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Abram Foley

# GHOSTS FROM LIMBO PATRUM:

DALKEY ARCHIVE PRESS AND  
INSTITUTIONAL LITERARY HISTORY

When JAMES JOYCE's *Stephen Dedalus* famously proclaims that "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake," he does so in the midst of a literary work (*Ulysses*) whose historic and geographic specificity is designed to bring Dublin to life.<sup>1</sup> However, Stephen does not denounce history in Dublin proper. He speaks the line while sitting uneasily in an educational institution in Dalkey, a town just south of Dublin. That space is the eponymous one of FLANN O'BRIEN's *The Dalkey Archive* (1964).<sup>2</sup> More than mere coincidence, O'BRIEN responds to Stephen's nightmare-inducing Dalkey by making the same town a setting for fictional awakening. In *The Dalkey Archive*, JAMES JOYCE has survived World War II and renounced nearly all of his literary works, and in his last appearance in the novel—a joke fitting what O'BRIEN describes as his fictional "class of fooling"<sup>3</sup>—he is offered a job washing the underpants of Jesuits. Whereas

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// Ulysses finds Stephen wishing to awaken from the nightmare of history, *The Dalkey Archive* awakens Joyce himself within the unlikely place of literary history. His

*description of Dalkey as an “unlikely town . . . pretending to be asleep,” where streets are “not quite self-evident as streets and [have] meetings which seem accidental,” works as a reflection on the curious diegetic space—and fictional pathways—developed in his novel, and on the inconspicuous modes of literary-historical succession taking place therein.*

Extending the focus of the novel from which it takes its name, Dalkey Archive Press took shape around a constellation of literary-historical claims ranging from the intertextual to the institutional. The press formed in the suburbs of Chicago in 1984 primarily as a response to what the scholar-turned-publisher John O’Brien saw as the troubled status of contemporary fiction. Even when publishers took risks on publishing formally complex fiction, they too readily let those works go out of print, creating an abandoned archive of books within American letters. These out-of-print books, in O’Brien’s eyes, were symptomatic of an academic failure to write about and teach works of fiction by lesser-known writers. Academic criticism perpetuated work by established authors—often published by major houses with large marketing budgets—while neglecting authors with little celebrity status and books with small print runs.<sup>4</sup>

In 1980, O’Brien addressed these problems by founding the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, which published brief critical essays on understudied authors and sought to “define contemporary fiction in terms of its aesthetics, its traditions, and its internal relationships.”<sup>5</sup> Following the success of the *Review*, O’Brien broadened his literary-historical task by publishing out-of-print books with the newly established Dalkey Archive Press. The young literary historian turned away from a traditional academic path in order to found alternative outlets for contemporary fiction. The *Review of Contemporary Fiction* and Dalkey Archive Press continue to make contemporary fiction readily available to readers while also presenting them with contemporary fiction’s alternative histories in the form of books that have often fallen outside the purview of corporate publishing models and academic rubrics.

Dalkey Archive Press, which took shape by republishing out-of-print books, compels us to consider what institutional literary histories leave behind. While studies by Mark McGurl and Margaret Doherty, for example, provide institutional optics that bring into focus many aspects of the literary field that have

remained obscure, such institutional histories often begin with the example of institutional success. McGurl's study of the effect creative writing programs have had on contemporary American fiction is a prominent example of scholarship that reads contemporary fiction through such an optic.<sup>6</sup> In Margaret Doherty's more recent account of the relationship between the National Endowment for the Arts and literary minimalism in the 1980s, the NEA operates as an "overdetermined" influence on pervasive minimalist form.<sup>7</sup> Narrative forms and literary categories that have lodged themselves most firmly in institutions become the starting points for McGurl's and Doherty's institutional accounting. I tread lightly here, for neither McGurl nor Doherty claims an entirely determining relationship between institutions and literary texts. McGurl addresses this point obliquely in the introduction to his book, where he writes, "This book will take up residence in the gap between freedom and necessity—or rather, in the higher educational institutions that have been built in that gap, with gates opening to either side."<sup>8</sup> McGurl's nod toward "freedom" here refers to Vladimir Nabokov's "assertion of artistic freedom" in writing *Lolita* while teaching at Cornell.<sup>9</sup> Yet McGurl's position as an institution-bound critic might rely more on the necessities of institutional history and on the conditions of possibility set in place by current institutional configurations than he cares to admit.

