

A Question of Identity: The Proto-Giulio Characters in Michael Mirolla's *Formal Logic of Emotion* and Their Relationship to Future Giulios

By Oswald Yuan-Chin Chang

Abstract

This paper examines the question of the connection between and among the various characters named Giulio in Canadian author Michael Mirolla's fiction. The paper emphasizes the earliest proto-Giulio character to be found in the author's first collection of short stories *The Formal Logic of Emotion*, and the relationship of that character with later Giulios, specifically those found in "Giulio Visits A Friend" and "Into Another Country." The paper concludes that, while these characters are not the same character in terms of physical or even geographical description, they reflect the fluidity of identity as theorized by Mirolla and actualized in his writing — and can thus be called identical in metafictional terms.

Introduction

This article proposes to examine the connection (if any) and the implications of that connection or lack thereof between two characters, both named "Giulio," in Canadian author Michael Mirolla's 1992 short story collection *The Formal Logic of Emotion*. Specifically, the paper concentrates on two short stories in that collection: the opening one entitled "A Theory of Discontinuous Existence" and the closing one called "The Proper Country." The two stories mark the first time that the "Giulio" character appeared in Mirolla's writing, and serve as the introduction of what could be called the Ur- or Proto-Giulio from which other "Giulios" have cascaded down through the years.

While the two characters named "Giulio," each serving as the focal point of a particular short story, do not seem to have much in common in terms of their physical make-up, actions, thought patterns and emotional setup, this article will argue that (a) they are in fact continuations of the same character, given Mirolla's notions of the fluidity of identity; and (b) they fit under the umbrella of the author's deconstruction of the meaning of human identity as something that is Lacanian rather than Cartesian. The paper attempts to achieve this through:

- A. A look at some of the influences (literary and otherwise) that have led Mirolla to create such a character in the first place, and the theoretical basis upon which the character exists.
- B. A close examination and critique of the two stories in question ("A Theory" and "The Proper Country") and this character as some type of Ur-Giulio,

- some type of representative of the author's creator-creation-created complex;
and
- C. A linking of the two stories to Mirolla's other, later writing (especially in a group of short stories published in various literary journals and magazines in which a character named Giulio continues to serve as the main creation, with emphasis on "Giulio Visits A Friend" and "Into Another Country").

In the next section, the article looks at some general concepts having to do with fiction in the 21st century, and how and how well those concepts have been fitted into Mirolla's writing. Please note: The author has granted the writer permission to access his unpublished manuscript *The Giulio Metaphysics III*, under which heading a grouping of "Giulio" stories have been gathered, including both published and unpublished short stories.

Metafiction and Identity: Some General Concepts

One of the major themes dealt with in serious literature in the late 20th and early 21st century is the question of identity and the connection between author and character. The underlying assumption in the majority of such literature is that the "self" is not a static object with some sort of essentialist nature. Rather, as Steven E. Alford stated, this self "is a textual construct, and subject to the difference and deferral inherent in language" (17).

The fluidity of identity within literature is a reflection of the indeterminacy of identity outside literature, "a social and linguistic construct, a nexus of meaning rather than an unchanging entity" (Kerby 34). In fact, an argument has been made that the self is nothing more or less than the very language in which descriptions of that self are couched. As Kerby put it: "[T]his identity ... is not the persistence of an entity, a thing (a substance, subject, ego), but is a meaning constituted by a relation of figure to ground or part to whole. It is an identity in difference constituted by framing the flux of particular experiences by a broader story" (46).

At the same time, what this implies is that the notion of "knowing oneself" or of so-called true self-knowledge is a contradictory one, one that can never be achieved. In the first place, it is understood that the "text" of that knowledge is a constantly revisionary one, one which is constantly being worked on: "We understand our self as the locus of our identity by telling ourselves stories, yet these stories' criterion of correctness is not truth, but what we might call the adequacy of a meaningful narrative sequence" (Alford 22). In the second place, the argument leads to an unsolvable paradox: in the attempt to sever self from truth, we also

sever our ability to know if that statement itself is true. As Linda Hutcheon has pointed out in talking about thinkers and literary critics such as Lyotard and Foucault: “These positions are typically paradoxical; they are the masterful denials of mastery, the cohesive attacks on cohesion, the essentializing challenges to essences, that characterize postmodern theory” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 20).

