On the Hyphenated Edge -- Hyper-Existentialism, Hybridity and the Magical Hyper-real in the Writings of Michael Mirolla.

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Abstract

This paper examines the role that fictocriticism, metafictional techniques and approaches, and hybridity play in the writing of Canadian novelist, short story writer, poet and playwright Michael Mirolla. The paper examines the congruence between his theoretical writing about meta-fiction and other forms of meta-writing, and the short fiction he has produced. The paper also looks at the influences, conscious or unconscious, that have exhibited themselves in his work, in terms of hyperrealism, hybridized writing, and the blending of fiction and critical writing. One other influence is examined here – that of the graphic artist M.C. Escher, indicating the verbal representation in many of Mirolla's writings of Escher's lithograph themes: mirrors, impossible architecture, and the repetition of motifs in an attempt to indicate the nature of change and movement. The paper concludes with some remarks on the difficulty and density of Mirolla's writing.

I. Introduction

> In the silence that follows, or perhaps it is only your concentration that shuts everything else out as you strain to see, to understand, they slowly unravel each other's bandages. Gently unwind the strips of white gauze, inch by inch, around and around, and lower them floating to the ground. And the first to go are their feet. And then their legs and torsos vanish. And this is followed by their arms. And their heads. And finally their fingers, their plucking nimble fingers. And the only things left on that platform are seven mounds of cloth, light as the feathers of invisible birds. But, of course, that's all there is in the first place.
> -- Michael Mirolla, "Bandages" from *Hothouse Loves*

Italian by birth and Canadian by upbringing and schooling, novelist, short fiction writer, poet, playwright and literary critic Michael Mirolla knows all about hybridity and hyphenated existence. He also understands the difficulty of navigating such a space – both as a person and in his writing. Rather than bemoan that fact, Mirolla has worked to create a literary space within these boundaries formed by genetics and language.

This hybrid literary space is not an easy one to describe, or define. In fact, in a critical essay, Mirolla labels it as both dangerous and tenuous, with one of its key properties being the fluidity of its form and shape and the inability of definition to grasp it fully. In the essay, he compares the writer carving out such a zone to a circus high-wire act:

> Both perform in the upper reaches of the world's Big Top tent, and often find themselves a little too far from the ground for either solid connection or

guaranteed safety. Both, despite any natural fear of falling, must negotiate the distance between start and finish while putting on the kind of show that is at once believable, seamless and entertaining. And both must engage in a balancing act that sees them place numerous objects at the ends of their teeter-totter poles (chairs, tables, balls, and even humans in the case of the high-wire act; words, phrases, sentences and other literary artifacts in the case of the writer). ("Denying Labels" 1)

Mirolla attempts to delineate a literary space that relies not so much on identity, facile identifications and personal interaction with an external world, as on internal rules of logic connected to the realms of meta-fiction, of writing about the act of writing, and on a playfulness that relates as much to Beckett, post-absurdist theater and the dark humor of the *Divina Commedia* as it does to broad slapstick, farce, puns and other forms of wordplay. This is also the foundation and the building block material of his creative work, as seen in novels such as *Berlin* (2009) and *The Boarder* (2007), short story collections the likes of *The Formal Logic of Emotion* (1992) and *Hothouse Loves and Other Tales* (2007), poetry collections (*Interstellar Distances/ Distanze Interstellari* (2009) and *Light and Time* (2008), or plays such as *Gargoyles*, *Snails*, and *A Revised Experiment*.

In its totality, the work strives to encompass a vision of writing that treats the work of art as something unto itself, separate and inviolable, and not reliant on any externality for its value and valuation. It is a vision that goes beyond the merely existential, the real, and the bounded (physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually) to the hyper-existential, the magically hyper-real and the hybrid beyond deconstruction, beyond analysis. It is also a vision that seems nearly impossible to maintain in a world so immersed in notions of actuality and factuality. As he states further on in his paper on the seeming non-future of the Italian-Canadian identity:

> If we look at 20th century creative writing, and I am talking here about serious writing … the literary endeavour in all its shapes and forms … we see an ever-increasing awareness of the meta-fictional nature of that writing: be it novels, short stories, poetry, playwriting or film. Let alone the so-called "New Media". In the simplest terms and without getting too technical about it, the writing no longer pretends to be an attempt to reflect some external "reality." Rather, it is self-reflexive. Put another way: the "reality" that the work of art presents is not something that exists on its own "out there" but is rather something that is constructed during the act of writing. Representational art about the external world gives way to projective art about the internal world; construction takes the place of imitation. ("Denying Labels" 5)

This paper is an attempt to examine just how well Mirolla does in the maintaining of this vision throughout his oeuvre, how close he approaches to the ideal he himself has set out, and

what he and his readers can look forward to in the future. It is less a critical analysis of his works than an assessment of the state of his art, as it were.

The structure of the paper consists of the setting up of a theoretical framework using the interconnected concepts of meta-fiction, *fictocriticism*, hybridized writing, and self-conscious fiction. This is followed by a close examination of Mirolla's writings under these concepts. While Mirolla has written in numerous genres (the novel, short story, poetry, playwriting, and critical writing), this paper focuses on the two genres at which he has been most successful to date and which reflect his particular and peculiar vision best: the novel and the short story.

A final note to the introduction: Prior to the writing of this paper, Mirolla graciously consented to a series of personal communications whereby the author was able to further gauge his approaches to writing and the role of the writer in his/her creation. As well, Mirolla provided the author access to the short story collection, *The Giulio Metaphysics III*. While the collection has not been published as such, several of the stories have appeared in literary journals. Thanks to this material, the author was able to gain a deeper understanding than would have been possible from published materials alone.

II. The Construction of Postmodern Art

> The words echoed through the club; the laughter spread – as if the
> joke, the misunderstanding, the faux pas was being passed from
> person to person … And the sound of that laughter – the roar of that
> laughter getting louder and louder – was the last thing Serratura
> heard before he collapsed head first onto Annie's lap, cheek pressed
> firmly against her
> bulge.
> -- Michael Mirolla: *Berlin* (2009)

If there is one theme to be pinpointed in Canadian writer Michael Mirolla's writing, it has to be the inability of anyone to determine, beyond a shadow of a doubt, what constitutes the essence of human identity in a world where the center no longer holds. Once this over-arching theme is locked in, the other recurring concerns in his writing (a world that refuses to be pinned down, relationships that spin back and forth without ever being resolved, and contradictory, even nonsensical events) become easier to identify, if not make complete logical sense of.

While these are attributes of the majority of Mirolla's mature writing, they are nowhere more clearly delineated than in his novel Berlin (2009). In fact, at one level, it could

be argued that the structure of the novel is there to elucidate these concepts, while at the same time moving forward in a way that allows the reader to carry on the pretense of characters that have a realist basis. No matter how much we try to locate the characters of Berlin within an external world separate from that of the novel, the subversion of such an attempt is so strong that we as readers are left with a classic post-modern simulacrum, in a literary space that can only be described as magically hyper-real.

One of the most obvious theoretical influences in Mirolla's writing is that of Jacques Lacan and in particular his theories on the nature of identity. The shape-shifting abilities and lack of rootedness when it comes to attempts to establish human identity are threaded throughout Mirolla's mature writing. In fact, even in an earlier piece such as the novella *The News Vendor*, Mirolla seems obsessed with mirror images and the fitting of one identity into another — to the point where the central plot of the story centers around the efforts of the nameless lead character to shape himself into the image of Sully or Cully the news vendor in order to eventually replace him physically. As well, in his *Giulio Metaphysics III* collection, the main character in each of the inter-connected short stories is named "Giulio," even though some of the character's traits, actions, physical locations and mental states are not only different but often contradictory.