Like the institution McGurl inhabits, Dalkey Archive Press occupies a gap between freedom and necessity: between "artistic freedom"<sup>10</sup> and the necessity of the market. It levies into this gap the enigma of literary history. Robert Caserio has argued that literary history "might be all the more involved than history proper with the problematics . . . of unintelligible specificity. By suspending their immediate relation to contexts, the fictions that constitute literature simultaneously explain and do not explain themselves. They intrude a riddling specificity or singularity upon the historicizing enterprise."<sup>11</sup> The Dalkey Archive Press operates at the crux of history and literary history that Caserio identifies. One can write a history of Dalkey Archive as a literary institution. And to that end, the first section of this essay offers an historical account of the foundation of the press. Yet the press remains open to—precisely because it is kept open by—the "riddling specificity or singularity" of the fictions it publishes. And to this end, this essay proceeds from the institutional history of the press to a discussion of several key works by James Joyce, Flann O'Brien, and Gilbert Sorrentino that were foundational to the press's early self-conception. The literary history of the Dalkey Archive Press reminds us that institutions

derive from commitments to literary particularity as well as to institutional identity. To return our critical focus to the riddling specificities of literature, as John O'Brien has done with the Dalkey Archive Press, might offer us alternative starting points for arriving yet again—with our various institutions—in our literary present.

### **“‘CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE’ IS ONLY CERTAIN PEOPLE ...”**

John O'Brien's career has long focused on the methodologies by which literary history emerges in critical and institutional discourse. Before he founded Dalkey Archive Press, for instance, the fledgling academic published a book titled simply *Interviews with Black Writers*.<sup>12</sup> Published in 1973, the book draws out a genealogy of literary experimentation by African American writers in an attempt to emphasize the often overlooked place of such experiments within academic accounts of twentieth-century American literature. O'Brien's experience interviewing writers ranging from Arna Bontemps and Ralph Ellison to Michael Harper and Ishmael Reed—who was just on the verge of publishing *Mumbo Jumbo*—led him to conceive of a second book of interviews with an array of overlooked writers. Although the second book never took shape, O'Brien's early inquiries for the collection put him into contact with author and editor Gilbert Sorrentino, without whose guidance O'Brien almost certainly would not have founded the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* or Dalkey Archive Press.<sup>13</sup> From his initial contact with Sorrentino in July or August of 1971, through the founding of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1980, to the founding of Dalkey Archive Press in 1984, and then to the end of Sorrentino's life in 2006, John O'Brien looked to Sorrentino as a friend and mentor whose guidance shaped O'Brien's project.

Sorrentino was forty-two years old when John O'Brien wrote to him, and he had a more stable position in American letters than the young academic did: Sorrentino had edited the important little magazines *Neon* in the late 1950s and *Kulchur* in the early 1960s. By the late 1960s, Sorrentino had become an assistant editor at Grove Press, which was then at the height of its influence in American countercultural publishing, as Loren Glass has recently shown.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Sorrentino had published three books of poetry and two books of fiction by the time O'Brien contacted him in 1971: his first novel, *The Sky Changes*, was published by Hill and Wang in 1966 (later republished by Dalkey Archive), and his

second novel, *Steelwork*, was published by Pantheon in 1970 (also republished by Dalkey Archive). In Sorrentino's first letter to O'Brien dated August 20, 1971, he adds "P.S. My third novel, *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*, will be available from Pantheon next month. You might want to read it before talking to me."<sup>15</sup>

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***Sorrentino's comment also demonstrates the multiple time frames in the life of a novel: if it is not reviewed immediately in the press and taken up by a wide public, the next best opportunity for authorial fame might be a belated academic essay about the book.***

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While Sorrentino was already on the path of a well-established literary career, having gathered many literary contacts and experiences in publishing that would become essential to John O'Brien, his finances were less assured. He moved among jobs proofreading, editing, and teaching in order to fund his writing. His letters to O'Brien show that during the 1970s he was continually scrambling for financial security, some of which he sought through O'Brien's academic backing. On July 26, 1972, he wrote to O'Brien: "I'm going to apply for a Guggenheim this year and I wondered if I might use your name as a reference. Please let me know."<sup>16</sup> Thus the friendship between O'Brien and Sorrentino was mutually beneficial; Sorrentino offered O'Brien access to the world of contemporary American letters and O'Brien in turn filled the role of academic advocate. When O'Brien solicited an editor of the *Chicago Review* to review *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*, Sorrentino responded gratefully: "Thank you for your conversation with the editor of the *Chicago Review*. I have a feeling that it is too late for reviews of *I[maginative] Q[ualities]* to appear, but perhaps someone will be moved enough by the book to consider a critical essay."<sup>17</sup> Sorrentino's comment also demonstrates the multiple time frames in the life of a novel: if it is not reviewed immediately in the press and taken up by a wide public, the next best opportunity for authorial fame might be a belated academic essay about the book. Though he could not have known it at the time, an even better second life might be found in a new publishing house that would situate *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* within a

complex institutional narrative about the history of modernist and contemporary literature.

