

# *The Trouble with Being Borrowed: Flann O'Brien's Characters in Gilbert Sorrentino's Mulligan Stew*

Pawel Hejmanowski\*

**Abstract:** *In Mulligan Stew Gilbert Sorrentino takes one step further the concept of the narrator of Flann O'Brien's legendary At Swim-Two-Birds (1939). O'Brien's proposition that any fictitious character may be made into an author, who, in turn, may create their own fictitious characters who are authors, and so on, alerted Sorrentino to the possibility of having one of these characters write the ultimate creator of the text into another fictitious character. Within the entirely artificial universe of the novel we have the invented narrator telling his story which is the novelist's story as well as the invented novelist telling his own story which is the supposed true story. The narrative is peopled by characters borrowed from F. Scott Fitzgerald, Dashiell Hammett, James Joyce, and Flann O'Brien. One of these is Antony Lamont, an avant-garde novelist, working on a murder mystery novel entitled Guinea Red. Antony keeps writing letters to his sister Sheila Lamont, in which he expresses his concern about her engagement to Dermot Trellis (created by the student narrator as his surrogate in At Swim-Two-Birds) as well as his criticism of Trellis's writing. Other characters of O'Brien's are also alluded to in Mulligan Stew. The intention behind the present paper is to examine the process and the results of transplanting characters from one novel into the other, with an emphasis on the alterations in the characters' fictitious identities.*

Gilbert Sorrentino's 1979 (republished in 1996) novel opens in a fairly unusual way. The initial pages, where one would expect to find the frontispiece, the title, or even the blurb, contain none of these. Instead, the reader is faced with eleven pages of letters of rejection from various publishing houses. These, the reader is tempted to believe, refer to the manuscript of the very novel he is about to begin reading. The letters are addressed to Gilbert Sorrentino himself, to his agent Marvin Koenigburg, and to the

\* Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Brasília.

vice-President of Grove Press (which actually first published the novel), Mr. Milo Kent. The contents of the letters are even more puzzling and, as we later realize, quite illuminating not only in regard to the real world of publishing, but also to the fictional world of the book itself.

Some editors try hard not to hurt the author's feelings and reject the novel on the grounds of their own financial incapacity which forces them to choose other works which are "not only good, but have definitive market appeal", as for instance *The Compleat Beatle Wardrobe Book*, a "necessary addition to Beatle Lore", or *Screwing in Sausalito*, a "zany, wonderful novel about life in California". Others reveal themselves to be unfulfilled authors unable to publish their own "brilliant" writings. Some editors, however, endeavor to assess the manuscript on its merits and are far more direct in their criticism. One writes: "Everything in the book has the touch of a virtuoso. Trouble is, I got bored, and so did another reader". Another: "The book is far too long and exhausts one's patience. Its various worlds seem to us to lack the breadth and depth and width as well to sustain so many pages". Or still another: "It is much too long by half, and to this eye, needlessly so – the author seems obsessed with (unnecessary) insertions, (useless) repetitions, twice and thrice-told tales, and reams of incomprehensible lists". Some editors show clear signs of irritation. One thought the "novel dismally uninformed as far as the female characters and their presentation. She thought them "fantasy figures" far removed from the reality of Woman that is all around us today". Another publisher simply refuses to "have anything to do with that work". The reader can no longer say s/he hasn't been warned.

The proper plot of *Mulligan Stew* is, on the one hand, fairly simple and could be summarized as a story of an author struggling to write an avant-garde murder mystery novel. On the other hand, its intrinsic complexity makes it virtually impossible to convey a fair impression of the novel in a summary. The simplest solution may be, perhaps, to turn to the author himself, who kept five notebooks on *Mulligan Stew* while writing the novel. The first entry date is November 1, 1971:

1. The narrator of a novel immediately identifies himself as a character in a novel.
2. The novel to be interfolded; that is the novelist's novel wherein the character is moved about in actions which the novelist invents, along of course with a whole slew of invented characters.
3. There is the activity of the narrator outside of the novelist's concerns, along with other of the novelist's characters and character's who do not appear in the novelist's novel.
4. This is a possibility out of "At Swim-Two-Birds," taking that book further, adding another integer to its basic idea. Absolute artificiality. We will have then the invented narrator telling his story which is of course the novelist's story. We will also have the invented novelist telling his story, the true story, if you will. Borrow, as Flann O'Brien's "At Swim," characters from other novels, my own as well as others. Some of these characters are to be in the novelist's novel, some could be in the narrator's novel, the true story [...]. (O'Brien 1993, 20)