This mutable identity fits in with the ideas of Jacques Lacan who argued against the ability to pull together or unite a subject under the conditions set out by Descartes. Instead, his notion of identity was based on the use of a type of mirror image as the foundation for self-consciousness (Lacan, 1977). At the center of Lacanian consciousness were two mirrors facing each other and reflecting each other to infinity, basically reflecting an emptiness. According to Lacan, the rise of language in the human child "irremediably splits the child into a speaking subject decentered from an ideal ego whose unattainable image of perfection the child narcissistically wishes to find reflected by others" (Van Pelt 58).

Lacan uses the ideas of a post-Freudian psychoanalysis with respect to the unconscious and the id to completely undermine the process that analysts normally use. His argument is that this type of psychoanalysis is trying to draw up rules and regulations about something that cannot really be seen, an attempt at the "reconstruction of that sphere of the psychic system that is without affirmation or negation, of a sphere posited as nontemporal, as lying behind a wall of time that is impossible for any observer to cross" (Fuchs 14).

From this, it becomes clear that what the observer sets up or constructs is not something that actually "exists" or is "real" or a duplicate of something that is "true" but rather something original, constructed from the words used to describe it, as signs and

signifiers. This makes the Cartesian construct of the ego into a paradox, the doomed-to-failure effort to pull together elements that cannot be brought together: "I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think. Words which make every attentive ear feel the agility with which the ring of meaning escapes our grasp on the verbal line. One would have to say: I am not where I am the plaything of my thoughts; I think of what I am, where I do not think I think" (Lacan 43). Mirolla's fascination with language (especially meta-language and the relationship between the creation and creator, signified/signifier, commentary/description, critical analysis/marginalia) seems partly a reflection of Lacanian ideas, an attempt to concretize the theory. As Nina Ort says, once language is introduced, only one thing can really be assured about the psyche: "It talks (and almost anything in the psyche talks: the unconscious, the symptoms, and, least clearly, the subject, since it is not sovereign but subjected to the signifying process), but what it says or why will always remain an open question" (37).

Lacan uses the analogy of the Moebius strip to indicate how it is not possible to pull back completely when it comes to the relation between signified and signifier. The two are always sliding into each other, pushing each other along, overlapping, etc. And there is really no escape from this relationship as it is a closed loop. In an essay in which Mirolla laid out the reasons why he felt that the traditional first-person narrative had come to the end of its validity, he employs similar ideas about a closed loop -- or perhaps more telling a painting of oneself into a corner. In speaking of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, he states:

> The result -- the only result that can logically arise -- of this self reflecting upon self is the loss of connection to the world beyond the boundaries of the self. And this means the kind of closed circle we see forming at the end of *Surfacing*. Or, at least, the author's interpretation of what such a closed circle might resemble - for the truth of the matter is that a character trapped within a genuinely closed circle would have no means of communicating with the reader. The author, then, becomes an interpreter or a translator. In this case, Atwood translates for us the "I" character's feeling of no longer being able to identify with other human beings, of - in fact - no longer considering herself a human being. But we can never truly know that feeling because, the moment it would happen to us, we would lose all ability to signal it. We would be off howling, leaving those around us to come to their own inevitably not very favourable conclusions as to our state of mind. ("'I' of the Storm" 136)

In his analysis of the meaning of the word "postmodernism," Lyotard describes it as a kind of skeptical attitude towards the idea that what the so-called "realist" narratives described was in some way an explanation of the modern world, a true making sense of it: "Postmodern designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the

nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" (Lyotard xxiii).

Taking it a step further, Mirolla argues that even writers who have been identified as modern or pre-modern were, in effect, creating their own world rather than (re)presenting an external one. He cites Leo Bersani and his analysis of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and what is "often considered an exemplar of the realist/naturalist genre" ("Denying Labels" 6). Bersani called the novel "an early, only half-explicit, not yet fashionable attempt to locate the drama of fiction in an investigation of the impulse to invent fictions rather than in any psychologically, morally, or socially significant 'content'" (Bersani x) and "the care with which Flaubert sought to make language transparent to reality consecrates the very opaqueness of language which he dreaded" (xviii). Mirolla himself adds:

> In other words, the harder Flaubert tried to erase himself and present the "reality" around him without any veils … the harder he tried to mold the word into the object … the more he ended up putting up road blocks to that "reality" and obscuring the precise objects he wished to capture … and this happened through the very act of dazzling readers with his writing skills and masterful ability to craft a fiction. ("Denying Labels" 6).

Mirolla cites an article by Brian Attebery in which that author "goes on to suggest that an instance of literary composition is actually three pieces of writing rolled or layered into one: the tale being told; the tale of the tale being told; and the critique of the tale being told. I would argue that there are a lot more permutations and combinations than these three … that, like Borges' self-referential stories in *Ficciones* (1962), where entire universes are reflected in a mirror, captured in the hexagonal rooms of the never-ending library, or initiated in the garden of forking paths, the possible roads to be taken are infinite" ("Denying Labels" 7).

Mirolla seems to understand clearly the multiple implications of such a suggestion, the "sudden opening up of numberless paths that is at the same time so thrilling and frightening … Once we discard the idea of an essential identity which can be lost … the possibilities open up in all their horrible splendour" (7). He goes on to list some of these possibilities for the writer, many of which he has come to employ himself in his efforts to stretch narrative techniques beyond the traditional set:

> One is the use of meta-form techniques -- with the "I" author appearing to lay claim to the "I" narrator, for example: making the God of the creation manifest, in other words, within his or her creation. A second, related to the first, is the hermeneutic approach: an examination of and commenting upon text and context. Another is the marginalization of the "I", moving it from the centre of the story so that it becomes more like a true observational "eye", more like the traditional omniscient third-person narrator. A fourth is the breakdown or fragmentation of

the "I" - so that the reader comes to understand that it is unreliable and unpredictable, that it may or may not be telling the truth, that it may or may not truly remember the events it is relating: the take-it-with-a-grain-of-salt approach. ("'I' of the Storm" 140).

At the same time, Mirolla seems to be aware of the various dangers inherent in such techniques and approaches, calling them the types of techniques that distance the reader from the work of art, that make it more difficult to "get into" the characters:

As such, they drive one more wedge between the "I" and the reader's perception of the "I". The question then becomes: When is an "I" so layered, so distanced it is no longer an "I"? For example, if we have a narrator upon whom the reader can't rely, how does that impact on the natural tendency to identify with the "I"? If an "I" narrator is suddenly seen as merely a puppet (even if an occasionally rebellious one) of a show-and-tell author, with whom should the reader ally himself? If the "I" is marginalized, how far can it recede before it becomes just another third-person narration? If the text is annotated and commented upon, can't the same operation be performed on the new text (a literary fractal deconstruction) -- and where does one stop? ("'I' of the Storm" 141).

Where indeed? Perhaps the last set of "theoretical" influences might provide the hint of an answer. These consist of meta-mathematical logic (Gödelian theory) and the art of M.C. Escher. Apart from his other mathematical achievements when it came to logic, Gödel hypothesized his so-called Incompleteness Theorem, which states basically that in a self-referential system, such as human consciousness or even a highly sophisticated computer program, you can always come up with a formula (a statement) that is not part of the original system but which can be generated from that system. In a paper written while studying philosophy, Mirolla applies this notion to self-awareness and to what he called "the level of consciousness" ("The Cognitive Science Project" 7), a level he argues cannot be captured through any computational theory. The interesting thing, as Mirolla points out, is that someone like J.R. Lucas (1961) flags the same fallacy while "it uses (a) the notion of a formal system in its attack and (b) the results of highly rigorous meta-mathematical theorems -- Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems -- to show that a mind could never be captured within any formal system" ("The Cognitive Science Project" 6).