John O'Brien was early in his academic career when he and Sorrentino developed their friendship, and aside from *Interviews with Black Writers* his work met with repeated setbacks due in part to his interest in relatively obscure authors. His early letters to Sorrentino have three general themes: excitement at discovering new authors through Sorrentino's

recommendations, including many O'Brien ultimately republished with his press, such as Brigid Brophy, Henry Green, and Nicholas Mosley; anger at the publishing industry for letting most books by such authors go out of print; and resentment about his stalled academic career. O'Brien shared his reservations about contemporary academia with Sorrentino, who in response to a particularly bleak letter from O'Brien, outlined the reality of contemporary literary studies for his younger friend:

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***The academic map never matches its territory where contemporary literature is concerned.***  
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It is permissible to be “interested in” contemporary letters, so long as you are interested in the right kind. The “line” runs from Henry Miller through Lawrence Durrell and thence to [John] Barth, [Donald] Barthelme, [Robert] Coover, [Thomas] Pynchon, down to our “peers”—[Ronald] Sukenick, [Richard] Brautigan, [Jerzy] Kozinski [*sic*], et al. You are still safe with O.K. black folks like Ish[mael] Reed and LeRoi [Jones], but outside those two, you're not too cool. What I'm saying, of course, is heresy, i.e., “contemporary literature” is only certain people.<sup>18</sup>

Sorrentino's heresy acknowledges the limited purview of the academy with regard to contemporary writing. O'Brien knew the limitation well. He likely even saw the purpose of anointing only a handful of contemporary writers out of the dozens or even hundreds whose work literary critics could usefully address. After all, how can academics be attentive to the vast field of contemporary literature in a critical and evaluative manner? They cannot be. The academic map never matches its territory where contemporary literature is concerned.<sup>19</sup> Rather than succumb to despair in the face of this fact, O'Brien responded to the wealth of fiction and the limits of criticism by founding Dalkey Archive

Press. The press attempted to offset the “line” of “contemporary literature” to which Sorrentino refers by constituting new and alternative models for literary history. Answering Sorrentino’s quip that “‘contemporary literature’ is only certain people,” the press complicated the wellsprings of contemporary literature.

In establishing the press to counter then-current academic versions of what contemporary literature was in terms of style, voice, and genre, O’Brien followed advice Sorrentino gave him in the aforementioned letter from late September 1974:

I think that you should forget such shabby journals as *American Scholar* and their aberrant editors. Why don’t you start contributing to “little little” magazines? God knows, they are spotty and half of the stuff they print is shit on toast, but they will print you, you’ll get some kind of audience, and they are weak in the criticism department anyhow, by and large. They could use you . . . The great problem nowadays is that there is really not a first-rate magazine out of the muddy academic stream, viz., *Kulchur*, *Black M[ountain] Review*, *Origin*. What I’m really saying is that I think you should take a shot now at seeing what you can do out of academe. I don’t want to sound fashionable, etc., but the university is a truly stultifying and depressing place, meant to be moved through rapidly, and then out of.<sup>20</sup>

Sorrentino’s references to “little little” magazines and *New Directions* are rife with modernist precedents. Indeed, Sorrentino’s sympathetic letter to O’Brien recalls the creation story of *New Directions*, perhaps the most renowned publisher of literary modernism in the United States. That story asserts that Ezra Pound, sensing no great achievement in James Laughlin’s poetry, directed him to use his steel-wealth inheritance to become a publisher. While the tale is famous in the history of Anglo-American modernism, Laughlin’s biographer writes, “There is no evidence to corroborate J’s [Laughlin’s] story that Ezra had snuffed out his poetic aspirations in favor of publishing others’ work. Years later J apparently concocted the story that Ezra had disparaged his poetic ambition and sent him in the direction of publishing, and this became the gospel of the *New Directions* creation myth.”<sup>21</sup> While there is also no direct evidence in Sorrentino’s letter that he told O’Brien to found a press, his anti-academic stance echoes Pound’s apocryphal advice to Laughlin, thereby forming a

provisional link between the foundation of O'Brien's press and the literary-historical mythmaking that operates within *New Directions* and its version of literary modernism.