It is thus a double trap: there is the suggestion (only a suggestion as truth is no longer viable) that self-knowledge must always be deferred and pushed into a new place where we cannot go without altering that self and thus making it no longer self-knowledge; and there is the idea that, because we cannot prove categorically that self-knowledge is impossible, we will always continue to strive for it, hoping to find it over the next hill, as it were. As Paul Auster has his narrator say in *The Locked Room*, the third novel in his *New York Trilogy*:

We all want to be told stories, and we listen to them in the same way we did when we were young. We imagine the real story inside the words, and to do this we substitute ourselves for the person in the story, pretending that we can understand him because we understand ourselves. This is a deception. We exist for ourselves, perhaps, and at times we even have a glimmer of who we are, but in the end we can never be sure, and as our lives go on, we become more and more opaque to ourselves, more and more aware of our own incoherence. No one can cross the boundary into another — for the simple reason that no one can gain access to himself. (292)

Under these circumstances, defining a character’s autonomous nature, sense of freedom, and specific unique identity is not possible because these “are not pregiven or a priori characteristics but must be redefined within the context of the person’s appearance within the sociolinguistic arena” (Kerby 113-114).

At the same time, there is the strong inference that all identities are inter-connected in one way or another and, in some cases, contingent upon one another: “One cannot become ‘I’ without an implicit reference to another person, an auditor or narratee — which may be the same subject qua listener. ‘I’ functions in contrast to ‘you’ in much the same way as ‘here’ refers linguistically to ‘there’ rather than any fixed location” (Kerby 68). In the same way, attempts to stop or freeze an identity in order to examine it are futile and useless:

“Interpretation, like understanding, is a continuous process with no precise starting point ... interpretation has always already started” (Kerby 44). What takes place in these efforts to “pin down” a character’s identity is that simply another piece of writing is created, one which itself then needs examination and interpretation and which has in effect “created” a new identity. Rather than the modern split between self and other, there are multiple selves and others moving in and out of each other, forming, reforming, deforming.

According to Hutcheon: “The modernist concept of a single and alienated otherness is challenged by the postmodern questioning of binaries that conceal hierarchies (self/other)” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 61). This is similar to the notion of “difference” and how signifiers are grouped together (in Saussurian-Derridian terms), something that describes not just how a narrative might be put together but also how identities might be constructed and deconstructed: “Difference suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, rather than binary opposition and exclusion” (Hutcheon 61).

Above and beyond this realization lies the notion of the ironic turn and the ability to manipulate a narrative and therefore characters within any such narrative in ways that create deliberate illusions and false trails. Once the notions of essential identity and truth are discarded, the playfulness takes on a life of its own. For example, as Allen Thiher said of Nabokov’s writing:

Freud appears to be a quintessential modernist insofar as the unconscious, with its storehouse of time past, can be compared to the modernist domain of revelation, waiting to be seized in the form of iconic symbols. By contrast Nabokov's self-conscious play with ironic doubles exults in the arbitrary relations that obtain between signs. There is, for Nabokov, no other discourse than this manifest play of autonomous language. There is nothing beneath this verbal surface. The novel's surface is all that the novel is: a self-enclosed structure of self-mirrorings, offered as so many language games, with only an occasional catastrophe to recall the void that waits on the other side. (100)

At the same time, one of the most obvious connections between one character and another, and between any set of characters and the author, can be found in the metafictional nature of much of the writing today. As Hutcheon stated: “What we tend to call postmodernism in literature today is usually characterized by intense self-reflexivity and overly parodic intertextuality” (“Historiographic Metafiction” 3). Metafiction itself has been defined as “fiction about fiction – that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (*Narcissistic Narrative* 11).

