Sophisticated Spontaneity: The Art of Life in Gary Soto's *Living Up The Street*

Heiner Bus

Starting his career as a poet in 1977 Gary Soto turned into a productive author of autobiographical narratives or essays within the last three years, contributing to the rediscovery of this genre by Chicano writers in the second half of the eighties. *Living Up The Street*[1] certainly defined a distinct perspective and mood for Soto's next two collections of short prose pieces,[2] all of them constructing small spaces of stability within a larger world of fluidity.

Life in the streets of Fresno, California, is the main subject of the twenty-one stories comprising *Living Up The Street*, which proceeds from "Being Mean" to "A Good Day." These titles suggest progress from violence and evilness to harmony and virtuousness. As the subtitle "Narrative Recollections" qualifies the book as an autobiographical work, the title phrase refers to the double exploitation of street life in reality and by memory.

Such conclusions presuppose a person who is quite certain about the relationship between his past and present. Yet, from the very beginning, the narrator presents himself as someone lacking a simple formula to subsume his life: "We were terrible kids, I think. My brother, sister, and I felt a general meanness begin to surface from our tiny souls while living on Braly Street, which was in the middle of industrial Fresno" (9). In my analysis of some of the most significant stories, I shall concentrate on the various modes of retrospection and introspection, the handling of the distance between narrated self and the narrator, the themes and final results of this search for a usable past.

In the lines quoted from the first paragraph, the narrator immediately questions the validity of the statement of an adult and prepares the ambivalent perspective of his story-telling. His ironic style both reflects the children's sense of growth, his own distressing awareness of his distance from this period, and, consequently, his perception of growth as loss. The mode of presentation paradoxically first closes and then widens the gap between the recalling and the recalled subject, as it implies the hope for a recovery of experience and, at the same time, exploits the

radical dissociation from adult standards. The first paragraphs of "Being Mean" also introduce a major theme of the book, values in a particular environment as prescribed by society in general and as experienced in the streets by the kids testing various adult ideologies offered in the smooth language of public consent.[3]

Braly Street is recalled as a rough place encouraging the children to live out their inherited strain of violence. Their 'savage' life bluntly contradicts the stereotypical expectations suggested by their 'civilized' appearance: "Although we looked healthy, clean in the morning, and polite as only Mexicans can be polite, we had a streak of orneriness that we imagined to be normal play" (9). The children utterly enjoy the rhythm of Braly Street set by "the broom factory and its brutal 'whack' of straw being tied into brooms" (9), an image illustrating the mechanics of this type of educational process.

In these passages the narrator switches to a matter-of-fact tone in keeping with the moral neutrality of the kids: "There were eight children on the block that year, ranging from twelve down to one, so there was much to do" (9).[4] This observation can be generalized: whenever the storyteller manifests himself in the text, he sides with the children. He, for example, discloses that some adult members of the Soto family also combined violent fighting with an exhuberant joy of life. His cynical and humorous comments, his imagery, his obvious delight in depicting the hilariousness of this paradise lost display his astonishment at the simplicity, consistency and effectiveness of this world. Braly Street provides the children and even some adults with ample opportunities to escape the punishment for 'uncivilized' behavior. Therefore, the first story of the book adequately closes with a scene of violent pleasures after an extreme example of unatoned 'meanness.'

"Being Mean" turns out to be an extension and illustration of the introductory statement of disconcertedness: "We were terrible kids, I think." Though the narrator clearly supports the children, he cannot define his loyalties in the maze of his longings for identification and the necessity and reality of detachment. This makes him open for further challenges brought up by memory.

In the following prose piece, the narrator recalls situations from his childhood and youth to his senior high school days, a period of roughly twelve years. Though the adult classification 'meanness' is repeated several times, the universe of the kids is described as a sphere of natural directness and fairness. Meanness becomes a synonym for virtues the recollecting self seems to miss in his present life.