There are hints of this throughout Mirolla's work, serving as a reminder that any interpretation performed on any given piece of writing will in itself create another piece of writing, one that was not inherent in the original but which is somehow connected to it. Mirolla sometimes even brings this into play with his characters, creating a fluid series where one flows into the other or becomes the other or takes on impossibly different tasks while

nominally being the same character (in effect, destroying Cartesian space by being in more than one place at the same time as most evident in the various "Giulios" that pop up throughout his work).

  This brings us to the last of the influences examined here: that of the etchings and other graphic material of the Dutch 20th century artist M.C. Escher. Designs such as "Concentric Rinds," "Rind," "Dewdrop," "Day and Night," "Reptiles," "Horsemen," and especially "Drawing Hands," as well as the impossible building series ("Relativity," "Concave and Convex," "Print Gallery," "Belvedere," "Ascending and Descending") find their equivalences in many of Mirolla's writings. On occasion, such as in the poem "February: Entropic Vistas on a Winter's Day" from his *Light and Time* collection, he actually makes the connection obvious:

> A perfect imprimatur
> with edges as flawless as the stamping
> of machine parts: Gödel's incomplete dream;
> Escher's pre-destiny. Two by two.
> Black and white. Background and foreground. A swan
> bursts from cloud cover, velvet throat exposed.
> In velvet, a snowflake cups the world.

The reference to Escher's "Predestination" (large white birds being intercepted in mid-air by giant evil-looking flying fish with a mouthful of sharp teeth) makes up the central portion of the verse. Other references are more subtle but always there. In "The Architect," for instance, from his *Hothouse Loves & Other Tales* short story collection, Mirolla describes an eternal house which seems to bear some resemblance to Escher's impossible buildings: "… fragments of a manuscript or detailed geometric sketch. It is the design of a house that can't possibly be built and thus, by extension, can't be destroyed" (22). In his speculative fiction novel *The Facility*, Mirolla describes a set of creatures which he calls "The Scavengers" who bear an uncanny resemblance to Escher's "Curl-up" etching, in the way they first rise up like gigantic segmented centipedes while devouring dead objects and other detritus and then form into balls to roll away back into the trans-dimensional space in which they exist in a dormant state until called up again into our world to devour the detritus. Finally, in the short story "Inside/Out" from *Hothouse Loves*, there is a reference to Cadmus, the main character, who "walks along a ribbon of road that sways like an orange peel" (*Hothouse Love* 204), thus bringing back a literary reflection of Escher's "Rind" and his many other ribbons of heads and faces coming apart in empty space.

III. The Novel as Portal into the Hyperreal

> He lies on the cool, wet grass, staring up at the sky. 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. He stands up. A distant clock strikes three. Whistling, he walks down a familiar road. This time, he says, even if I get nothing else right at least I'll know enough not to mistake the Old for the New.
> -- "The Proper Country" from *The Formal Logic*

The notion of "hyperreality" is one that contemporary philosophers and cultural critics bandy about in an attempt to explain what Baudrillard calls "the simulation of something which never really existed" (1981) and what Eco labeled "the authentic fake" (1990). Elsewhere, Baudrillard defines the hyperreal as a "postmodernist screen projected with simulations rather than representations" (*America* 91). What we get is a hyperreal construct, where the image of the real has replaced the real and where there is no way to uncover the difference between the original object and its simulacra.

Mirolla takes this construct a step further in a novel such as *Berlin*. Here, in what has been described as a confrontation with "the metaphysical and the surreal" (Baine, par. 7), Mirolla asks the question: What if, instead of the impossibility of distinguishing the simulacra from the real, there is no real in the first place? What if it has always been a simulacrum that we have been chasing? What if we ourselves are simulacra? Of course, this is a question that certain philosophers have been asking in one form or another down through the millennia, including Gautama, Plato and Sartre. It is very appropriate then that *Berlin* has as one of its main characters (perhaps "simulations" is a better word) none other than a philosopher. And not just any type of philosopher but one whose specialty is logic.

Using the framework of a novel-within-a-novel (and in some ways resembling Escher's "Magic Mirror" and "Drawing Hands" lithographs where one action taken on its own seems possible but the two together impossible), *Berlin* tells the story of Giulio Chiavetta (another of Mirolla's "Giulio" incarnations), a stationary engineer who has been institutionalized in a Montreal, Canada, mental facility. Chiavetta, which in Italian translates into "little key," suddenly awakes from the stupor he has been in since his arrival at the facility (on the day news breaks of the fall of the Berlin Wall) and tries to make his escape, claiming his need to return to Berlin.

At this point the psychiatrist at the facility, knowing Chiavetta has never been anywhere near Berlin, examines the computer in the room Chiavetta has occupied and discovers a series of texts entitled "Berlin: A Novel In Three Parts." In this is told the story of Antonio Serratura ("lock," in Italian), a Montreal philosophy professor who is invited to read a paper at a conference at Freie Universität in pre-fall-of-the-wall West Berlin. In this Cold War Berlin, Serratura finds an increasingly strange world (or rather set of worlds) that keeps constantly altering its shape, like some type of Proteus mixing mind and matter and keeping them in constant flux. As he tries to navigate through these changes (and he seems the only one to be aware of them as other characters seem to inhabit their own world and nothing else), he experiences a series of events that make him question the basis of his own logic and even existence:

A. Did the Swedish philosopher who liked putting on punk circus displays as part of her presentations kill herself with a drug overdose injection in the university washroom?
B. Does Serratura end up in a transvestite bar watching a presentation of *Annie Get Your Gun* with a Jewish friend who sells gas stoves?
C. Does he commit a brutal, cold-blooded murder, killing the beautiful, enigmatic wife of the man who was kind enough to invite him to Berlin in the first place?
D. Are the brother and sister who run the hotel-pension where he's staying indulging in Sado-masochistic acts?
E. Is there a tiny old man in the hotel who replays vintage Nazi propaganda movies in his bedroom and still thinks he's fighting on the Russian front?

This is only one layer. At the same time, Serratura has another mystery to solve and one that is much closer to home: a diary in Italian of German POW camp memories and impressions left behind by his father, a diary with some very alarming revelations (or so it seems) that add further to the confusion Serratura feels during every step of his journey. In the midst of all this, there is the central question of the relationship or connection between Chiavetta and Serratura:

A. Are they one and the same?
B. Is one really the invention of the other? If so, who is the inventor and who the invented? Or did they simply invent one another? Taking turns, as it were? One simulacrum creating the other simulacrum in an endless act of pseudo-birthing?
C. Were they once one person, one identity, and then split apart in the descent into madness: Serratura Cold War and Chiavetta post-Cold War? Are they now trying to get back together? To re-form one identity? And what will be the result of that reforming?