This fits in well with the fluidity of identity and inability to pin a character down: designing a novel or short story around a Cartesian character is no longer possible. Rather, a postmodern writer “takes the inner division that results from self-consciousness and, by metaphoric extension, makes it a resource — namely, the subject of his fiction” (Westervelt 42). This, in turn, leads to a new approach to critical debate on metafiction, a debate that “substitutes a heroics of text and language for the older heroics of creative genius and

imagination. The text ... accepts the existentialist challenge to confront the lack of a center at the heart of language and to dwell in that void” (Woolley 460).

In the next section, the paper examines in close detail some ideas behind Mirolla’s selection of a proto- or Ur-Giulio character in the two stories in *The Formal Logic of Emotion* that have a “Gulio” character as the main protagonist: “A Theory of Discontinuous Existence” and “The Proper Country”.

The Ur-Giulio Concept

The original character named Giulio first appears in Mirolla’s fiction in “A Theory of Discontinuous Existence,” a short story selected as part of *The Journey Prize Anthology*, comprising the 10 best short stories published in the previous year in Canadian literary journals. Later it formed the opening story in Mirolla’s first collection, *The Formal Logic of Emotion* (1992), and was listed under the sub-heading “The Giulio Metaphysics I,” thus implying that there would be more to come.

In the story, a young boy named Giulio undergoes an appendectomy and then the reader is given a whirlwind tour of his life — to the point where it loops once again back to just before he is about to have his operation. Thus, the reader does not know whether what has taken place actually happened to a person named Giulio or is something invented by him as he undergoes the operation, as he is being put under. The end of the story hints at something of the sort:

And he fell away, the vision of his friend an anomaly sitting there in that sun-speckled room, blowing his nose on blue toilet paper and holding a picture of himself in his hand. Now, where did he get that? But he fell away before the answer came to him. Perhaps never to awaken. Perhaps to dream forever. Perhaps to invent the rest of his life after all. (37)

Two elements that are explored much more fully in later stories appear here for the first time: (1) the notion that the attempt to pin things down, to analyze their components or to create some sort of formal system, is a doomed enterprise due to the self-reflexivity of human consciousness; and (2) that human identity is not as constant or uninterrupted or unbroken as we are usually led to believe or make ourselves believe.

The first hints of the inability of consciousness to self-examine itself in a logical or complete way comes early on in the story. Thus, after the nurse who has been taking care of him following the operation asks whether Giulio believes in God and then, after he nods, tells him he shouldn’t, Mirolla writes:

It was as if a blurred image had, for a moment at least, been pulled into razor-sharp focus. And then it was gone again — as if it wasn't meant for him after all. For, when everything else had been removed from that frame, what was left in the crystal-clear emptiness was simply his own confusion, a confusion that would hover over him, on and off, for the rest of his life. (11)

The title of the story provides the clue to the second part of Mirolla's examination of postmodern existential experience: the fracturing of human identity. In a way that allows a mirroring back and forth of the concept (again in terms that resemble Lacan's theories on the meaning of identity and self-consciousness), it is not Giulio himself but a friend he has known since grade school who proposes this idea: first that statues move when people are not looking (according to Baudrillard, the simulacra coming to life), and then that existence is not continuous (mocked by Giulio: "Discontinuous Existence, eh? That's brilliant. Does it have anything to do with your theory of statues?") (*The Formal Logic* 21)).

In the end, the friend is placed in a mental facility "not for wanting to blow up statues but for actually believing he himself had turned into one. He would stand in one spot for days on end, moving only imperceptibly, face covered with chalk to make it look like alabaster, eyes fixed forward or forced back into his skull, as if in a desperate attempt to see inside himself" (Mirolla, *The Formal Logic* 14). The friend also never revealed what he had meant by "discontinuous existence" and it haunts Giulio: "There were times when Giulio actually believed he had discovered on his own what his friend had meant. But he couldn't be sure. And the moment he felt sure, the seed of doubt was planted. It was as if someone else had the key to Giulio's self-knowledge" (*The Formal Logic* 21).