Within several years of Sorrentino's advisory letter, John O'Brien conceived of a little magazine that he planned to run with his colleague, John Byrne. The *Review of Contemporary Fiction* published its first issue—dedicated to the works of Gilbert Sorrentino—early in 1981 and operated on the following guidelines, which O'Brien wrote up in a prospectus for possible subscribers and sent to Sorrentino for suggestions:

PROSPECTUS: AIMS / PLANS

\*\*\* Will promote an on-going discussion of contemporary fiction, primarily through a consideration of one or two writers per issue.

\*\*\* Will consider the moderns in terms of their continuing presence in contemporary fiction.

\*\*\* Will regularly consider various schools and movements within the contemporary: the Beats, the Black Mountain school, the Kulchur group, etc.

\*\*\* Will treat the other arts in so far as their activities touch upon or parallel those in fiction.

\*\*\* Will publish essays on the work of younger contemporaries beginning in issue three.

\*\*\* Will feature book reviews, forthcoming books, recommended books, and out-of-print books that should be reissued.

\*\*\* Will define contemporary fiction in terms of its aesthetics, its traditions, and its internal relationships.

\*\*\* Will treat expansively the work of Gilbert Sorrentino, Hubert Selby, Paul Metcalf, Wallace Markfield, Nicholas Mosley, William Gaddis, Douglas Woolf, Aidan Higgins, Paul Bowles, John Hawkes, Juan Goytisolo, Julio Cortázar, Robert Pinget, Paul Goodman, Coleman Dowell, Ishmael Reed, LeRoi Jones, William Eastlake, Jack Kerouac, Camilo José Cela, and José Lezama Lima.<sup>22</sup>

One point that deserves immediate mention: the complete absence of women in O'Brien's early conception of the *Review*. Dalkey Archive has addressed this conspicuous absence by publishing works of Djuna Barnes, Christine Brooke-Rose, Brigid Brophy, Micheline Aharonian Marcom, and Gertrude

Stein, among others. Its first book of translated fiction, moreover, was Luisa Valenzuela's *He Who Searches*, which Dalkey Archive published in 1987.<sup>23</sup>

In fact, several points in O'Brien's prospectus for the *Review* anticipate the formation of the Dalkey Archive Press. First, O'Brien writes that the *Review* "[w]ill consider the moderns in terms of their continuing presence in contemporary fiction." This presence has long anchored the self-conception of the press, and Dalkey Archive continues to publish works within the tradition of literary modernism. In addition, O'Brien noted that *RCF* would feature out-of-print books "that should be reissued," a task O'Brien would eventually undertake himself. These two goals lead up to the most important point of the prospectus: the *Review* would "define contemporary fiction in terms of its aesthetics, its traditions, and its internal relationships," projecting the literary-historical project that became central to the formation of the press. Sorrentino's advice to retreat from the deadening academy was not entirely taken up by O'Brien, who kept his own institutional ties as well as those of the press throughout the press's history.<sup>24</sup> Yet O'Brien did turn away from his own formal academic writing in order to found institutions dedicated to alternative literature. Dalkey Archive promoted contemporary fiction by republishing the work of those who, as Sorrentino remarked, failed to be "contemporary literature" in their time. In this sense, the texts Dalkey Archive published (and continues to publish) remind us that the critical category of "contemporary literature" is often itself a useful contemporary fiction for literary historians, and one that often obscures the contradictions and elisions that comprise literary history.

### **FOUNDED UPON A VOID: ON THE QUESTION OF LITERARY HISTORY**

The hundreds of letters O'Brien and Sorrentino sent to one another during the 1970s and 1980s abound with book recommendations from Sorrentino to O'Brien. Many of the authors cataloged in O'Brien's prospectus—such as Nicholas Mosley—had been the topic of exchanges between him and his author-mentor. In a letter from February 8, 1974, for example, Sorrentino wrote to O'Brien, "If you can, get a book (Coward-McCann) called *Impossible Object* by Nicholas Mosley. It is extraordinary and brilliant. You see how everything conspires to keep these remarkable writers under wraps. He's British and has been publishing novels for apparently 20 years or so. But read it yourself.

