

## FLYING A KITE. RONALD SUKENICK'S *UP* AND *OUT*

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### I

The titles of Ronald Sukenick's five books of fiction today seem to deserve a certain amount of attention in themselves. Puzzling with the early novels (*Up, Out, 98.6*), challenging with the intermediate collection of shorter pieces (*The death of the novel and other stories*), finally imaginative with his latest work (*Long talking bad conditions blues*), they offer as such something of a quintessential definition of his writing. However, whereas the title of the second of the present two novels has enjoyed a satisfactory critical response and explication, the possible significance of the first work's title has passed largely unnoticed.<sup>1</sup> Actually, although they appeared within a notable, five-year span of each other and are only too conspicuously different, *Up* and *Out* suggest a sequel and thus lend themselves to collective treatment.

If there is a single quality providing most immediately for the identity of the authorial voice in both books, it is an occasional poetic touch about Sukenick's style.

The light starts to empty from the sky, ragged overcast patched with blue. On the tenement roof ... a boyish figure raises a long, bare pole. He holds it above his head ... moves it in a circle, lowers it. Again. Again. Again. The light empties from the sky (Sukenick 1968: 330).

Commenting on this closing scene of *Up*, Jerome Klinkowitz observes: "(it) is lyrical in the finest ... He has not made the sun go down; the fact is that

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<sup>1</sup> A possible exception is J. Klinkowitz's essay "Getting real: making it (UP) with Ronald Sukenick". *Chicago review* No. 3. Winter 1972. 73–82.

the sun will set anyway. But what a wonderful way to make the sun go down" (Klinkowitz 1975: 124).

A big dog is licking Carl's eyes he opens them it's the sun he rolls over stretches out his hand to the damp grass ... gets out the map the siren keeps rising it's too high for Carl to hear beyond a wire fence cows graze he walks to the highway (Sukenick 1973: 74).

In the similarity of the images they employ and the mood they create, these two passages, though selected almost at random, clearly convey a distinctive creative imagination. What it advances in *Up* and elaborates further in *Out* is a metaphorical rehearsal of an esoteric poetics of fiction rendered in terms of kite-flying aerostatics. This is precisely what unifies the ultimate theme and purpose behind the two novels and establishes their paradoxical, disparate congruity. The effort is fully conscious:

We are passing through a time when all the "paradigms" of fiction are called into question and in consequence we begin to see the development of a poetics of fiction. Preferably the theory should be implicit in the novel, the poetics part of the poem (Sukenick 1974b: 429–30).

As Philip Stevick notes in his well known essay on the subject, "there is ... utility in having the power of a novel compressed and represented in a single trope" (Stevick 1974: 135). Obviously, "The first thing to do with metaphors for the novel is to collect them; the second is to make sense of them" (Stevick 1974: 128).

Fundamentally, Sukenick's kite-metaphors illuminate a post-modern artistic sensibility struggling with its medium and its own self, which to a considerable extent is what his whole fiction is all about. Published in 1968, *Up* may be considered a representative book of the decade, in so far as it illustrates the general confusion and uneasiness about the state and future of the novel bearing heavily upon American fiction since the early 60's. According to Klinkowitz, it is

a virtual rewrite of American fiction since World War II. Its here, named Ronald Sukenick, is a walking casebook on (recent) American fiction ... having the intellect of a Glass child, the paranoia of an Alexander Portnoy, the academic hassles of an S. Levin, and all the self-apparent persecution of a Wallant or Bellow hero ... (Klinkowitz 1975: 120–21).

Its formal dimension is equally audacious. Running to over three hundred pages, the work engages a variety of styles and conventions, introduces some new strategies and tackles the paramount issue of fictional reality. Still, as Sukenick hints elsewhere, the idea is not to "recreate history ... but to examine a tradition and its meaning" (Sukenick 1973: 41). *Up* repudiates as outmoded all the received formulae of the genre which account for much of its substance and overall design. More immediately, however, it is to be seen as a

self-imposed and measured exercise in this very tradition. The book responds satisfactorily to S. G. Kellman's concept of self-begetting fiction, as a narrative "within which its main character and his fiction come to life". "The truth is I really want to be a writer. I've always wanted to be a writer" (Sukenick 1968: 129). In this magnum opus of literary allusions and cross-references, Sukenick forges his creative identity through pastiche, imitation, direct parody, implied polemic and pronounced theoretical discourse. While the novel does manage to come out in the end as a unified structure, it reveals at times to be in a state of profound uncertainty: "the whole book may have been a mistake from the beginning" (p. 222), "You think I ought to rewrite it?" (p. 224). Also, with its protagonist — as is typical of self-begetting fiction — solitary, single and overconscious ("I had certain images of heroic isolation, types of exile and self-exile, Kafka, Joyce, Lawrence, Melville" p. 265), *Up* is aware of the need to assert its integrity against external reality: "Contra solipsism. Retreat from the ivory tower, so baleful and meladive" (p. 3). Towards the end of the story, feeling tired and dejected: "I couldn't stand the thought of going back to my apartment" (p. 265), "my cramped and littered desk" (p. 3), the writer raps out a blunt — "The hell with it", decides — "Let's not get too complicated", only to make a surprising offer — "Who wants to fly a kite?" (pp. 265–67 *passim*).