The story weaves back and forth in time, one moment relating events from Giulio's childhood, the next showing the birth of his son. Just before the end, Giulio is an old man lying on his bed:

But I am me, now. Now! I am not what I was yesterday or the day before or the day before that. There is no connection between Giulio today and Giulio yesterday, between Giulio-lying-on-the-bed-creaking and Giulio-leaning-under-the-statue-singing. You fool. There is a point in time when there is no point in time. He felt a pair of fists kneading his stomach, fists needing his stomach. Oh no, those weren't fists and they didn't knead/need his stomach. Oh no. Those were the gentle caressing hands of his mother, the gentle caressing touch of his wife, the gentle caressing motions of his nurse. (*The Formal Logic* 35-36)

And then a little further on, it seems as if once more the lifelong confusion starts to dissipate (ironically in the form of a “fog” that allows him to envision what is not there, at least not at the present moment:

He could hear a voice droning, a voice as far off as the stars, as near as his own mind. A warm wind from the South Seas blew open the curtains. There, in the daylight, it was suddenly summer, the morning after school vacation started. The streets were full of children, shouting and raising the dust, Giulio’s unmoving friend among them; full of the milkman making his rounds and proudly showing off his new van, the van that had replaced dapple-grey Boxer, now in chevaline heaven; full of the street cleaner, sending forth a gush of cold water and mud across the sidewalk. Out of nowhere, an ambulance careened into view. A small boy, all wrapped up in blankets, was hustled by stretcher down steep stairs. A distraught mother huddled beside him, tears streaming down her face as the entire street came to a halt. Statues one and all. (*The Formal Logic* 36)

Giulio in “A Theory of Discontinuous Existence” comes across as an exemplar of Mirolla’s future Giulios, a proto-character with many of the characteristics and traits of the protagonists in collections such as *The Giulio Metaphysics III*. He is a character in the lineage of Beckett’s narrators from his novels, characters whom Wolfgang Iser says find it “increasingly impossible to conceive themselves — i.e. to find their own identity; and yet at the same time it is precisely this impossibility that leads them actually to discover something of their own reality” (174). Giulio explores some of the side roads and holes missed by the lead characters in Beckett’s *Murphy*, *Watt*, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. As Richard Begam points out:

For Beckett there is no epic struggle to make the past and present cohere in a moment of self-revelation, no grand effort to “unite” the “hero and the narrator,” to confront the man who ultimately will become “the author of his own story.” In other words, what Beckett gives us is not an autobiographical novel but its critical construction. (6)

Similarly, the story (and other stories in the collection) exemplifies what Beckett himself says about the irrationality and impossibility of literature: “The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (Beckett, “Three Dialogues” 139). In particular, the connection between Beckett’s *Watt* and the Giulio character comes across clearly in the split between the ability of language to “capture” things, events or objects in themselves, mirroring the split in humans between what has been labeled the rational versus the irrational. According to Jacqueline Hoeffler:

In Watt's scientific and positivistic thought, to distinguish between what can be said about an event and what the event really means is sheer nonsense. Yet Watt persistently makes this distinction: he is content with an "outer meaning" which he can observe and make formulations about. But there is another kind of meaning, non-sensory and non-rational, indefinable in his terms, of which he is aware, though he purports to ignore its significance. (169)

In "The Proper Country" (which is listed under the sub-section called "The Giulio Metaphysics II"), the malleability and inability to pin Giulio down becomes part of the main thrust of the story. Describing the return of this Giulio (who, if he is connected to the Giulio in "A Theory of Discontinuous Existence", must have taken one of those unmarked vacant areas along the fractal landscape) to "his proper country" (*The Formal Logic* 144), the story seems to gather together segments and fragments of a whole series of characters, time sequences, impossibilities, and absurdities in three-dimensional time and space, while at the same time freezing these "at precisely the right moment and on the first tick of 3 a.m." (*The Formal Logic* 144). Reviewer Susan Wasserman describes "The Proper Country" thus:

The story unfolds in dream logic. The situation is a perverse version of *Alice in Wonderland*, as our hero tries to find his way home, out of this maze which comes complete with people walking through walls, dead birds coming to life, an evil baby sprouting flippers and whiskers, and a village idiot brandishing his 'Priapus-sized penis.' The protagonist is Giulio, presumably of the first story, but not recognizable as such. But, then, identity here is discontinuous. He feels like a stranger and yet is constantly greeted by people who seem to know him. (He observes, 'This is all very familiar..., all too familiar. I know this place from when it wasn't this place. Or perhaps from when it won't be this place any longer.') Mirolla pulls out all the stops: chameleon-like, Giulio changes character to suit the situation: at one point he is a doctor delivering a baby, then an amorous young lover, then a priest. (123-124)