In one way, there is an obvious parallel here between the Chiavetta/Serratura split and the Wall that separates one part of Berlin from the other. But just as Chiavetta and Serratura are

hyperreal characters, so the two Berlins are hyperreal cities. Both sets serve as twisted mirror images (re: Lacan) that perhaps have no reflection in the real:

> As Serratura turned the corner leading back to the right corridor, he thought he heard a harsh, scratchy voice coming from one of the rooms. It sounded as if someone's name were being recited over and over again at an ever increasing pitch--but he couldn't really be sure. And then there was a loud burst of martial music, followed by a steady flickering of lights at the base of the door and what seemed thousands of voices all saying the same thing in a very insistent manner. Just as quickly, it stopped: music, voices, flickering of lights. All gone. (37)

Just as objects appear and disappear, events occur or do not occur, so does a good deal of the story line flicker between TV imagery of riots taking place (thanks to the visit of another hyperreal character, Ronald Reagan as President of the United States) and the unreality of the actual riots:

> This time, gangs of youths were rampaging along the edges of the barbed wire he'd seen from the plane. Now, he could make out that it was several metres high, placed in rolled layers and practically impossible to penetrate. To make doubly sure, police on horseback patrolled the inside perimeter. The reporter on the scene was speaking from a temporary podium beneath the Brandenberg Gates. The podium and gates were eerily floodlit and, at times, it seemed as if the reporter were fading in and out, like the "Beam-me-up-Scotty" sequences on *Star Trek*. (44-45)

Like any simulacrum, like any set of holographs, this is one that we believe we can turn off as we wish: "The young woman on the sofa got up with a sigh, smoothed her skirt and switched the channel. A game show that resembled *The Price Is Right* -- Serratura recognized it because his daughter enjoyed shouting along when the host yelled: "Come on, down" -- was in progress, complete with contestants jumping up and down and scantily dressed, large-breasted hostesses who lounged about suggestively on the bedroom furniture" (45).

Mirolla takes every opportunity to point out the schizophrenic nature of the characters and the city, and how the two are intertwined. In fact, Mirolla has indicated that the original idea for the novel arose from an idea he had been mulling over for several years (a character who had split in two and was trying to come back together) and a fortuitous trip to Berlin. The distancing effects (as originally outlined in Mirolla's 1996 article "'I' Of The Storm") come out in full force here. For instance, the three parts of the novel-within-a-novel are written from three different points of view: the first part in the third person; the second in the second person; and the third in the first person. Meanwhile, the sections where Serratura reflects upon his father are written consistently in the first person and within quotes. Chiavetta seems to live in a different world from that which he inhabits physically. For

example, although single and without family, he'd marked down "Married, One Child" for his civic status. When asked by the psychiatrist the reason he'd been admitted to the hospital, he had replied: "Why, don't you know? I killed someone. I wasn't myself at the time but I still killed someone. And this is where they put people who kill people. Isn't it?" (70). The persons Chiavetta claimed to have killed were none other than his own wife and child: "There was one problem with Chiavetta's self-accusation: no proof was ever found that he'd actually killed someone – let alone a nonexistent wife and child" (70).

Other examples include the following: the conference that Serratura is attending is called the *First Wittgenstein World Symposium on The Realism/Anti-Realism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy*, with papers presented including ironic ambiguities as *Meaning, Bivalence and Anti-Realism: Can Classical Logic Be Preserved or Must We Toss Out the Baby with the Bath Water?*, and *Intuitionist Logic: A Constructivist Approach to Non-Existent Objects*; Serratura mistaking a young couple from Georgia for members of the Hitler Youth Corps; the painting of a woman with a piece of cement wedged between her legs ("The cement seems not foreign but an outgrowth of the flesh itself, an organ added to combat some alien disease" (113)); a watch that keeps appearing and disappearing from Serratura's arm; the old man midget's doubled diary that resembles his father's diary but only written in German, as well as the midget's trunk imitating his father's (again, the doubling and the slightly skewed mirror images without a reference point to indicate which is "real," if any).

It is in the third section, however, the "I" section, where this sense of hyperreality is ratcheted up to the point where it spreads and takes over all else. It is here that the world becomes an unstable place or perhaps no place at all, if Mirolla has his way. Everything becomes margin and without a center anything is possible, including contradictions of all kinds. The last part of his father's diary reads:

> We're all traitors, each and every single one of us. We're all mass murderers. We've all compromised to stay alive, to scrabble out our measly, miserable existence, to chew on our potato skins and grub-infested cabbages. Only those who did themselves in at the very beginning managed to escape the stain of guilt and complicity. I have betrayed my friends. I have betrayed them over and over again daily. They know not who it is who betrays them, who constantly slips the knife into their backs and gives it the final twist. They continue to treat me like a friend, like someone they can trust. But I'm not worthy of their trust. I don't deserve their friendship. I deserve only to die. (158)

If that unexpected admission of betrayal is not enough, the actual threads of the universe start to unravel (or at least Serratura sees it that way). The world around him takes some stutter steps, as if not quite knowing which way to go, as if it too has lost its way:

I pick up a cube of sugar and plop it into my mouth, sucking at the sweetness. LSD perhaps. To help you traipse off the top of the Europa Centre without a care in the world, to float down like a feather right into the World Fountain. That would explain a lot of things. Or would it? I must test the composition of the water: H_2O or XYZ? Ah, Twin Earthians, who can tell the difference? Who can ever tell the difference? (161)

At another point, all the various characters with whom Serratura has interacted (including the dead punk philosopher) appear before him when he awakes from having fainted. At this point, it appears as if the entire sequence of events has been manipulated and they have all been in on the deception: "I look from one to the other as they stand there, some with sheepish grins on their faces, others avoiding eye contact altogether. They resemble wax. Any moment now the flame will come too close and they'll become shapeless, lacking any identity. Until, of course, they re-form into something new" (188). But is that really the case? In a fit of anger and a twisted notion of getting even, Serratura decides to outwit the cast of "actors" (or agents) by doing the one thing they are not anticipating: he commits suicide by throwing himself in front of a subway train: "The last thing I hear is Celine's cry of horror and despair" (193). But it is not the last thing he hears:

When all the other possibilities have been cut off, have been reduced to zero, I snap awake. I'm flat on my back, staring up at a pair of large, circular fluorescent lights. One is working properly, I note; the other flickers on and off. I shut my eyes again for a moment, still groggy, still uncertain, convinced that somehow my body has been turned inside out. Has been negativized, its internal structure exposed for all to see. (193)

So, perhaps it was not a well-orchestrated plot after all on the part of the characters. Or it may have been such a plot in one of the worlds but not in this one. By this point, Serratura has lost all sense of the real and lives completely in the world of the hyperreal. That is why he must commit one final atrocious act. That's why he must kill Celine whom he loves but cannot have, the one real thing:

I shut my eyes. Out of the dark come more of the words, the words I can't control, now strung along by some sequence I also can't control. Words that make perfect sense, make perfect sentences--and yet don't: "There is no second-order logical calculus." That's it. That's it? Doesn't that make sense? Of course, it does. "The set of second-order logical truths is too rich to be rationally subjugated." Of course, that's obvious. I suddenly blurt out: "The predication of relations. The predation of relationships. In the night. Russell's paradox. The moxie of orthodoxy." (p. 199).