In a number of stories, the kids succeed in rejecting the demands of

the adults either by sheer ignorance or skillful remodelling strategies. Still, many of the excursions into true meanness end in failure, and prove that there is no self-determination beyond childhood. For a while this notion is covered up by gestures of pretense or desperate retreats into the past. "Small Faces" very impressively demonstrates the dilemma. There, the narrator sees himself at sixteen when he worked as "a recreational assistant for the City Parks Department" (83). Like Holden Caulfield as the *Catcher in the Rye*, Gary used his job to relate to a particular period and a specific place. While walking through the streets of his childhood to the school some of his family had visited, he reflected: "So this is what it's like, I thought. I walked in wonder and in quiet happiness because this was the area where I had spent my first six years" (83). In contrast to the chief supervisor of the program, Gary "wanted badly to be liked by these kids" (86). When he did not achieve this goal from the detached position of a superior, he participated in their games as an equal, "happy and thinking it wasn't so bad" (92).

Rejecting the role of an adult, like in the subsequent story "Bloodworth," did not really solve his problems in the long run. The inevitability of growth and socialization, the strong pull of the world of the grownups with its rewards[5] could no longer be resisted. In the stories documenting the transition into adulthood, the escapist strategies turn out to be ineffective and self-deceptive. Yet the narrator signals his refusal to cut all the ties with his childhood.

"Being Stupid" excellently demonstrates his double allegiance. Its first sentence, "What evilness had risen from my hand?" (123), refers back to the very beginning of the book. Whereas in Braly Street the kids enjoyed their own culture, "Being Stupid" suggests that the heroic attempt to conjure up and practise the 'meanness of childhood' now becomes self-afflictive stupidity. The story consists of two scenes of pleasure spoiled by contemplation of the moral context. Values as taught by the Catholic church certainly determine the outcome of the first one, while in the second one these combine with a naive lack of foresight. In both adventures the protagonists acknowledge their shortcomings, though none of them is able to articulate them as clearly as the narrator by his very sophisticated mode of presentation. Unlike the introductory statement of "Being Mean," the initial rhetorical question of "Being Stupid" remains unmodified. The narrator calls the boys stupid for acting against their better judgment taught to them in the normal process of socialization. Yet the radicalism of his summaries implies an ironic point of view which is confirmed whenever the actual feelings of the kids are communicated in a plain style.[6] These signals indicate that he believes that the children have

been cheated not only by their own antagonisms but also by the institutions and authorities responsible for the loss of childhood without adequate compensations. The narrator as an adult skeptic obviously understands the reluctance to grow up. This becomes particularly evident towards the end of the second scene when the protagonist longs for the period of 'innocent meanness' as recollected in the earlier episodes:

> What freedom of conscience. When we were kids of thirteen and fourteen we had done the same: Downed a bowl of Frosted Flakes and then met somewhere, in a vacant lot or a corner, to begin a day of wandering through the streets of Fresno in search of trouble. There had been no better time. (131)

Again the narrator pronounces the emotions of the protagonist who expressed himself in simple compensatory gestures in the Huck Finn style. Such auxiliary services announce a new quality in the relations between the narrating and the narrated selves.

By the simple fact of growing older, the stronger demands of the adult world, and the newly developed skills of self-reflection, the two gradually move towards each other. "Small Faces" describes the ability of the adolescent to refer back to an earlier period of his life; in "One Last Time" the protagonists are portrayed with a firm perspective of their past and future; and some of the events of "Being Stupid" are set in a time "when I was trying to become a poet" (125). All these testing episodes result in disappointments, nevertheless, they mark the birth of the autobiographer.

In this middle section of the book the quality of the materials recollected make Gary a more sophisticated narrator. The double perspective of "Small Faces" and "One Last Time," the tight summaries of longer sequences in his biography in "Desire" and "Bloodworth," the rise of perspective as a central theme of "Small Faces" and "A Saturday with Jackie" substantiate this. Sophistication is employed by the narrator while, at the same time, his narrated self again and again experiences it as unproductive.