Right at the start of the story, Giulio is confronted by an old woman in black (fate? destiny? death?) who puts the paradox to him. While he seems lost, not quite sure of his directions or even that assured of his own identity, she tells him: "I remember you. That I do. Just as if it were yesterday. Well, maybe not yesterday. Maybe the day before. Or a few days before even that. It's all in your features, all in the blood, as they say. You can't escape from yourself" (*The Formal Logic* 147).

It appears that Giulio spends the rest of the story trying to escape from himself — or from what others are trying to tell him he is. For, in the next sequence, he is confronted by "a day-glo vision on a skateboard ... a young girl with unwavering green eyes" (*The Formal Logic* 148-149) who says to him: "Doctor, doctor. Where the Christ have you been? Come

quick! They've been looking for you all over town. They've even sent someone out to the new excavations, thinking you might have sneaked off to do a bit more digging" (p. 149).

At the same time, as he is undergoing all these transformations (the final one being as someone convinced he needs to get revenge for insults to his grandmother's grave), Giulio is exploring the underworld. Ironically, he does not do this in a methodical or conscious manner but rather subconsciously, in keeping with the old ideas of the Id as the manufacturing plant for irrationality, as the source and fountain of those interstices in formal systems that cannot be captured — as proved by Kurt Gödel. Giulio is enticed into a basement by the coolness of the walls and the smoothness of the stone stairs:

Somewhere there is the sound of water trickling, a gurgle like a cut throat. Ahead, pitch-dipped torches provide a dim, unappetizing light. He steps into a vast cavern-like room, green around the edges. Along the walls, a line of thick bones dangles from the ceiling, picked clean, save for a light, grey covering that turns out to be mites; outsized barrels powder beneath his fingers, their metal hoops balancing like pendulums for a moment before the final collapse. The sound of water is nearer now and he makes out the source at last — a low, snaggle-toothed well, its sides caved in, out of which a furtive stream flows. Or rather pumps feebly and without conviction. Obvious efforts have been made to stem it, rubble piled in its path, rocks jammed into its eye, bigger and better barricades thrown up by each successive owner — earth, clay, cement, re-enforced concrete. To no avail. (*The Formal Logic* 154-155)

In one of a series of climactic scenes (for they are all seemingly climactic scenes), Giulio is told to rush back to save a baby (the baby he helped give birth to as a doctor) from falling off an unfinished balcony. It is hinted that he is the baby and that its death would signal his disappearance from the scene. Instead, he finds a “slouching infant, fearless, slug-like, face smeared with watermelon and trailing a shitty, makeshift diaper. It measures the doorframe with its flippers, tentatively sniffs the air, whiskers twitching ...” (*The Formal Logic* 168). But it is in no danger of falling: “The creature taunts him with arabesques and cartwheels, sudden feints and retreats” (168). Then, through this deformed infant, Giulio reads the thoughts of what can only be the warped and twisted mind of the creator of these impossibilities:

There is hunger in those thundercloud thoughts, a world-devouring hunger, strip-mining the imagination to feed the fact of gravity ... He sees then the cobblestoned road, the caravanserai just off to the side, the village, the highways old and new all spinning out of the creature's head, extensions of its shackled tongue. And out of the houses of the village is disgorged an endless line of secondary characters, characters that vanish on turning sideways ... They're dressed in their Sunday best with starched collars and polished boots, sun bonnets and stone-washed kerchiefs ... They spill on to the road as if stunned for a moment, surprised to be there amid all the familiar, rough-hewn faces. But they brush their too-short trousers, tug at their shredded shirt sleeves

and soon forget the fact they've come out of a pulpy creature's head, would laugh at the absurdity of such a suggestion ... Giulio wants very much to warn them, to tell them to mind their tongues, to point out the tenuousness of the road on which they've embarked, how it buckles and lurches beneath them. But already the insight escapes him, becomes vapid and banal. What tenuousness? They're as solid as they'll ever be, skin drawn tight around their cheekbones, their skull and crossbones. I'm as solid as I'll ever be, he says, thumping his chest just like the others. (*The Formal Logic* 169-170)