Besides the central hero himself, the project absorbs three of the major characters of the novel who, as Sukenick's additional fictional surrogates, highlight various aspects of his authorial personality. The scene takes place in a solid setting of recognizable landmarks but, significantly, is delineated within a familiar poetic perspective.

The Empire State was so clear it seemed as if there were no atmosphere. From the top you'd see the docks, the harbor, three or four states. Ships in both rivers cutting their slow wakes. When the sun sets you can see the dust in the air below you tinted red, then purple. The lights go on in patterns. All the while a distant roar (pp. 267–68).

The description develops into what may be viewed in the final analysis as a peculiar, "meta-metaphorical" anticipation or diagram of the kite-flying acrobatics to come.

Flocks of pigeons wheeling from the roofs, racing and gliding in skidding circles, merged like intersecting schools of fish, then separated leaving confused stragglers. A jet arrowed up out of Idlewild (p. 268).

Equipped with three kites, twelve hundred feet of string as well as "pieces of rusty metal ... tin cans" (p. 269) — "the detritus of the culture" (Sukenick 1975a: 71), the party enact against the infinity of the sky, which Sukenick was to adopt later as an image of "the blank space the clean slate" (Sukenick 1975a: 171), "silence of page" (Sukenick 1969: 155), a dynamic chronicle of his

genesis as an emerging writer. Predictably enough, the first attempt proves to be an outright and pathetic failure. "The first kite went up quickly '... (then) the string snapped and it settled into the water" (p. 269). Suggested improvements give the next one some momentum. "The second kite, flapping its twig barbed tail, went up with the steady pull of a balloon ... Finch dropped the spool to let it unwind, I felt the string hissing through my fingers" (p. 269). Suddenly, "the kite crumpled, and it collapsed brokenwinged into the river ..." (p. 269). Capitalizing on the now deeper appreciation of its kinetics, the third endeavour brings about further technical refinement of the kite. At the same time, the project is frustrated by other, unforeseen difficulties.

The string came up in a slimy complication of knots, loops and tangles ... We began working at knots with our fingernails and teeth ... after a lot of persistent, rather blind pulling ... the line ... started to untangle (p. 270).

Finally everything seems to be under control; Sukenick in his authorial capacity himself taking charge of (pulling) the string(s), Finch "holding the kite up to the wind", "Otis and Nancy carrying the extra spools." However, "the wind sent the kite sailing low over the river, then ... (again) it took a nosedive right into the water" (p. 270). Unwilling to concede defeat ("It's still in one piece"), they haul it in and decide to try once more ("Maybe it will go up anyway"). Indeed, having survived — to extend the self-begetting theme — this traumatic act of quasi-christening, the last kite was soon "about two hundred feet high and going up like an elevator" (p. 271). Once the kite is up, what originally offered itself as a predictable scenario of demiurgic ecstasy, turns out to be a demanding and exasperating commitment.

The line snaked around my ankle, caught at my shoelace ... I had the cord off my ankle but now it was around my wrist ... "Run with it." ... The line burned through my hands ... "Slow down." "Make it fast." "You clumsy son of a bitch." (pp. 271—72).

Eventually, deploying the whole length of the available line and adapting themselves to its dashing, playful motion, they get the kite as high *up* as it could go.

We passed the line around so that each of us took it for a while, gingerly, incredulously, as though handling tangible evidence of a miracle ... And, as I held the string ... "Gee," said one of the small boys gathered around us, "that fucking kid can sure fly kites." (p. 273).

This is precisely what spells out the title of the book, intimates its qualified success and Sukenick's initiation as a novelist.

As Stevick notes, "Metaphors indicating movement have always seemed central to the novel's purposes: the novel is a river, a passenger train ..." (Stevick 1974: 136). They are to be seen "kinetically, as a force", "a comment

on the self-generating effect of fiction, the principle that things set in motion ... follow their own laws ... run their own course" (Stevick 1974: 135, 133). With its daring if only marginal formal inventiveness and general restlessness, *Up* is certainly trying to assert its own voice, to break out of the straightjacket system of conventional narrative. The effort is self-consciously ventilated by the suggestive line from a pop-song, "You got to shake it shake it shake it" (p. 279), and informs the kite-flying itself.