The beginning and the conclusion of "Black Hair" make this contradiction very evident. The narrator starts out with a neat subdivision of his life: "There are two kinds of work: One uses the mind and the other uses muscle. As a kid I found out about the latter" (113). Like "One Last Time," "Black Hair" shows that "There was no grace at work. It was all ridicule" (120). Looking back at this disillusionment, the narrator concludes with yet another philosophical passage:

> How we arrived at such a place is a mystery to me. Why anyone would stay for years is even a deeper concern. You showed up, but from where? What broken life? What ugly past? The foreman showed you the Coke machine, the washroom, and the yard where you'd work. When you picked up a tire, you were amazed at the black it could give off. (121)

Such comment reveals an utter helplessness when faced with the complexities of life. At the same time the narrator re-establishes the detachment of the introductory paragraph. He is performing the work of the mind, voicing his concern without being able to answer his own questions.[7] Though his experience teaches him to take reality for granted, he searches for continuity between past and present as is expected from an autobiographer. But he remains a very puzzled recorder. He cannot explain his situation, though he somehow avoided the "dark fate" of his early fears, "To marry Mexican poor, work Mexican hours, and in the end die a Mexican death, broke and in despair" (119–120).

The final stories depicting a person testing the work of the mind do not produce much progress. "The Savings Book" leaves behind a remarkably confident narrator after recalling a larger segment of his life: "It's time to live, I tell myself, and if a five dollar bill flutters from my hands, no harm will result. I laugh at the funny scenes that aren't funny, and I can't think of any better life" (136). Here the narrator contradicts the emotions which caused him to write this particular story and the whole book. He poses as a person in totally different circumstances, who, on this material basis, has detached himself from his past. Still, the inserted "I tell myself" hints at the self-persuasive element in his strategy which is totally exposed when he starts to tell the next story which again requires the subtle interplay between closeness and detachment typical of autobiography.

In "Getting By" Gary's problems become even more urgent. He anxiously seeks to avoid parallels between his "narrative recollections" and his beginnings as an author of autobiographical poems. The craft and its practical results are described in extremely negative terms:

> I sat in the living room, legs crossed, and literally waited for a poem to surface from a brain cell, because I was clear-headed and eager to push words from one side of the page to the next. I was eager to reinvent my childhood, to show others the chinaberry tree, ants shadows, dirty spoons—those nouns that made up much of my poetry. On that day in August nothing came except a few stilted lines about loneliness in contemporary society. I felt sick. The poems I had written in the previous weeks had been dismal efforts to rekindle a feel for the past. (139)

In the last scene of the story, his preoccupation with art and its social accessories prevent him from acting spontaneously and responsibly when help is requested by his next-door neighbor. Indirectly, this observation already justifies the narrator's longing for the simple enjoyment of immediate reality without the burdens of memory and sophistication.

The devaluation of the past is also reflected in the modes of telling. Events are separated from their original contexts, the stories become extremely episodic and rather incoherent, 'short takes' for restricted audiences such as the letters to Carolyn and the diarylike passages of "Short Takes." The narrator's notion of life's ambivalence and lack of casuality[8] explain his concentration on small segments of reality. At this point he constructs the coherent myth of an ideal childhood as an alternative. He indirectly describes its ideological foundation when he compares his daughter's state of mind with that of ants, "alive but not fully aware" (151).[9]

The final "A Good Day," which at the beginning of my analysis was suspected to provide a positive conclusion, shows how the narrator eagerly pursues his precarious course of looking at the wonders of life with the eyes of a child. The emotions triggering off the action are not unfamiliar to the children of Braly Street: "Once, when we were bored and irritable. . . . " (157). Relief is easily achieved by mobility and the fruits of unwelcome sophistication. The appreciation of "a fuchsia-like vine with red-flamed flowers" (157) on the way and the play with sterotypical roles demonstrate the merging of the publicly celebrated spontaneous with the unobtrusive premeditated:

> We walked along a leaf-littered path, paired-off into couples looking very much like the tourists we were . . . We stopped and leaned against a stone fence, first to take pictures of the divers, and then of one another gazing into the distance, in the mock concentration of would-be free thinkers. (158)

After the first paragraph, the reactions of the group are predictable as recorder and agents appear to be firmly resolved to avoid negative encounters with the work of the mind. Thus, the potential meanings of the details observed and recalled are largely ignored: the divers of Cuernavaca perform at "a pond that was pressed small by an arena of jagged rocks and wispy trees that were filled with birds" (158). After collecting money they plunge into the depth and come up smiling. Setting and action are not marked as metaphors for the recollecting process.