After all these references to the work of Flann O'Brien, and especially to his 1939 novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the name of the book's novelist, Antony Lamont, does not come as a stunning surprise as we recollect him as Sheila Lamont's brother in O'Brien's novel. And *At Swim-Two-Birds* is also a book (by Flann O'Brien) about a man writing a book (a nameless student narrator) about a man writing a book (Dermot Trellis). The frame story involves the student's attempt to write a novel. His everyday experiences determine the progress of *his* work: fiction becomes criticism, criticism fiction. The dynamics of fiction-making are reflected in the way that Dermot Trellis is based on the student's uncle in 'real' life – the uncle himself is a parody of a character in Joyce's *Dubliners*. Trellis himself is writing a 'clarion-call' to the Irish people on the consequences of sin, and has some peculiar notions – inherited from his creator – about textual composition. In collaboration with another imaginary author, William Treacy, Trellis plagiarises from a vast range of genres, populating his text with characters such as the Pooka (an Irish folkloric devil), the legendary Finn McCool, cowboys of paperback Westerns, and the mad King Sweeney, hero of the medieval Irish romance *The Frenzy of Sweeney* (*Sweeney Astray* in Heaney's translation).

Trellis keeps his characters locked up in his hotel, The Red Swan Inn, but they move independently of Trellis when he is asleep. Trellis had created the beautiful Sheila Lamont in order to have her seduced by the evil Furriskey, but he grows obsessed with Sheila himself, and rapes her.

Meanwhile Trellis, in order to show an evil man can debase the highest and the lowest in the same story, creates a very beautiful and refined girl called SHEILA LAMONT, whose brother, ANTONY LAMONT he has already hired so that there will be somebody to demand satisfaction off John Furriskey for betraying her – all this being provided for in the plot. Trellis creates Miss Lamont in his own bedroom and he is so blinded by her beauty (which is naturally the type nearest to his heart), that he so far forgets himself as to assault her himself. (O'Brien 1998, 86)

To cover up his crime, he kills her off, but not before she gives birth to their son, Orlick. Orlick is persuaded by the other characters to exert a bizarre revenge by writing his father into a courtroom drama, and Dermot Trellis goes on trial for crimes against literary humanity. The whole affair goes up in smoke (literally) when Trellis's maid Teresa accidentally burns the manuscript of his novel.

In Sorrentino's novel Lamont seems to be shifted two levels higher, or shall we say closer, to the actual author in comparison with *At Swim-Two-Birds*. He occupies the place of the nameless student narrator of O'Brien's novel. Dermot Trellis is often mentioned in his letters to his sister Sheila as a one-day good friend and a writer, too, though of a more popular appeal. Trellis and Sheila are now engaged and about to get married. Oddly enough, it is Lamont who undergoes the most profound deformation on

his way from one text to the other. Even though we never actually get to see them other than through Lamont's letters and notebooks, Trellis and Sheila seem to preserve some of their identities, however artificial, they possessed in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The Red Swan, the name of the hotel in *At Swim Two-Birds*, is alluded to as a novel of Trellis's, and we feel Lamont's concern for Sheila whom he believes to be Trellis's victim. Yet Lamont himself differs from O'Brien's character to such an extent that he no longer retains his transworld identity, to use Umberto Eco's term. Instead, we seem to be facing a case of mere homonymy as the character acts now as a kind of Sorrentino's alter ego, voicing his feelings about the very novel we are reading:

Speaking of books, my own is coming along, but to be perfectly candid, not at all to my satisfaction. I sometimes feel like scrapping what I've already done and starting all over. God knows, there isn't that much of it to scrap. The trouble is that if I scrapped what I already have I honestly don't know if I could begin anyway. I've never felt so in the dark about a book, nor so unsure of myself. The other day I wondered – I mean *seriously* wondered – if all this trouble is worth anyway. All my years of work and – let's face it! – I've produced nothing first rate, nothing, nothing at all! Oh, there are flashes of good writing in, I suppose all my novels, but truly, I have an aversion for the bulk of my stuff. Sad confession. (Sorrentino 1996, 56)