The kite zoomed about as if it were trying to get away, darting this way and that like a fish in a small tank (p. 273).

However, although it is clear that when controlled too hard the kite starts to "dip and dive" or becomes "absolutely still", and even though in the frenzy of the moment the writer is urged by one of his alter egos to "Let it out" (p. 271), he lacks at this stage the necessary confidence and sense of direction to do so. In the end, to thematically accommodate this spirit of irresolution and uncertainty, Sukenick has his kite shattered by a passing ship.

The line slipped over the high ... foremast ... The kite settled, dragging in the air after the freighter ... we grew quiet, watching as the kite floated into the water way downstream (p. 274).

Notwithstanding the awareness that "nothing (has been) solved", the venture leaves the author "happy" — "projecting huge, beautiful ... kites, hypothesizing an impossible, ultimate kite" (p. 274).

The way *Up* dodges this self-evolved dilemma brings to mind Mark Twain's memorable trick in *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In the wake of Huck's irreversible failure to take Jim to the free states, the author dispels the impasse thwarting the progress of the novel by, likewise, having his raft smashed under the paddlewheel of a steamboat. As has been suggested by numerous critics, Twain apparently did not see clearly where he was going when he began the book. With the raft as an expedient, supporting symbol, the method and meaning of *Huckleberry Finn* grow organically out of its own development. As the writer recommended, "Narrative should flow as flows the brook ... its course changed by every boulder it comes across ... its surface broken, but its course not stayed ... a brook that never goes straight for a minute, but goes briskly, sometimes ungrammatically ... always loyal to that law, the law of the narrative, which *has no law*" (Shefter 1973: 19).

## II

It is already in his next work, the collection *Death of the novel*, itself "technically more diffusive and inventive" (Klinkowitz 1975: 124), that Sukenick's kite-metaphor finds its perspicuous, theoretical, articulation.

There's one of the ideas we have to get rid of: the Great Work<sup>2</sup> ... What we need is not Great Works but playful ones in whose sense of creative joy everyone can join. "Built entirely without precedent or orderly planning, created bit by bit on sheer impulse, a natural artist's instinct, and the fantasy of the moment" (Sukenick 1969: 56, 163).

All these qualities, echoing Twain's poetics, are displayed in the spontaneous and dazzling kite-flying performance in *Out*. It is introduced almost exactly half-way through the book and is set very nearly at "the geographical center of U.S. ... one of the magic places where everything comes together" (Sukenick 1973: 140).

Coming into Rapid City ... we stop for a hitchhiker he climbs into the truck very stiff we pull him up ... he opens his valise

starts working with some struts and colored paper very quickly he has this box kite set up red and blue with small wings he gets in and takes off rises to the top of a tall cottonwood tree and gets off on a branch on one side starts climbing disappears on a branch opposite he's going to fall

disappears his head pokes out around a distant branch he falls reappears at the very top of the tree disappears around to the other side a foot comes out from behind a branch a leg an arm waving then he reappears next to us on the ground I hug him ... (pp. 134–135).

Instructively, this feat of incantatory virtuosity is directly related, "in a slow practical chant" to the wind ("Trust the wind" p. 78) as an image of creative spirit.

Without the wind  
The kite is dead  
With it everything  
Is possible (p. 140).

It is fitting that the kite-sorcerer should immediately and inexplicably disappear, thus suggesting that it was a "dream". "That vision has seven meanings only of them are important what's important is the feeling of it ..." (p. 137). Actually, the book in its entirety releases and sustains the liberating "feeling of it", since it functions in its own right as a dynamic, "hypothetical" kite — according to Sukenick's dictum that "Form is itself a metaphor" (Sukenick 1974b: 429).

If *Up* comes forth as an initiatory pilgrimage to the thesaurus of modern fiction, the second novel is a postmodern quest for — to pun in the writer's words on its title — "an opening out, a broader awareness of the possibilities of the medium" (Sukenick 1974a: 133).

Besides the respective kite-flying scenes central to them, the present two

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Sukenick's remark in *Out*: "MOBY DICK ... FACING EXTINCTION" (p. 261).