Again, Mirolla creates a mirroring effect: Did Chiavetta also kill the one real thing? But Chiavetta did not have the one real thing. He had to create it. He had to create it in order to kill it. Now, Serratura must find some way to escape from himself, from the deed that he has done:

> The only real way to avoid discovery is madness, that true loss of self, that true and utter shattering of personality. But there's one little problem with that, one teeny-weeny problem with that. No map with which to find myself again if I ever change my mind. ("Change my mind"--now isn't that a most strange, most wonderful expression?) No well-ordered formulae to bring all the pieces back together once the trip is deemed over and the coast is clear. Besides, madness can't be willed upon someone, can it? I don't think so. It must come on its own. Or I must allow it to find me, to leap upon me from some dark corner. (207)

Thus, we have Serratura seeking Chiavetta's solution. But naturally he would: Is he not Chiavetta's creation? Or is it? If it were Chiavetta's creation, it would seem that the conversation would be about his absolute sanity rather than the seeking of non-sanity, no? But it does make sense if Chiavetta and Serratura are mirror images of one another, each one creating the other in a mutual bond from which they cannot escape. Well, perhaps they might have been able to escape, if the universe could provide them with a point of entry. Instead, Serratura sees it shape-shifting around him. Mirolla manages to sum it up in a very powerful image, one both familiar and so utterly frightening:

> I shake my head. No, no. There's a mistake here. A category mistake? I smile. This note has been sent to the wrong person. Really. It's addressed to the Serratura who hadn't killed Celine, the Serratura who ... who had jumped in front of the U-Bahn train, perhaps. Or the one still sleeping, the one held tenderly in Annie's arms, true love in his grasp at last as he fingers the lubricated condom 20 stories above the ground. Something has slipped, no question about it. After countless eons of infallibility and impossibly smooth running, the universal sorting machinery has missed a slot. And now it scrambles to set things right but only succeeds in making them worse, in missing more slots, in grinding away the gears like a motorist who has lost control on a very busy stretch of highway. (212)

While *Berlin* has often been called a "metaphysical detective novel", the truth is that there is nothing meta-physical here. The world is made up of words and it is the beauty in putting together those words that Mirolla believes is the only thing that is important. That the story has been structured in the form of a metaphysical detective novel is merely one more illusion in the never-ending but obviously fruitless attempt to deconstruct the hyperreal, to reduce it to some magic potion that will allow the real to appear at last. All appearances to the contrary.

IV. Fiction, Meta-Fiction, Fictocriticism

> Towards the middle of the night, at precisely the right moment and on the first tick of 3 a.m., Giulio re-enters his proper country. It is the only time for which a visa has been granted, for which a visa could possibly be granted. He avails himself of the suitable channels, files the necessary papers and crosses the appropriate borders. Everything is in order, he tells himself, in perfect order.
>
> -- "The Proper Country" from *The Formal Logic*

In his "Denying Labels and Identifications" article, Mirolla discusses the concept of what it means to know one's craft. He argues that the ability to put together words, phrases, sentences, etc. for "the creation of a meaningful-valid-useful-relevant story" (4) is only part of that craft:

> The other part consists of knowing what others have done in the past and are doing in the present within that craft. In the driest terms, there must be a knowledge of the theory that stands behind the practice. Or else there is the danger of suffering the fate of re-inventing the artistic wheel each time pen is put to paper. Not only is there the danger of re-inventing that wheel but also the real possibility of being crushed beneath its Juggernaut. (5)

In the article, he cites Amanda Nettelbeck (1998) and her discussion of "fictocriticism" which she says makes use of "[S]elf reflexivity, the fragment, intertextuality, the bending of narrative boundaries, crossing of genres, the capacity to adapt literary forms, hybridized writing, moving between fiction (invention/speculation) and criticism (deduction/explication) of subjectivity (interiority) and objectivity (exteriority)" (3-4). Mirolla argues that this type of writing "[w]hether one calls [it] metafictional, fictocritical or gives it some other post-modernist tag" (8) should not be assigned merely to discussions within esoteric academic circles:

> Among the better-known examples of such writing are all of Beckett's works, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Calvino's *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* … and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. In the latter, O'Brien, a Vietnam War veteran, produces a collection of short stories where he mixes naturalistic and often graphic descriptions of jungle combat with commentary on the necessary invention and fiction found in such war stories, as well as insights from a character by the name of "Tim O'Brien." (8)

It is also significant that Mirolla cites Patricia Waugh's 1984 essays on meta-fiction in which she states:

> Metafiction is … an elastic term which covers a wide range of fictions. There are those novels at one end of the spectrum which take fictionality as a theme to be

explored … whose formal self-consciousness is limited. At the center of this spectrum are those texts that manifest the symptoms of formal and ontological insecurity but allow their deconstructions to be finally recontextualized or 'naturalized' and given a total interpretation (which constitute … a 'new realism') … Finally, at the furthest extreme … can be placed those fictions that, in rejecting realism more thoroughly, posit the world as a fabrication of competing semiotic systems which never correspond to material conditions … . (qtd. in Mirolla, 8)

Mirolla also points out that this type of writing is not something that has appeared out of thin air or as some sort of game being played by intellectuals with too much time on their hands. It is grounded on the idea that the old canons have lost their basis and that the vision of "a set 'reality'(usually a reality based on Eurocentric principles or a variant of those principles as adapted by North Americans" (9) can no longer be sustained. Again, citing Waugh:

Contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures. The materialistic, positivist and empiricist world-view on which realistic fiction is premised no longer exists. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that more and more novelists have come to question and reject the forms that correspond to this ordered reality (the well-made plot, chronological sequence, the authoritative omniscient author, the rational connection between what characters 'do' and what they 'are', the causal connection between 'surface' details and the 'deep', 'scientific laws' of existence). (qtd. in Mirolla, 9)

A large number of Mirolla's own fictions are a reflection of meta-fictional concerns and approaches. This is true even of his early published stories such as "Was Socrates The First Absurdist" (originally published in 1973 in the *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, reprinted in *The Formal Logic of Emotion* (1992)). In it, Mirolla sets in motion a pseudo-scholarly scenario about Franz Hartmann, a German professor whose so-called revolutionary thesis about Socrates (as indicated in the title) becomes intertwined with his own life and that of a graduate student who comes to live with him and who serves as narrator.

In the story, Hartmann is so engrossed with his thesis and fear of rebuttals that he does not notice the fact the narrator and his wife are involved in an affair or even that his wife leaves him, taking their child with her. Nor does the narrator notice when Hartmann himself vanishes – in search of Socrates. At a certain point, the narrator discovers that throughout all the years, Hartmann has been carrying on a correspondence with himself, including vitriolic letters sent anonymously:

Why Dr. Hartmann carried on a correspondence with himself can be answered only by him – if at all … The important thing for me is that I shall always believe

in a continuous entity named Hartmann. If he has changed to the extent his handwriting no longer matches, it's still not as drastic as a belief in metamorphosis. Besides, I've yet to see a transformation of a butterfly into a caterpillar. ("Was Socrates The First Absurdist" 63).

In a follow-up story, "The Anteroom," Manfred, the son of the narrator from the original story, lands in Vancouver after responding to an ad by a certain Arturo Fe ("as in auto-da-fé," as he describes himself). Manfred is certain that Arturo is actually Dr. Hartmann and, when he cannot get Arturo to admit as much, even under torture, there is the hint that Manfred may have burned down Arturo's house, including the "anti-room" reserved for Manfred, and in the process killed Arturo's poem-reciting wife and two children. In the story, we only hear the wife and children, with Manfred implying that Arturo has simply orchestrated the whole affair, creating his family from tape recordings and such; in the report of the fire, only the wife and children are listed. There is no mention of Arturo/ Hartmann. Actually, it is even more confusing than that as the news story reads:

> "The remains of the Fe residence on Hastings Ave. in Burnaby. The tragic fire claimed the lives of four people" – something jammed up his windpipe, hot and pumping – "whom the fire department has tentatively identified as Mrs. Celia Fe, a widow; her children, Paul and Lucy; and a boarder as yet unidentified but believed to be a visitor from outside the country." ("The Anteroom" 101)

While Mirolla played with the meta-fictional/fictocritical forms from early on, they reach their densest configuration in his later work, specifically in the short stories collected in the *The Giulio Metaphysics III*. The title emerges as a continuation of the first and fourth sections of *The Formal Logic* ("The Giulio Metaphysics I" and "The Giulio Metaphysics II" respectively). The first section contained the story "A Theory of Discontinuous Existence" and the fourth "The Proper Country." Both these stories are about identity: in the first, a questioning of what it takes to "string together" a particular identity or what makes a human being an integrated whole; the second consisting of the outsider returning to the land he may have felt should embrace him (having been born there) but which instead forces him to take on a series of identities over which he seems to have no control: doctor, priest, archeologist, avenger against family wrongs.