In the next scene the group meets a blind harp player who entertains

them with an autobiographical story, various childhood memories and a love song. Again, the narrator does not comment on such obvious correspondences with his preoccupation. He remains busy with the apparently objective reproduction of the ostensible spontaneity of the group. And he preserves his detached attitude even when he admits that they recognized the manipulation and illusion in the situation. As if by a common consent they stopped their train of thought: "when he finished we clapped and could think of no finer music as we looked at one another, moved by the song and this man who seemed so innocent despite his age" (159). As with the "fuchsia-like vine" in the first paragraph, the 'innocents abroad' are deeply impressed by this stereotypical figure personifying the dissociation from actuality and the creation of another present through memory and art. The narrator here draws his own portrait without saying so. Such attitudes confirm the beginning of the story: the narrator does not disturb the atmosphere of unrestrained enjoyment of the immediate, though his function as "master of impression management"[10] disproves his own public image.

The coda of the story further undermines his position as it shows how strongly spontaneous behavior relies on the stereotypical, the premeditated:

> We hummed louder, but when they [their wives] picked up handfulls of leaves and twigs to throw at us, we stopped and mockingly opened our arms to them. Leaves fluttered in the air, and we chased them humming all the way down the hill to the car. (159)

Quite sophistically, the conclusion quotes details from the preceding scenes. There is singing, the butterflies of the love song have turned into fluttering leaves. Once more the full connotative potential of these symbolic gestures of love remains unexploited by the acting figures and the recollecting narrator.[11]

Like the children of Braly Street, the adults accept and use the setting for their own pleasure, ending up in gestures of love replacing or perhaps merely modifying the acts of violence of "Being Mean." But Cuernavaca is a place of their own choice as the trip has been purposefully designated as a relief operation from the frustrations of everyday life. This intention determines their mode of perception and the processing of impressions. As we have seen, the narrator has stored up more than he and his companions wanted to assimilate at the time and afterwards. His refusal to give up his restraints shows that he pretends to have slipped back into the life of simplifications leaving the interpretation of the totality of

details, the arts of life and recollection to his readers. He declines to function like the blind harp player whose present and future were dominated by the past; but, on the other hand, this is exactly the configuration Gary constructed for himself.

In these paradoxical circumstances, it is quite logical to finish the series of prose pieces. "A Good Day" closes the gap between the narrator and the narrated self. As the narrator deliberately identifies with himself and the group, there is no longer any need or space for him to directly interfere. But even the simple task of documenting such unconditional surrender to the spontaneous asks for a sophisticated mind making choices of detail and medium.

In *Living Up The Street*, the adult narrator started by looking into the period of the naive approach to reality, brought back the disappointments of the adolescent with the work of the muscle and the mind, and closed the circle by returning to the simple, unrestricted life. Paradoxically, the retreat into the realm of spontaneity was achieved by memory which provided the adult with all the materials from which he could deduce the idea of an existence apart from the irritating world of ambiguities and change. In this way the book retrospectively justifies and contradicts the narrator's denunciation of sophistication as harmful, and also justifies and contradicts his suspension of the boundaries between life and art as a technique to guarantee his new peace of mind.