What a pleasure to see a conscious artist at work.”<sup>25</sup> Seven years later, Mosley contributed a brief piece on Sorrentino’s fiction for the first issue of *RCF*. Eight years later, *RCF* dedicated half an issue to Mosley’s work. And at present, Dalkey Archive has at least seventeen of Mosley’s books in print, including the remarkable five-novel Catastrophe Practice series. In the same letter in which Sorrentino recommends Mosley, he commands O’Brien to “[w]rite about Douglas Woolf. The stomach turns when one sees year after year go by with no one mentioning his name even in relation to the American novel.”<sup>26</sup> Ten years later, Douglas Woolf’s *Wall to Wall* was one of the first three books published by Dalkey Archive. The other two were *Splendide-Hôtel* by Gilbert Sorrentino and *Cadenza* by the little-known Irish writer Ralph Cusack. In an introduction Sorrentino wrote for this last volume, he compared *Cadenza* favorably with the fiction of James Joyce and Flann O’Brien.<sup>27</sup>

The most significant point of correspondence between the writer and the future publisher was their mutual adoration of Irish fiction. Allusions to Flann O’Brien dot their epistolary exchange, with Sorrentino recommending that John O’Brien name his press “Flann Books, or, even better, The Dalkey Archive Press.”<sup>28</sup> In an earlier letter from 1980, Sorrentino writes to John O’Brien about the literary-historical correspondence between Irish and American fiction: “if I were a scholar, I would write a book about Irish and American fiction, that is, how it is not only removed from, but at odds with, English fiction, that it is, operating at its best, ‘blood brothers.’”<sup>29</sup>

Sorrentino’s claim for a literary kinship between Irish and American fiction raises the question of succession as it becomes operative in the literary-historical claims made by John O’Brien’s publishing strategies. In the press’s early years, these strategies often follow the dynamics of literary-historical mythmaking in the fiction of three figures important to the press: James Joyce, Flann O’Brien, and Gilbert Sorrentino.

Among the many hypotheses Stephen Dedalus advances over the course of *Ulysses*, one from the “Scylla and Charybdis” episode bears particular significance for this essay: that succession takes place upon a void. The ninth episode finds Stephen in Ireland’s National Library surrounded by friends and rivals who listen as he develops his theory of lineage in *Hamlet*. Stephen speculates on *Hamlet* with a two-pronged form of genealogical criticism: he performs a

reading of succession within *Hamlet*—the passage of kingship and lineage—and he undertakes his reading based on details of Shakespeare’s biography, namely the death of his son Hamnet Shakespeare. The literary thereby converges with the biographical in Stephen’s reading and gestures toward the often competing claims between literary history and genealogy that continue to structure literary economy. For Dalkey Archive, these competing claims structure a similar tension in the construction of contemporary literature, a field built upon a problematic genealogy “built upon a void”—in this case, of unpublished or out-of-print experimental fiction. Dalkey seeks to preserve works of fiction from the obsolescence created in part by a market-driven literary field: it attempts to intervene in the material economies of both literary history and literature in order to reconstruct a literary-historical succession.

This has precedents in modernist literature: the associations between literary history, succession, and institutional history figure prominently, for example, in the “Scylla and Charybdis” section of *Ulysses*. Well into the episode, Stephen spars with his intellectual rival, Buck Mulligan, who pokes fun at Stephen’s scholastic lecture on spirit, matter, and genealogy in *Hamlet*. Provoked by Mulligan’s skepticism, Stephen turns from literary genealogy in *Hamlet* to other forms of succession, asserting that “Fatherhood, in the sense of conscious begetting, is unknown to man. It is a mystical estate, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to only begotten. On that mystery . . . the church is founded and founded irremovably because founded, like the world, macro and microcosm, upon the void. Upon incertitude, upon unlikelihood.”<sup>30</sup> In conflating fatherhood and apostolic succession here, Stephen proposes that the truth of begetting undermines the stable foundations often claimed by genealogical institutions. He likens biological fathers to the church fathers, both of whom derive and maintain their powers from an unbroken, successive patriarchal line. Stephen draws two conclusions. First, he reasons that institutions can be founded on processes that remain obscure or even mystical. And second, he concludes that lineage just as often derives from elective processes of succession—where one chooses the line one will follow—as it does from ontologically or biologically stable points of origin. Like literary history, the process is constitutive, drawing unlikely lines of descent and founding institutions upon uncertainty or unstable ground.

To the extent that “Scylla and Charybdis” takes literary genealogy as its theme, it equates literary history with churchly succession as fictions built upon a void.