But this feeling of solidity does not last very long. Giulio is soon caught in another state of confusion: in a church, dressed in priestly garb, and standing before a young couple looking to be married. Like all literate men, Giulio seeks the comfort of words in the belief they will help to make things solid:

Surprisingly, he knows their names: alb, amice, girdle, maniple, stole and chasuble. And those of the blessed linens. And the sacred vessels. But rather than freeing him, each bit of knowledge serves only to weigh him down even more. He feels himself literally sinking on the altar, literally melting away, liquefying, a sacrifice without a purpose being shaped for reasons not his own. (*The Formal Logic* 172)

Again, it is the vision on the skateboard who comes to the rescue, the girl out of place and out of time, in a sense, the *deus ex machina* of metafictional writing: "Her hair is sheared Mohawk-style and multicoloured; her make up in slashes across her cheekbones. He can't be sure but it seems to be moving, shifting, as if alive" (*The Formal Logic* 173). This girl, who comes to him again at the end of the story to lead him out of the village, seems to exist in the interstices between what Hugh Culik would call the "rational numbers": "Just as all the points on the number line are not named as ratios of whole numbers, so reality is not fully named ..." (136-137).

Quite naturally, a wedding reception follows the church ceremony. Just as naturally, in this world, Giulio is called upon to defend the honor of his family and is taunted into a knife fight with another man. In the time-honored tradition of these fights, he kills the other man. But then, when he picks up the man's knife and turns it on himself, he discovers it is spring-loaded and harmless.

At the end, he is back in the basement, only this time he descends deeper and deeper into the underworld, chasing after the always-glowing skateboarder: "There is movement along the damp walls. And voices, the soft, dangerous voices of the past. The voices are reciting. There is no beginning or end to their recital" (*The Formal Logic* 188). There follows a conversation with the skateboarder before she vanishes, an attempt to pin down the meaning of identity and identification:

They walk together in silence, guided only by the light from her eyes. The stairs turn into a low sloping tunnel. After a few minutes, they come out into a natural cave. There are primitive drawings and scrawls on its walls. Giulio stops before a pair of sandstone faces, symmetrical about each other. They are sad, as if on the verge of tears. Beneath them, the word “Tybicza”.

“What does it mean?” he asks, passing his hand over the upper face’s lips.

“It’s the ancient name of this town,” the skateboarder says. “But, wait a minute. You should know that. You were the one most responsible for uncovering these caves.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve never set foot in here before.”

“But the doctor has, hasn’t he? He was in here digging for archaeological goodies while his patients waited for the miracle cures that never came.”

“What’s that to do with me? I’m not any doctor, let alone the doctor.”

“No. Nor a young lover in an olive grove. Nor a shit-faced child. Nor a priest with a too-tight collar. And especially not an avenging angel, right? You don’t take responsibility for any of those things, right?”

“That’s right. I came here strictly for a visit. My visa forbids me taking responsibility.”

“And now you’re leaving, to live once more among strangers, the place where no one knows you.”

“Right again. I feel so much safer there.”

“I bet you do.” (*The Formal Logic* 189-190)

The final paragraph tries to present in visual terms what that moment must feel like when the self-reflexivity of human consciousness comes up against that immovable force that we all must face at some point or other. Abandoned by the skateboarder, Giulio finds himself in absolute darkness, running, then crawling, then practically digging, within a tunnel that becomes smaller and smaller as he moves through it:

Dear God, don’t let me be stuck, wriggling in the dark — a parasitic worm unnoticed in the bowels of the earth. He scrambles forward on all fours. He can feel the walls now closing in. He pounds at them, batters them till his knuckles are raw. But it doesn’t help. His breathing is shallow now and uneven, his heart threatening to leap out of his chest. It’s all over, he says. She tricked me. They tricked me. They led me here to my own grave, to this place where there is no moving, neither forward nor back. Best to curl up and let it all go. There is no breath left; the eyes bulge; the hands open and close; the legs spasm. Ah, death. (*The Formal Logic* 191)