Sorrentino has an interesting theory concerning O'Brien's relation with his own work. He believes that O'Brien somehow feared his own books, or perhaps he feared his own talent that created them. He argues that *At Swim-Two-Birds* avoids its eerie logical conclusion – the “assault upon and possible erasure of its primary creator, the writer himself.” (Sorrentino 1998, 2) As for *The Third Policeman*, the novel was repressed by its author during his lifetime, appearing soon after he was safely dead. *The Dalkey Archive*, a “re-vision” of *The Third Policeman*, and published during O'Brien's lifetime opens with a dedication which, according to Sorrentino is not to be read as a joke. It goes: “to my Guardian Angel, impressing upon him that I'm only fooling and warning him to see to it that there is no misunderstanding when I go home.” Sorrentino says:

I see this novel as a non-sinister *apologia* for the unearthly terrors of *The Third Policeman*, as well as a barrier between the latter and O'Brien; and the charge to his Guardian Angel has to do with the suppressed text, for which *The Dalkey Archive* was but a surrogate. O'Brien believed that fiction is not far removed from life, that it is, in a sense, another kind of life, separate from the mundane by the thinnest of walls. (Sorrentino 1998, 2)

Likewise, O'Brien's pen name separated the author from the real person. Moreover, in *At Swim-Two-Birds* O'Brien protects himself from the dangers of his own

fiction by placing the obliteration of his narrative at two further removes from himself (O’Nolan/O’Brien/the student/Dermot Trellis).

The author of *Mulligan Stew* obtains a similar effect though in a slightly different manner. Rather than hiding his own identity behind numerous masks and disguises, he seems to lose it, firstly by borrowing someone else’s character, Antony Lamont, and stripping him of his own identity, and secondly by endowing the novel with its own voice, which represents its peculiar layered quality. Sorrentino confessed he felt surprised when “I was about fifty pages through because I suddenly realized that what I thought I wanted to do, I could do, and that was to remove myself from the novel for the first time, to invent a voice and tone that for the first time could in no way at all be identified with me. It was a disembodied voice. It was a tone that permeated the novel and seemed to be cut loose from the man who wrote it. Total fabrication.” (J. O’Brien 1981, 20)

Now, if we look at the work of both writers from a more theoretical angle, we won’t fail to notice that they offer similar answers to the basic questions concerning fiction such as what is fiction and how it works. My argument is that Sorrentino’s and O’Brien’s novels seem to go hand in hand with the theoretical work of the last century Polish phenomenologist Roman Ingarden. A concise introduction to Ingarden is offered by Brian McHale in his *Post-modernist Fiction*. Ingarden deals with fiction’s intrinsic ontological complexity. This complexity lies first of all in its being *heteronomous*, existing both autonomously, in its own right, and at the same time depending upon the constitutive acts of a reader’s consciousness. Secondly, the literary artwork is not ontologically uniform, but polyphonic, stratified. Ingarden distinguishes four such strata: *Firstly the stratum of word-sounds*, that is the essential phonemic configurations, which make the differentiation of word-meanings possible: *Secondly the stratum of meaning-units* which actualize parts of our concepts of objects; sentence-meanings project “states of affairs,” which are progressively and retrospectively modified by the higher units of meaning into which sentence-meanings enter. This occurs when a reader “concretizes” meaning-units, that is when they become objects of a reader’s consciousness: *Thirdly the stratum of presented objects*. According to Ingarden, fictional texts do more than carry information in articulated chains of signifiers and signifieds, they also project objects and worlds. Purely intentional objects, Ingarden says, are projected by the word-meanings of nouns, or presented or implied by states of affairs at the sentence-level or higher. In the aggregate these presented objects constitute an “ontic sphere” of their own – a world. This world is partly indeterminate:

It is always as if a beam of light were illuminating a part of a region, the remainder of which disappears in an indeterminate cloud but is still there in its indeterminacy. (Ingarden 1973, 218)

The individual objects that make the ontic sphere are cloudy, too. Compared to real-world objects, presented objects are strange and paradoxical, full of ontological

gaps, some of them permanent, some filled in by readers in the act of concretizing the text. Flann O'Brien in *The Third Policeman* has laid bare this aspect of fiction's ontological structure by putting the nameless narrator face to face with the bizarre reality of his ontic sphere. The artificial cardboard appearance of the Police Station and its crew plays overtly with the notion of ontological gaps:

I kept on walking, but walked more slowly. As I approached, the house seemed to change its appearance. At first, it did nothing to reconcile itself with the shape of an ordinary house but it became uncertain in outline like a thing glimpsed under ruffled water. Then it became clear again and I saw that it began to have some back to it, some small space for rooms behind the frontage. I gathered this from the fact that I seem to see the front and the back of the 'building' simultaneously from my position approaching what should have been the side. As there was no side that I could see I thought the house must be triangular with its apex pointing toward me but when I was only fifteen yards away I saw a small window apparently facing me and I knew there must be *some* side to it. (O'Brien 1996, 53)

As the narrator approaches the awesome building, his initial feeling of bewilderment gradually subsides and he manages to fill in the missing dimensions. This is also true of his first contact with the policemen from the station. First, he can see Sergeant Pluck's enormous back and finds its shape "unprecedented and unfamiliar", then realizes that the whole body of the policeman creates a "very disquieting impression of unnaturalness, amounting almost to what was horrible and monstrous." (56) However, as soon as they are standing face to face, the policeman assumes the air of normality. What's more, he seems to emanate "good nature, politeness and infinite patience." (57)

Sorrentino seems to follow a similar pattern when he makes two characters explore some of the cloudy features of their own 'ontic' sphere:

It is a rather odd house, to say the least. There is the living room and the den, but we haven't been able to find any other rooms. It *seems* as if there are other rooms, but when we approach them, they are – I don't quite know how to put this – they are simply *not there!* There is kitchen, no porch, no bedrooms, no bath. At the side of the living room, a staircase leads "nowhere." Oh, I don't mean to say that it disappears into empty space, it simply leads into a kind of [...] haziness, in which one knows there is *supposed* to be a hallway and bedroom doors: but there is absolutely nothing. (Sorrentino 1996, 30)

Naturally, all fictional houses are like this, partly specified, partly vague, but normally neither the reader nor the character inside the fiction notices this vagueness. O'Brien's narrator is not aware of being inside a fiction. This is why he 'concretizes' presented objects even though they initially appear incomplete and unnatural. Sorrentino's

characters realize they are entrapped inside the novel, and so find their house anomalous, with its permanent gaps. The same is true of the characters' own appearance: "[...] Lamont has no idea what we look like, nor what clothes we are wearing, since he never bothered to describe us. (Ned says that this is a modern novelist's prerogative.)" (Sorrentino 1996, 151)

The fourth stratum postulated by Ingarden is that of *schematized aspects*. He argues that presented objects and worlds are inevitably schematic, lacking the plenitude and density of real objects in the real world. What the literary artwork *can* do, though, is to duplicate the fragmentary and aspectual nature of our experience of objects in the real world, by restricting the point of view or choosing one sensory channel through which to present the object. The stratum of presented objects, mediated through schematized aspects, manifests what Ingarden calls the work's "metaphysical qualities" – the tragic, the sublime, the grotesque, the holy, and so on. Interestingly, in O'Brien's and in Sorrentino's novels, as well as in a vast majority of post-modernist fiction, irony appears to be the dominating "metaphysical quality," the fact which does not exclude other qualities such as the holy or the tragic, but rather turns them inside out. In an article about O'Brien's fiction, Sorrentino refers to *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman* as "cruel at their core, and many of the most risible scenes, conversations, and set pieces are rooted in pain, anguish, ignominy, humiliation, and death." (O'Brien 1981, 21) And about his own view of how these qualities function in fiction: "A writer seizes on a particular aspect of the culture; and I believe that life is basically ridiculous. The ridiculous quality can be tragic, it can be pessimistic or dark, or it can be highly comic." (21)

## Works Cited

- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1987.
- Ingarden, Roman. *The Literary Work of Art*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- O'Brien, Flann. *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Third Policeman*. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "An Interview with Gilbert Sorrentino". *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Spring 1981, v. 1.1. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1981.
- Sorrentino, Gilbert. *Mulligan Stew*. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1998) "Reading Flann Brien O'Brien O'Nolan", in *Context*, n. 1, On Line. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press.