works imply a sequel also on the account of some thematic correspondences. The crucial one is obviously that of "Ronald Sukenick", featured in *Up* and *Out* in many roles or guises, among them Roland Sycamore, a fictional character in both novels. This continuous metamorphosis of characters is especially relevant for the structure and meaning of *Out*. What reappears in it to define its (dis-) organization is also a wrist-watch exemplum illustrating the artist's troubled apprehension of time. In the dramatic struggle with the last kite in *Up* its line is seen not only tangling on Sukenick's foot and wrist, but "hissing through the links of (his) watchband, pulling the watch right off" (Sukenick 1968: 271). Foreshadowing the inconclusiveness of the whole venture, it is only proper that the author should manage to get "disentangled from the string", thus evading the danger (chance?) of "hav(ing) to let the watch go up" (Sukenick 1968:271). In one of the kaleidoscopic episodes of *Out* movie shooting is brought to a stand-still following the loss of its director's watch. "That watch is very precious to me. I can't work without (it)" (p. 201). Given the bent of the project ("an epic-mythic-cosmic spectacular") as well as a possible allusion to Donald Barthelme's famous concept of "dreck" inscribed in the director's name (Mr. Derrekker), the passage may be regarded as a scathing insight into the disposition of popular art in general. As for Sukenick himself, in *Out* his is a simple choice.

He wonders where he's going he's a little afraid not too much just enough he slips off his watch and heaves it into the dark. As he walks he whistles ... he's happy ... (p. 57).

With, admittedly, *Up* as the immediate field of reference, the writer declares at the beginning of *Out*: "This one's gonna be different" (p. 17). His overall intention is made clear later in the novel: "I don't want to remember anything" (p. 107), "I want to erase all books. My ambition is to unlearn everything ..." (p. 136). The damage *Out* inflicts upon traditional procedures and formulae of fiction is truly incisive. Not only do the characters merge and in the course of things dissolve into one another, but they are perfectly "unreal" and they themselves "feel like cardboard" p. 154. Not only is the tense of the narrative reduced to the ever expanding present but the major incidents are very often presented in baffling, alternative versions. Consequently, the rules of chronology, causality, let alone plausibility are being constantly disrupted or totally neglected. Also, as Raymond Federman put it, "OUT fucks up the English language. No one ... has as yet ... so brilliantly, so deliberately messed up the English syntax ... half-finished sentences run into other half-finished sentences to make new unfinished sentences" (Federman 1974: 140). On top of all this, the author occasionally steps in to directly challenge the reader vis-à-vis the text: "here we are in the middle of our book" (p. 117), "Hi. Everything up to here has been a novel" (p. 162), "I'm getting out of

this novel" (p. 164). However, as he motions in his "Twelve digressions toward a study of composition", "fiction ... has to be considered not only an artifact but also an activity" (Sukenick 1974b: 431). Accordingly, the bizzare trip across the country which informs the plot<sup>3</sup> of the novel is organically propelled by the formal design of the book. In particular, the hallucinatory speed of the journey is paralleled by the ever accelerating manner of narration. Thematic motifs of dispersion and decomposition in which the story abounds are reflected in the organizing principle of the text — the order of the countdown, with blocks of words decreasing by a line in each "chapter" from ten to one and leaving proportionately the inverse number of blank lines in between. "This is the message. Speed increases space expands" (p. 104). When the narrative line runs its length, "this way out" (p. 294), the novel — reminiscent of kite-flying aerostatics throughout — bursts like the cherished, "impossible" kite into empty space, "the blank page, the void where everything is called into question" (Sukenick 1974b: 437).

Sukenick comments on the development and performance of his early fiction in one of the characteristic, digressive asides of *98.6*: "(He) has tried up and he has tried out ... (But it'll take you (only) part of the way ...)" (Sukenick 1975a: 131). The idea is to "invent new games — and then discard them and invent more" (Sukenick 1969: 57). Indeed, *Out* is not to be seen as an end in itself, and neither is the kite-metaphor to be regarded as *the* rubrick of Sukenick's poetics. Where the first two novels offer a therapeutic clearing of the ground, *98.6* and especially *Long talking bad conditions blues* construct new forms, generate new meanings and create new fictional realities. In fact, it is already in *Out* that the future direction of his writing suggests itself. Drawing on the inspirational impulse of the box-kite vision, the author envisages "a book like a cloud that changes as it goes" (p. 136). Not only does *98.6* resemble one, but Sukenick himself appears in it as a character named Cloud. Also, to stress the importance of the original kite-metaphor, Sukenick's aesthetics of "skywriting" (L. S. Bergmann's coinage) has since developed a number of congenial images. In effect, his fiction continues to "fill ... what he calls the verbal hole with airy provocations", "not unlike the exhaust stream of a jet plane twisted by random winds into illegible scribbles in the sky" (Sukenick 1979: 4, 112).

By way of conclusion, we may only repeat after Stevick that "it is certainly possible to invent ... metaphor(s) ... separating other people's novels, popular novels, old-fashioned novels, from the kind that one likes or writes oneself" (Stevick 1974: 131).

<sup>3</sup> Actually, Sukenick's counter-definition should be respected here: "There's a ... more basic phrase to replace plot—what I call incident, movement, action" (Sukenick 1976: 143).

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