But death does not come and it turns out to be a birth canal when “the tunnel convulses, constricts like a sphincter to expel him into the night air” (*The Formal Logic* 191). However, even now, Giulio is not sure of who he is or where he is:

For a moment, he imagines he’s still inside — an immense cave, perhaps — and those aren’t really stars up there but pinpricks in the ceiling. And the mountains behind him nothing but papier-maché. And the valleys a child’s diggings. And the highways gift-wrapped ribbons. And the village a black cutout silhouette. (*The Formal Logic* 191)

In the next part of the paper, a further examination of the Giulio character and his development is made. This character has gone on to appear in a large number of Mirolla's writings, including under different guises in published stories from *The Giulio Metaphysics III* collection, one of the lead characters in the novel *Berlin*, and the male lead character in the novel *The Boarder*. Here, only the Giulio of "Giulio Visits A Friend" and "Into Another Country" are examined.

The Multiplicity of Giulios

The use of a similar or in some cases identical name for a series of characters who may or may not have some obvious connection to one another is a metafictional gambit. It self-consciously points out to the reader that these characters are a creation, one that at times can inhabit the same time and space (in the text, at least) and that they are thus not part of a three-dimensional Cartesian axis. They bleed into one another, can be in two places at once, and, as Robert Kroetsch put it, "seek that timeless split-second in time when the one, in the process of becoming the other, was itself and the other" (593). Thus, what all these Giulios are doing is attempting to create a whole that is greater than its parts while at the same time not ever quite being all there. This is being done in a discursive area that is neither real nor unreal. To put it another way, one could argue that this set of characters neither fully exists nor does not exist and they are constantly moving towards something or becoming, always "escaping the constraints of self-presence" (Docherty 184).

The Giulio character is malleable, changeable and often carries on conversations with his creator. He vanishes into one textual hole and re-appears out of another. In Mirolla's "Giulio Visits A Friend," the character is goaded along and forced to do what he does not want to do — visit a friend who is dying of AIDS:

In fact, I [the creator speaking] practically have to drag him there, kicking and screaming, an invisible hand reaching in and pulling him by the scruff of the neck. He keeps coming up with all kinds of excuses: the neighbourhood makes him queasy with all its marble steps, red Camaros and bird-bath statues; the family hasn't sent him an invitation; his friend doesn't really want to see him; he lost the directions the last time he emptied out his pockets. (156-157)

At the same time, he cannot help but notice the drastic changes undergone by his friend:

“[T]he luminous quality of his friend's eyes, beautiful, unnaturally large, almost bulbous and bulging like that of a stereotypical friendly alien – in direct contrast to the scarred and sunken cheeks, the open sores about the lips, the purplish splotches across the temple and forehead” (159).

But the creator is not done with Giulio yet, not done with the manipulation of identity, identification and classification. There is one more surprise at the end of the novel:

Nor do I allow him to look back once he has stepped outside. That's strictly verboten. For, if he were to, he would surely notice the entire family — mother, father, sister, brother — standing at the front window. They are standing at the picture window, arm in arm, smiling. They are standing at the interior design picture window, arm in arm, smiling — and proud of themselves. So very proud of themselves. (162)

It is this Protean quality — in character, scene, conflict — that exemplifies Mirolla's fiction, that makes it so slippery and ungraspable in its entirety. The reader may think he/she has a handle on what is happening and without notice the narrative rug is pulled out. It is pulled out not only from under the reader's feet but often from under the character's as well.

In "Into Another Kind of Country," a first-person narrator Giulio awakes on a cross-country bus to discover he cannot remember his name or where he came from or what his destination should be: "Toronto, I say to myself. Is there where I want to be?" ("Into Another Kind" par. 62) He only discovers his name when someone hands him a duffel bag:

She holds out one of the bags for me to take. It's blue — one of those blue sport bags — and has a large white tag dangling from the zipper.

My bag? I say, scratching my head, not yet prepared to accept it as such. I don't remember —

Look, she says. You got a name, right?