The conclusion of the book boldly propagates that a new beginning is possible by returning to childhood and by largely shutting out adolescence and life in general. But already in "Saturday with Jackie," a story from the middle section, the chances to control the impact of reality were depicted as rather small. The narrator recalls an excursion downtown with his friend Jackie. The two youngsters obviously tried to impose their own tough-guy image on the scene:

> We started up Angus Street, looking around without talking. If we did talk, it was not in sentences but single words or phrases . . . We walked without saying too much because talking ruined the joy of noseless minds. Jackie understood this, I understood this, so we walked looking around like television cameras . . . We looked around while that endless film wound behind our eyes. (80)

For most of the time there is no direct response to the many signals of actual life. Only when the kids discover mannequins in a boarded-up building do they lose their composure. It is the replicas, not real people, which persuade them to fall back into unrestrained child's play.

Transferring this pattern of experience to the last stage of develop-

ment means that the replicas of life as constructed by memory cause the final effort of the narrator to approach life unreservedly. Negating the selective work of the mind in reality and in its reproduction in the story, he tries to escape the inescapable. *Living Up the Street* rejects the familiar civilising process with the fragile, contradictory artifice of life lived and/as reconstructed.

On this ideological basis, Gary Soto continued to publish more collections of loosely interrelated stories, all of them adding up to the picture of a person eager to control the ghosts of the past, and, in the restricted sphere of his private life, to create islands of stability through the protagonist's sensibility and the artist's effective but unobtrusive practice of his craft. Soto's autobiographical narratives avoid many stereotypical features of mainstream autobiography but also honor this tradition. With their constructs of unresolved contradiction, they use the imagination and art as means of escape from "other directedness."[12] This series of temporary centers lacks the optimistic, self-confident spirit, the coherence and the shrill didacticism of some of the great models of autobiography as Soto does not explore the origins of success. He, rather, returns to the crossroads from where the collective norms led him astray, into blind alleys of frustration. He comes pretty close to the basic concept of *The Education of Henry Adams*, the narrator of which searches for stability and identity in a disintegrating world. In the terminology suggested in Wayne Shumaker's *English Autobiography: Its Emergence, Material and Form*,[13] *Living Up the Street* is a "developmental autobiography" and, more precisely, a very individual variation of the conversion narrative. The desire to document and communicate these efforts of 'living up the past,' of self-help, are common to the Chicano writer and his mainstream colleagues. Soto's many idiosyncrasies, above all his brilliant use of understatement, secure him the position of an outsider whose works "enrich and complicate the tradition."[14]

[1](San Francisco: Strawberry Hill Press, 1985). All subsequent quotes in the text are from this edition.

[2]*Small Faces* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1986) and *Lesser Evils. Ten Quartets* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1988).

[3]Cf. "We were terrible kids . . . our tiny souls."

[4]Cf. also the description of the baby of the Molinas "crying like a small piece of machinery turning at great speed" (10).

[5]Mildly ironized retrospectively in the earlier story "Looking for Work."

[6]Cf. also the introduction of his friends as "lover of gravy on cantaloupe"

(123) and "still another lover of cantaloupe and gravy" (124); also when he describes their life style: "We lived like monks with bad eating habits" (125).

[7]Here Soto gives the reader an example of what Sherwood Anderson called "the sadness of sophistication" (cf. "Sophistication" in *Winesburg, Ohio*).

[8]Cf. also p. 153: "The truth is, I am unsure about where we will be in a year and what life will wake up to; we've had close calls in the past when our passbook read close to zero. Anything is possible."

[9]Cf. also pp. 34–35: " 'Yeah, then we could have a dirt clod fight,' I reply, so happy to be alive."

[10]Cf. Stephen J. Whitfield, "Three Masters of Impression Management: Benjamin Franklin, Booker T. Washington, and Malcolm X as Autobiographers," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 77 (1978): 399–417.

[11]Like the butterflies, the fallen and fluttering leaves refer to the idea of transformation and manipulation, the natural cycles of rebirth and memory, the interaction of past and present.

[12]David Riesman's term as used in his *The Lonely Crowd* (1950).

[13](Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954).

[14]James Craig Holte, "The Representative Voice: Autobiography and the Ethnic Experience," *MELUS* 9.2 (Summer 1982): 25–46, 45.