Indeed, Joyce merges the clerical and the literary in “Scylla and Charybdis” through the Catholic conception of *limbus patrum*. Early in his lecture on *Hamlet*, Stephen asks his small audience, “Who is the ghost from *limbo patrum*, returning to the world that has forgotten him? Who is King Hamlet?”<sup>31</sup> In Catholic theology, *limbus patrum* denotes the limbo in which the saints from the Old Testament awaited the resurrection of Christ and consequently their own ascension to Heaven. Here, Stephen figures *limbus patrum* as the hazy locus from which the ghost of Hamlet’s father returns to the world. Joyce’s invocation of “limbo patrum” thus takes on meaning for literary history as well: both Stephen and Joyce engage with Shakespeare to situate themselves in a literary genealogy, Stephen as the precocious student and analogue to Hamlet, Joyce as Shakespeare’s descendent and peer. *Ulysses* claims lineage with a text that institutes a certain literary genealogy. As Joyce suggests, however, such claims take place within the strange limbo that is literary history itself.

Flann O’Brien follows Stephen Dedalus’s arguments in “Scylla and Charybdis” by making the novel a limbo-like space where arbitrary genealogical succession can be constructed. In a passage from O’Brien’s first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), the unnamed student narrator of the primary narrative frame (there are several narrative frames in the novel) proclaims that literary “[c]haracters should be interchangeable as between one book and another. The entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only when they failed to find a suitable puppet.”<sup>32</sup> In a meta-critical manner characteristic of O’Brien’s fiction, this passage applies the process it describes. As Anne Clissman has shown in her early study of Flann O’Brien, the student narrator is himself a parodic figure of Stephen Dedalus; his literary assertions “are intended to be a mockery of the overstatements, conscious posturings and squalid habits of James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus.”<sup>33</sup> Yet even a mocking rejection of Dedalus’s pretensions ultimately draws upon, refigures, and continues the Joycean legacy O’Brien seeks to divert. If the corpus of existing literature is a limbo, adding to that corpus constitutes lines of literary history but not necessarily a line of flight.

O’Brien develops this point in the novel he wrote last, *The Dalkey Archive*, where the “unlikely town” of Dalkey corresponds to the “unlikelyhood” and “uncertainty” Joyce attributes to institutions based on succession. O’Brien reflects on his novel as an unlikely place where historical figures return to fictional life.

The novel's general notion of "archive" finds a specific figural counterpart in the narrative, as a limbo from which figures from the past return to the present. After the novel's opening description of the town, the protagonist Mick and his friend Hackett encounter the "theologist and physicist" De Selby, who tells them he has developed a substance, DMP, which removes oxygen from the environment.<sup>34</sup> Forming an analogue to O'Brien's conception of fiction, De Selby claims that in an enclosed environment DMP creates a vacuum where time ceases to exist and historical figures present themselves. Mick and Hackett doubt his claims, so De Selby invites them to a cave along Dalkey's shore. The cave mouth has been sealed off by high tide, creating the sealed environment within, and De Selby outfits the two young men with oxygen masks to swim into the concealed space. In the cave De Selby detonates a small charge of DMP, suspending time's apparent course. If the novel's opening passage hints at the "unlikely" spaces created by fiction, here we find the rarified version of fiction's unlikely figurations: "Then Mick saw a figure, a specter, far away from him. It looked seated and slightly luminescent. Gradually it got rather clearer in definition but remained unutterably distant, and what he had taken for a very long chin in profile was almost certainly a beard. A gown of some dark material clothed the apparition."<sup>35</sup> Just as Hamlet reacted with alarm to his father's ghost, Mick is startled by this vision. But before he can conceptualize his experience, De Selby addresses the apparition, who responds with a voice, "from far away but perfectly clear."<sup>36</sup> Oddly, the specter has a Dublin accent, but speaks about perhaps being African. Only when the ghost brings up his second book of confessions do we realize that the specter is Saint Augustine brought back to fictional life in the Dalkey Archive, which figures the limbo-like space of the novel as well as the "corpus of existing literature."

