The Bradley-Sorrentino picture, claiming that interaction and localization of subjects are mutually intertwined and therefore obscuring precise descriptions of subjective space and movement, inaugurates a new phase for modern narrativity: modernity's hope for the novel's 'natural' talent to open up, in the wake of Descartes' epistemological turning-point, new vistas beyond the hermeneutical self-coercions of antiquity, have not come true. They have even been distorted and transvaluated in such a manner that even modernity's project, the self-referential installation of a rationalistic subject, is at stake. And there is more than mere coincidence between Bradley's systematic considerations and the loss of secure subjective centers in post-Cartesian worldmaking. Within the narrative rites of late modern triangulations, all assignments of certainty may only be taken at virtual value.

### **5. Conclusion: Aberrations and Modernism**

Resulting from these analyses, some decisive and contoured differences between Sorrentino's narrative adaptation of Bradley's model and modernist conceptions of innerness arise. The first striking aberration from modernism has been lined out above and centers on the idea of epiphanic transgressions, which searches for momentous coherence and meaning behind the fluctuations of daily life. In this idea of transcendence, modernist disillusionments concerning the new subjective unitarity of interiorized self- and world-construction converge. Aside from an accentuation of non-rational introversion, there is an antique component in this holistic patterning: within a flashback of seconds, the harmonious hermeticism of the classical cosmos is spectacularly revitalized in the modern mind, presenting to the irritated and disoriented post-medieval subject an ephemeral 'seeing' of a world beyond.

Sorrentino's narrative adaptation of Bradley's model marks a radical rejection of both conceptions. On the one hand subjective psychodynamics is given extensive treatment, but no new certainties arise from this procedure. On the opposite: psychology expands the virtualizations

of the other's mind and intentions, broadening the horizon of aberration to a further degree. Sorrentino's subjects do not undergo a psychodynamic centering, but an accelerated dispersion. On the other hand, all remaining hopes for unity, normally connected with an absolute center of meaning, get ultimately disappointed. Narrativity, conceptualized on the basis of Bradley's model, does not know any foci of fixed perception or interpretation; thus, displacements, aberrations and virtualizations acquire the status of constitutive modes. In Sorrentino's formalistic style of narration, the spaces for subjectivity take over astonishing degrees of freedom and optional variants, unknown to the fluctuating associations of modernist introverted sceneries.

At the end of this tour de force from antique optics to postmodernist fictional strategies of displacing the subject, one result may be accepted as plausible: the role of sciences in literature (and vice versa) has always been powerful, though most of time the influence has remained obscured. Among the postmodernist authors who prefer to lay open parts of this relationship, Sorrentino indulges in presenting these connections in the terrain of modern optics, making multiple figurative use of the fact that modern subjectivity does not only trigger the rise of the novel, but also the growing autonomy of rational innerness – and the triumphant installment of modern optics as an immediate focus of epistemological worldmaking. This is one of reasons, why this novel creates an illusion, which cannot be severed – on the reader's side – from an intense awareness of reality. Or, as David Andrews put it:

It is odd, then, that the reader takes away from *Aberration* a perfectly coherent whole in which all the perspectives and all their distortions coalesce into one illusion of objectivity.<sup>29</sup>

But this 'illusion of objectivity' is more than just the result of a meticulous and clever constructivity on the author's side. It reflects Sorrentino's ability to bring classical ideas of objective reality into the realm of subjective worldmaking. Which implies a fascinating interference of subjective rationality and worldly objects. *Aberration of Starlight* is an illuminating example of this postmodernist version of 'enlightenment'.

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<sup>29</sup> David Andrews, 'Gilbert Sorrentino', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2001): p. 44.