In *The Giulio Metaphysics III*, an amorphous character by the name of Giulio carries on a running battle with his creator: at first as an almost unconscious puppet, then rebelling, and finally taking over his own destiny. Or perhaps only seemingly taking over his destiny, given that the over-arching construct of Mirolla's work is that there is no such thing as an external "destiny". It is all controlled by the person who puts the words together – and this

"person" is not so much an entity but rather a producer of words who in turn is displaced the moment he/she/it is uncovered as the "person" putting together the words.

Here is the Prologue to the manuscript:

> I fall.
> Tumbling head over heels. Arms flailing. Legs scissoring. No longer trapped within the boxy confines of the genre. Within the strictures that have tied and bound. Within the artifice and limiting parameters of the written-on-the-blank-tablet message.
> I fall.
> Tossing pages to the left and right. Up and down. Fragments of words, phrases, sentences. Accordion-like pieces of paragraphs that stretch away from me in an attempt to escape before snapping back into my face. Before parading military-style   in front of my eyes. Before stuffing themselves into my mouth.
> I fall.
> Hoping to escape. To make a clean getaway. But the words are insistent. They insist on being read. They insist on being swallowed. They insist on being turned into flesh. They will not leave me alone. They demand a sacrifice. They want to nail me to the wall. Keep me fixed forever.
> I fall instead.
> Insisting in turn: "It's the falling that keeps me free." The mantra that I keep repeating as my arms flail and my legs scissor and I tumble head over heels. But I know it can't go on forever. I can't keep falling forever. The words will catch up to me. And they <u>will</u> crucify me.
> In the meantime.
> I.
> Fall. (5)

In "A general introduction to pure phenomenology", the opening paragraph sets the tone and introduces the creator:

> The porcelain cup out of which Giulio is sipping coffee once contained arsenic (a thousand years ago perhaps -- or yesterday). And will again someday. But no one knows when -- not even <u>me</u>. Or if there's a pattern to the fillings and emptyings. He swallows slowly, in tiny gulps, fingers wrapped around the greasy, battle-scarred container, letting the coffee drip organically into his half-awakened mind. (25)

It ends with:

> My poor Giulio.
> Come on, now. I'm sure someone out there has a little arsenic to spare. Just a tiny little spoonful. Tucked away in a mouldy box beneath a mouldy stairwell. Left over from an Agatha Christie mystery, yes?
> I could reach right in at the beginning, before it really gets started, and stir it into his coffee. Mix it in nicely so that he'd hardly notice the slightly bitter taste.
> That would wipe away a lot of confusion, wouldn't it?
> And I promise not to tell anyone who gave it to me.
> Promise.

The creator is becoming more and more bold, appearing out of the frame of the stories much more arrogantly. It is almost to the point where there doesn't seem to be much concern for Giulio himself: the creator is edging Giulio out of the frame and questioning his/her own usefulness: "Sometimes, it just doesn't seem worth the effort. Here I am, filling reams of paper with funny little stick persons. I can make them cavort; I can make them cry; I can make them ask the reason why. But the thrill is gone. Know what I mean?" ("Intermezzo I: Moving on" 33).

In "He goes to school," the creator actually sets the scene with a sort of introductory explanation as to what he/she is trying to achieve and why certain things are done:

> Giulio considers himself an independent-minded and free-thinking individual.(That's always within the confines and definition, of course, of the sympathetic character. Couldn't have him suddenly and without warning go berserk, Uzi in hand, in an Israeli shopping mall, now could I? I could, however, have him suddenly and without warning fall madly in love – with a PLO intellectual. Or decide to go for his driving license -- even if it's a little late in his life for that.) In other words, within the confines of the sympathetic character, I allow him to do pretty much as he pleases when he pleases -- as long as he follows through on those choices. (56)

When we arrive at "Farewell … or the extrapolation blues," the creator's hand weaves itself to such an extent in the pattern of the story that pulling out those threads would cause the story to collapse. The manipulation here is obvious:

> While enjoying a quiet moment in the den of the drug kings, Giulio reflects on a recent incident that took place involving himself and his daughter. A little background: In one of my more mischievous moments, I envisioned what the poor child (barely past her teens) would look like as a full-fledged Jehovah's Witness. And then I liked her so much in the guise I decided to keep her that way for as long as humanly possible -- with a few little quirks thrown in for good measure, of course. So now, blissfully oblivious of the fact it's *The Watch Tower* that needs peddling, she goes daily from house to house, *The Plain Truth* magazine in hand, submitting herself to every abuse possible for her adopted cause. (70)

Not only does Giulio's daughter vanish at one point (just as she is about to dip a biscuit into her coffee) but the entire neighborhood begins to alter shape:

> What had been mere days before a lower middle-class neighbourhood, complete with comfortable single-family homes and languid shade trees, is now an inner-city ghetto. Stripped-down cars squat engineless in puddles of thick oil; waves of refugees and the homeless fight each other for every square inch of free space; gangs of feral children roam the alley ways, trying to break into any unprotected home; broken pieces of glass sprout like demonic fingers along the tops of six-

foot high concrete block fences; the manhole covers explode and steam rises from the sewers, bringing with it the sleek, pungent, finger-snapping odour of poverty mixed with a dash of official ignorance. (73)

In "Scenes from a life … scenes from some deaths," a story consisting of a series of alphabetized vignettes that become more and more disparate, Giulio is about to be institutionalized for his own good when the creator "invoke[s] a previously unmentioned prerogative and create[s] what has been until now an unknown escape hatch for my Giulio" (92). But this escape hatch also serves to get Giulio out of his creator's clutches:

> It's through the basement, naturally, at the far end of the basement. Where the cobwebs are thick and steely enough to stop marauding bats. Where the bloodied writing remains curdled on the wall. Where a damp, pre-matrimonial mattress still has the indents from their original love-making. (Ah, what bliss, the dust that we made rise in the slanting rays of sun.) Now, the same people who had wanted Giulio captured are waving at him, urging him on, giving him hints and indications, signs and directions: a paraplegic in a wheelchair spinning his wheels; a dog shrugging off a thick layer of snow; an old woman expertly wielding a sharp feather; a red-faced man with a debased coin in his hand; another man who parts his hair to the left; a nuclear family shaking away the blues; a smiling God in a bloody smock smoking an aromatic pipe; a blonde child trying on a matched set of black angel wings; an hermaphrodite in a cylindrical cap; the parts and pieces mixing and matching, matching and mixing. And then melding precipitously into one, into one multi-dimensional creature. (90)

In "Intermezzo II: Hello, it's me," Giulio fights back and takes over the role previously held by the original creator. In his telling of the story, they were not coming for Giulio but rather for the creator: "They wanted to toss that nice, little fine-meshed net of reality over you and you – tricky, tricky you – managed to divert it" (93). The diversion, according to Giulio, was the creation of Giulio. Giulio accuses his creator of only pretending to care, of having created this character who "doesn't eat, doesn't bathe, doesn't answer the phone, doesn't pick up his mail, doesn't respond to the voices and concerns of those around him, doesn't acknowledge love" (93). And all the while, it is the creator who is in control of Giulio's various states:

> And there I was all the while, stuck under your thumb. My lips zipped shut. Unable to make any rejoinder, unable to react, unable to explain myself. Why? Because you didn't want me to. Because you wouldn't allow it. Because what you said, what you wrote down, what you edited, what you crossed out and re-wrote, that was the law. My thoughts didn't count. My desires weren't even considered. My wants and needs were worth less than those of a mosquito flitting along a storm window screen, looking for some way in before the rain and the thunder and the lightning struck, washing it away forever with the other flimsy detritus. So, what do you say? Does that sound about right? Close to the mark? Close enough, eh. Come on. Admit it. (93-94)

In the third part of the collection ("Families, Friendlies, Familiars III"), Giulio experiences a type of re-birth that turns him into a quasi-existential character, a type of almost Beckett like personage who seems to wander about the countryside without any real ability to organize or pull together his thoughts/actions. In a sense, he just is. "Into another kind of country" (with its obvious mirroring of "The proper country") begins with: "Startled, I awake." He finds himself on a bus and doesn't know who he is, or what he is doing there. Along the way, he seems to have picked up Norma, a lover of some type: "Do I know you? I want to ask. Have we met before? But somehow I realize that isn't the appropriate response" (102). The only clue to his identity is a blue sports bag with his first name on it. In it is a videotape which Norma suggests they take to one of the giant electronic stores to play. The images on the tape reflect the elemental composition of much of Mirolla's stories and bring together identity, media images, hyperreality and that sense of absolute loss and frustration:

> As the picture clears and comes into focus, I can see a man sitting on a wooden chair in the corner of a dark room. He's sitting on a chair naked: one hand over his private parts; the other covering his face, shielding himself from a very bright, very concentrated spotlight. And squirming. He's squirming as trickles of sweat ooze down his face and chest to form a puddle on the floor around him.
> ………………………………………………………………………………………
> At that moment, the camera closes in on him. On his face. I have to admit the resemblance is remarkable. It's like looking at myself in a mirror. Perhaps, that's what the screen is. I reach forward with my hand and touch it. No, it's no mirror. I shudder and step back again. (112)

In "His life in two chapters," the story is set up as a video shoot (which mirrors "The hyperborean's: a re-enactment," the story set up like a play in the first part), and then as a video game. In the opening sequence, Giulio and his unnamed wife indulge in sexual games where they shout out various nonsense phrases:

> **GIULIO** (leaning forward to kiss her)
> Cucarachas!
> **WIFE** (returning his kiss)
> Mothers-in-law!
> [They push their mouths together hard and then the rest of their bodies, a grope that soon has them lying on the ground, enmeshed with one another.]
> **GIULIO** (unbuttoning the front of her dress to expose a blood-red half-bra)
> Lactate infenestration!
> **WIFE** (fumbling with his belt)
> Meat wagon sicophantasies!
> [**GIULIO** runs his tongue along the top of her breast, then reaches in and pops it out of its half-cup. He takes the nipple in his mouth and begins to suck gently – at the same time slipping a hand beneath her dress. His **WIFE** tugs at his trousers

and soon has them below his buttocks, hairy swaggerers with a life of their own. She hikes up her dress, now brown and mud-stained, and pulls him towards her.]
GIULIO (starting to pump back and forth)
Cata-cata-cata-tonic!
WIFE (between yelps and flesh-slapping sounds)
Cata-cata-cata-strophic! (134-135)

At one point, there is a direct reference to a post-Kafka type of scenario:

> A shiny **COCKROACH**, huge for its kind – perhaps four inches long. Cautiously, it crawls out, golden wings held tight against its segmented body. It sniffs the air with its sensory feelers, making sure nothing's moving, nothing that can do it damage. Then, it begins to slide and slither across the rotting porcelain of the bath tub, unable to get a really good grip with its multiple legs. It comes up against the edge of the tub and stops for a moment, frozen, waving its cerci.]
> **GIULIO:**
> Hello, Gregor. Feel like talking?
> [Instead of instantly fleeing, the **COCKROACH** rises up on its last two pairs of legs, rises up until it starts to grow. Until it seems as large as **GIULIO** himself. Or at least on the same level as him. Then its insect face begins to contort, to twist and morph until it resembles a human face, albeit a very old, very wrinkled, very ugly human face.]
> **COCKROACH**: (wearily, as if hardly able to hold this size and position for more than a few moments at a time)
> Three hundred twenty million years. Through thick and thin. We even had our own "age", you know. The "age of the cockroach". And we managed to survive that, too. That's the only antidote for angst. So don't talk to me about fathers who are unforgiving. Or mothers who abandon their offspring at birth. Let the little nymphs squirm if they're able – and die if they're not!
> [The **COCKROACH** slithers down and back, once again nothing more than a four-inch giant of his kind. Head first, it scuttles into the drain and vanishes.
> **GIULIO** rubs his eyes. Too late, he rushes to the drain and rams a thin stick down its throat. He jams the stick up and down. Then stops to inspect it closely, to see if there are any green guts sticking to it.]
> **GIULIO**: Bastard! And here I thought you were a friend of mine. (142)

In the game portion, the reader can help decide Giulio's movements. The game has some of the same scenarios as seen in some of the previous stories but now much more obviously contrived and metafictional:

> [**Level One (Park Extension): GIULIO** is walking along the street, hands in pocket and head in the air, happy-go-lucky and carefree. He's so happy he's actually whistling. And why shouldn't he be? He's a young man with the whole future laid ahead of him – at least that's what the drop-down text says about him: "Giulio, a 21-year-old male. Bright, well-educated, healthy, in the prime of life. Ready to take the world by the tail and spin it out into space. Ready to make a difference. To leave something lasting behind." … Suddenly, out of the sky, there descends a vicious-looking Samurai warrior, covered in spike-like armor and wearing a lizard-head helmet. The warrior stands solidly blocking **GIULIO**'s way, legs apart, sword weaving menacingly in the air. Slowly, it

removes its helmet. Surprise! The Samurai warrior turns out to be his **GIRLFRIEND**. Before **GIULIO** can ask what this is all about, what's the big idea, she smiles and turns sideways, sword tip planted in the ground. Her profile shows a definite swelling around the area of her belly, a swelling that seems to be growing bigger by the moment. The drop-down text says: "Reproduction: a process whereby living plant or animal cells or organisms produce offspring. Reproduction is one of the essential functions of living organisms, as necessary for the preservation of the species as food getting is for the preservation of the individual." (144-145)

At this point, the reader can help Giulio decide what it is exactly that he wants to do: from turning and fleeing to fighting back, from killing himself to simply sidestepping and moving forward.

In "Homeward bound," there is a mirroring of the second and fourth stories in the collection, "The man in the basement" and "A general introduction yo pure phenomenology". But from another angle, as if the reflection is not a true one. Giulio, not really knowing who he is, descends into the basement to find a tableau of a middle aged man sitting at a tiny wooden table, almost like the kind a child would sit on to do his/her drawings. Giulio has the feeling that the tableau is only set in motion the moment he steps into the cantina – and stops again when he departs. The same thing happens when he steps outside – at first empty and then filled with all sorts of day to day activity. But the most frightening part of this scene is the idea that Giulio cannot escape his past (or whatever had been created as his past): "I walk away down the street as fast as I can – almost running. The house looms ahead of me. I turn back. It's there, at the other end, as if rising on its haunches" (163).