Following the specter's appearance in the cave, a lively discussion ensues, with De Selby asking questions about Saint Augustine's still murky life. O'Brien uses the scene as an opportunity for a range of jokes, mostly at Augustine's expense. The treatment Augustine receives in the novel even led O'Brien to include an epigraph to Saint Augustine: "I dedicate these pages 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."<sup>37</sup> O'Brien's use of the word "fooling" here is particularly important, because a brief interaction concerning "fooling" early in De Selby and Augustine's conversation returns us to Gilbert Sorrentino and the Dalkey Archive Press. Referring to Saint Augustine's

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***Calling to mind Auden’s epigram that poetry makes nothing happen, The Dalkey Archive makes “nothing” happen in the printed language of the novel. It continues to make nothing happen in the formation of Dalkey Archive Press...***

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renowned days of debauchery before turning to God, De Selby asks, “Were all your rutting ceremonials heterosexual?” Augustine responds passionately: “Heterononsense! There is no evidence against me beyond what I wrote myself. Too vague. Be on your guard against that class of fooling. Nothing in black and white.”<sup>38</sup> The saint’s pithy response to De Selby—there’s nothing in black and white—hints at the passage’s complexity. In particular, the “black and white” can be glossed in several ways. Most simply, the expression suggests that nothing exists in an either / or opposition; nothing is that simple. Yet Augustine, in his early years, was greatly influenced by Manichaeism, which sets spiritual light against the darkness of the material world. Manichean duality therefore lodges itself in Augustine’s response as well.

Most importantly, Augustine’s assertion that there’s “nothing” in black and white refers to print, O’Brien’s medium. Augustine emerges from a limbo in *The Dalkey Archive* and also proceeds to empty print of its import. Yet his assertion of the vacuity of print takes place in a novel whose response to literary tradition and whose own internal consistencies make it a singularly rich work of fictional meaning. In this light, Augustine’s assertion fails to transform print into a pure negation or total void. Still, what O’Brien attempts here is to empty print of its content—of its historically factual content especially—in order to make the “nothing” in print available as a “class of fooling,” an especially fitting definition of fiction as Flann O’Brien understands it. In *The Dalkey Archive*, the Manichean dualism between the ideal and the secular—which would describe separate worlds of absolute aesthetic autonomy (total void) and positive factual history (all is present)—collapses into the limbo expressed in black and white: in this case, fiction. Fiction is neither factual history, nor total void. It is an uncertain form, a limbo. Calling to mind Auden’s epigram that poetry makes nothing happen, *The Dalkey Archive* makes “nothing” happen in the printed language

of the novel. It continues to make nothing happen in the formation of Dalkey Archive Press, which looks to O'Brien's theory of the novel as it sets into print and into literary history a range of modern and contemporary fictions.

### **A SUSPENDED CONCLUSION: GILBERT SORRENTINO AND THE DALKEY ARCHIVE PRESS, REDUX**

It is a coincidence of history that Flann O'Brien published *The Dalkey Archive* in 1964, the same year that Gilbert Sorrentino published a book of poetry titled *Black and White*. The close publication dates make it doubtful that Sorrentino had read *The Dalkey Archive* and had time to make his book's title a reference to a brief passage in the novel.<sup>39</sup> Undoubtedly, however, Sorrentino's later novel, *Mulligan Stew*, works as an elaborate extension of Flann O'Brien's oeuvre. Like O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *Mulligan Stew* plays with the relationship between fictional authors and the fictional characters they adopt and create. Antony Lamont, the fictional author in *Mulligan Stew*, is a character created by the fictional author, Dermot Trellis, in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*. And as in *At Swim*, Sorrentino makes Dermot Trellis into Lamont's literary rival. The fiction that Lamont ultimately writes employs Ned Beaumont (a character from Dashiell Hammett's fiction), a "created" character named Martin Halpin, and Daisy Buchanan (moonlighting from *The Great Gatsby*) as its protagonists. Beaumont and Halpin are publishers in New York and the bane of Lamont's increasingly frustrated writing career. The novel does not have a plot as such, and works more as a mulligan stew (a stew concocted from whatever ingredients are at hand); even so, as Antony Lamont becomes ever more frustrated with his stalled literary career, the chapters of his novel become increasingly unruly. Making his central figure into a comically stymied author, Sorrentino fools with literary history just as Flann O'Brien does before him. But he also turns his novel into a meta-critical reflection on the extraneous pressures—primarily the publishing industry—exerted on the intra- and intertextual working of literary history.