I nod. Not that I'm sure, really. Does everyone have to have a name? I guess so. I guess it makes sense.

So, she says, there's one freaking way to find out, isn't there? She points at the name tag: Is that your name — or what?

I peer down at the tag. The word "G-I-U-L-I-O" is spelled out in large letters. In large block letters. With a felt pen of some sort. I try to pronounce it in my head. Soft "G"? Hard "G"? I'm not sure. Beneath the name, scribbled in much smaller writing, is an address. All I can read is the word "Montreal". I can't make the rest of it out, no matter how hard I squint. A permanent blurring. (pars. 75-70)

This state of "permanent blurring" is another feature of the Giulio characters, a constant going in and out of focus. As Eva Darias-Beautell points out: "The appearance/disappearance play ... self-consciously stresses the relation between figuration and absence. Since reality is always already a discursive construct, this strategy locates the possibility of articulating experience not in the real, but in discourse as constituted by that contradictory play of appearance (of reality) and disappearance (absence of the real)" (319). Rather than clearing up for the narrator in this story, things become more and more murky. The narrator seems to move further and further away from discovering who he is "really".

In his book on *Proust*, Beckett notes that the effects of time serve to alter the “subject ... resulting in an unceasing modification of his personality, whose permanent reality, if any, can only be apprehended as a retrospective hypothesis” (4). Or as Linda Ben-Zvi puts it: “The ego is contingent; it does not exist apart from language” (192). Thus, as Giulio moves forward, he undergoes a series of states that can only define him for a split-second and then lose their value immediately afterwards: “The individual is the seat of a constant process of decantation, decantation from the vessel containing the fluid of future time, sluggish, pale and monochrome, to the vessel containing the fluid of past time, agitated and multicoloured by the phenomena of its hours” (*Proust* 4-5). Similarly, Martin Esslin states: “Being subject to this process of time flowing through us and changing us in doing so, we are, at no single moment in our lives, identical with ourselves” (50).

At the end of “Into Another Country,” Giulio learns to accept the fact he cannot escape himself — or he learns it for a moment, at least, only to forget it again at some future point, the reader must assume. He tries to kill fellow bus traveler and unwanted companion, Norma, by pushing her in front of a speeding car. It is a direct hit: “Metal on flesh. A sack flying over a hood” (par. 117). However, it is not to be:

[B]efore I have a chance to turn away, I see a figure spring up. Almost as if it comes out of the ground itself. It's Norma, brushing herself off and laughing. I stand rooted to the spot as she ambles towards me. Like a bear. Or maybe a wolverine. You can't freaking kill me, she says with a smile as she takes my arm. Do you wanna know why?
I stand there, shuffling my feet, not knowing what to do next. I stand there, staring at the ground, afraid to look at her.
She lifts my chin until our eyes meet: I'm already dead, she says. (pars. 119-122)

It is the only state of permanence and self-knowledge, she seems to be saying. It is the only time when language does not define. And it is the only time when one can be captured by a formal system, without being trapped in what Culik describes as “the esthetics of incompleteness” (131).

Concluding Remarks

The similarities between the two Giulios (he of “The Theory of Discontinuous Existence” and he of “The Proper Country”) can be seen quite clearly on a metafictional level. If the two characters are not physically compatible, if they cannot be fitted into the same space and time line, if they do not interact on any three-dimensional Cartesian network, that

says more about the fluidity of self and identity than any differences between them. The similarities come in the sense of confusion experienced, the lack of recognition of a stable and continuous identity, and the feeling that they lack control over their lives and actions (as if some mastermind-creator-godlike puppeteer is actually manipulating things).

As well, the argument is made that no attempt to capture any particular or specific character on a page can succeed in its entirety or fullness. There will always be gaps in the formal system of character recognition and human identification. It is in those gaps that the further Giulios in Mirolla's fiction can be fitted. These new Giulios are not so much extensions of the previous Ur- or proto-Giulio as found in "The Theory" and "The Proper Country" but rather refracted images, deconstructed and then rebuilt, put together in different ways in the hope of one day completing the task that all are quick to say is impossible: filling the formal system so completely that it no longer has any gaps in it; so that the word is truly made flesh.

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