It is in this story that there is a moment of epiphany, a tiny sliver of the physical that intrudes on all the images and created scenarios, the assembled set of lies with which human beings filled their days. Here, there is a moment of pureness:

Suddenly, I don't care who I am or what they want me to be. I don't care if God is watching or if there's nothing out there but a dumb emptiness that goes on forever. I don't care if we have the rest of our lives to act out this moment or if someone's going to burst in at any moment. Ready to hurl a bucket of cold water on us – as if we were little more than a pair of rutting dogs. I just don't care. She pulls me on top of her, on the source of the heat. I kiss her lips, her neck, her nipples. I lick her nipples, feeling the tiny bud beneath my tongue. Then I work my way back up. She opens her legs, placing them against my sides. Her hands work away at my penis, straightening it, aiming it. I lower myself and thrust, meeting solid resistance. I persist, pushing hard. She gives a cry, a sudden burst

of pain. I almost pull away. But she holds me there, holds my buttocks tight, forcing me to continue. A second thrust. The resistance gives somewhat. She grimaces. A third thrust and I'm inside her. The grimace turns into a smile. I begin to move faster and faster, my hips seemingly possessed of a mind of their own. And then there's no stopping – not even when I spot the drops of blood on the towel beneath her. Not until I've spent myself and fallen away, struggling to catch my breath. (166)

But in Mirolla's world, this type of epiphany is not something that can last or be truly captured. Sooner or later, the discovery of falsehood is made, the deception is uncovered:

> Their faces are twisted and full of hate. And they mean to do me harm. All except for the little boy. He's busy tossing bones against the nearest wall. I have no choice but to back up. They keep coming, filling up the entire landing. I want to ask how the man in the wheelchair managed to make it up the stairs but somehow it doesn't seem relevant. The truth is they've found me out. It was bound to happen sooner or later. They've recognized me as the impostor that I am. And they're right to be angry. After all, I'd be mighty pissed off if I discovered my best friend, my lover, my son was a fake. Someone whose actions – and even emotions – were carefully staged. I want to tell them I didn't mean to hurt anyone. That it was their fault really for assuming I was the person they thought I was. But it's a little late for that, isn't it? Besides, who'd believe me? Wouldn't they think it was just one more act for their benefit? Suddenly, the weeks spent on the cold and damp streets seem very inviting. (173)

In the end, it is Giulio who finds himself falling; it is Giulio who is the creator; it is Giulio who must be punished for that sin, for daring to step up. The last story, "You will land …", is written in the second person and future tense, giving it a type of double distancing. Here, Giulio will slither and squirm through a desert where the wind is always in his face; he will feel often on the verge of dying: "The end. Finis. Done. Dropped. Kaput. But no. There's yet another squirm in you. Yet another slither. Yet another slink" (177). He will end up in a box-like container through which he can hear some scratching, the scratching that has haunted him throughout. There, he will be fed and kept alive, allowed to see the outside world through a porthole. But there will be no way out, no way "back to the real world" (181). He will find a spike, long and sharp. He will spend time trying to figure out what it is for: open the door? Kill himself? Scratch the porthole? Then he will realize what the spike is for:

> Held in a two-fisted grip, you'll press that spike against the wall. Nail the words to that wall: "Giulio's mother, I will have you write in my cramped style, in my cramped, ever-so-peculiar style, Giulio's mother showed him the reality in dreams. For that, Giulio vows, she can never be forgiven, must never be absolved." (183)

Mirolla gives us a strong clue as to what is going on here (other than the obvious surreal or magical real surface) in his critical writing when he states (referring to the type of meta-fictional writing that he is trying to develop and sharpen, as it were):

> Because its success does not rely on essences, identities, labels and identifications, on the continued existence of histories and hyphenations … because at that point all that really matters is the ability to manipulate the fictional world and its infinitely rich elements … because of all that, not even the inevitable erasure of the author … of that universe's god … can undo the creations themselves. Put another way: while the non-existence of the writer is all but assured, the fictional landscape created — in all its beauty and hideousness, its fragility and robustness, its mirrors and libraries — will go on without you. I guess that's as close to immortality as anyone will ever get. (11)

IV. Concluding Remarks

> No, he is getting up again, shaking the crumbs of snow from his chest. He pulls something away from his foot and throws it back towards the clearing. We easily recognize it as a snare, a thin wire shaped into a noose. The last toe-hold has fallen away. There's no keeping him back. He continues to walk, showing as yet no sign of stiffness. Soon, all we can see rising above the snow is his cap, the rest blending perfectly with the surroundings. Behind him, leaving x's in the snow, a rabbit follows, thinking it knows a safe path when it sees one.
> -- "The Truth-Tree Method" from *The Formal Logic*

The idea of a "safe path" is one that Mirolla examines in his writing (see "Dying Labels"), but it is also one that describes the attitude towards his writing by some readers. Mirolla's writing is difficult, dense and often does not reveal its meaning through a casual or one-time examination. In fact, even those who have taken the time to study and appreciate his work more closely have spoken of its density. Here is what D. Cloyce Smith had to say on the amazon.com site about Mirolla's *Berlin*:

> I've never read anything quite like Berlin. There are perhaps inevitable comparisons to Borges, Calvino, Kafka, and Vonnegut, but its realist underpinnings remind me of other works: the cabaret demimonde of Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*, the philosophical hijinks in Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net*, the increasingly addled scholars who populate the novels of John Gardner (not to mention the meta-fictional frameworks of *October Light* and *Freddy's Book*) and the weird and irresolvable circularities of David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*. Mirolla's novel is funny and fascinating, baffling and exasperating, but in the end the fractured worlds of its central characters -- both the person of Serratura and the city of Berlin -- come together to make a sort of wild, incoherent sense that you might expect to find in a universe of parallel worlds.

> This is a book to read twice: first for its mesmerizing storytelling, then to tease out the meaning of it all. (par. 3)

Similarly, another commentary on the same site speaks of going from one reality to another until the two realities, the mirror-images are no longer distinguishable:

> In the end it is not entirely clear what is real and what is not. Much of what Serratura experiences did not or could not have happened outside his increasingly deranged mind, yet what is described in the final scene may be the truth about what happened to the author Chiavetta himself. Clearly Mirolla's intent is to play with reality just as philosophers play with reality, philosophers who, in the postmodern interpretation, cannot decide what is real and what is not real, or whether we can ever know, or even whether a question about reality even makes sense. (Littrell, par. 9)

In an interview Mirolla gave to Lowndes (2009), he explained something of the essential nature of his type of writing and the essence of the combination of magic realism and fictocritical writing for which he has come to be known:

> Magic realism is like taking a trip with a shaman. One goes on a 'real' journey across realistic landscapes. But everything is heightened and has an inner glow to it. That inner glow is the essential magic that should emerge from a magical realistic short story or other work of art. In this world, everything is possible and transformations occur all the time. However, there is one rule in magical realism: one cannot go against the internal logic of the story, the determining framework controlled by the writer. In the end, like a shaman's journey, a magical realist story needs to be a healing of some type, a way to close the gap between what we take as real and what is really real. ("Hunter in the Abyss")

The evaluation of Mirolla's writing, how effective that writing is, the originality and impact of the entire body of work, is still open to debate. He is still producing, still refining, still examining and still questioning. At the same time, he realizes and understands that the lack of a canon applies to him as much as to anyone else. It is the fate of the writer today to carve out an area within the world of hyper-reality and hybridity – and then to watch that world be swept away.

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