Given the relationship between formal experimentation and authorial frustration in *Mulligan Stew*, it is ironic that Sorrentino himself failed to find a publisher for the novel for several years. When Grove accepted the book and published it in 1979, Sorrentino prefaced the novel—before the title page and copyright even—with eleven unnumbered pages of comically fictionalized rejection

letters from publishers that dramatize the novel's trials. Some letters lampoon the commercialism of for-profit publishing: "To be frank with you, I must show a profit to the parent company before I can even consider getting behind a project like yours."<sup>40</sup> This particular editor offers hope for future experimental works, however, which will be funded by the popular books he has recently published: "One already on the shelves, is, it seems to me, a necessary addition to 'Beatle lore'—*The Compleat Beatle Wardrobe Book*."<sup>41</sup> The next letter mocks the contradictory logic at work within publishing houses: "the conclusion, I'm afraid, is that the narrative doesn't rise above its own irony—although one of our readers, a Sorrentino 'fan,' felt that the irony hasn't the precision to cope with the strong narrative."<sup>42</sup> Another letter ridicules publishing's association with corporations: "I am about to leave to join my senior colleague Dack Verlain in starting our own publishing house, a subsidiary, wholly owned, of Cynosure Oil."<sup>43</sup> Eventually, "Gil" sends a letter to Barney [Rosset, of Grove Press], joking about the many suspicious characters who have rejected his work: "Can 'Dr. Mullion Blasto' exist? He sounds like one of my characters."<sup>44</sup> At Grove Press, *Mulligan Stew* finally receives an excellent review and recommendation to publish. The saga continues, however, because the larger publishing house that distributes Grove's books refuses to distribute *Mulligan Stew*. When Grove demands an explanation from "Hasard House," its legal counsel replies that "Hasard House did not elect to distribute Mr. Sorrentino's novel because it was not considered by our legal staff to be of sufficient merit to warrant the additional investment of inventory. 'Merit' in this context is to be spelled 'bottom line,' if you follow me."<sup>45</sup> Even with a good publisher behind it, *Mulligan Stew*, or some fictional version of it, is left in a legal limbo as tortuous as the lines of literary history developed within the novel's narrative.

Hasard House's final letter to Sorrentino and Grove Press—fictionalized as it may be—outlines the limbo between publication and distribution that Dalkey Archive Press sought to address. Arthur Gride, Hasard House's General Counsel and also an old miser in Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*, explains, "Our decision [not to distribute *Mulligan Stew*] is not a *rejection* of Mr. Sorrentino's manuscript, which presumably has been *accepted* by Grove Press, heaven knows why! Be that, however, as it may, we here at Hasard House simply have exercised our option under our contract with Grove not to distribute that work for Grove, nor to have anything to *do* with that work. Grove is now free to arrange for its distribution by others and, if I may say so, lots of luck!"<sup>46</sup> Whether they

are drawn from actual letters Sorrentino received, or whether they are pure invention, these last sentences dramatize the material and historical distributive limbo into which many lines of literary history lead. Hasard House is not *rejecting* Sorrentino's book; they simply refuse to make it available to readers.

We come here to the crux that Sorrentino and John O'Brien identify as a problem of literary-historical succession: a book can be accepted and even published but can nevertheless fall into a very real material-historical void. In *Mulligan Stew*, fiction enacts and shows the contradictions of this distributive limbo, which is a material problem made into a problem for literary history, as well as a catalyst for literary-historical mythmaking. Fooling with the oeuvre of Flann O'Brien, whose second novel, *The Third Policeman*, went unpublished for over two decades until after O'Brien's death, *Mulligan Stew* acknowledges literary history's reliance on publishers' whims and the publishing industry's market imperatives. Yet Sorrentino also suggests in his novel and in his personal letters that the specific correspondences and contradictions generated in literature are not to be found through market-driven or institutional optics alone. Institutional histories can indeed tell us much about literary history. But too few institutional histories tell us how institutions can also make nothing happen, thereby suspending rather than guiding literary history's uncertain succession.

The history and publishing imperatives of Dalkey Archive Press reveal alternatives to the institutionalization of literature and the creation of a mainstream—or academically sanctioned—literary canon and history. Sorrentino, for instance, plays a much more minor role in Mark McGurl's account of creative writing programs than he does in the history of Dalkey Archive Press. In the introduction to *The Program Era*, McGurl argues that “the dominant aesthetic orientation of the writing program has been toward literary realism and away from . . . experimentalism . . . This is mostly accurate as a description of the programs at schools like Iowa and Stanford, which emerged from the rich descriptive regionalist literary movements of the thirties, and have generally remained committed to some version of literary realism ever since. Still, one can find obvious exceptions to this rule even at these places—for example, Kurt Vonnegut at Iowa, Gilbert Sorrentino at Stanford,” and several others.<sup>47</sup> While Sorrentino ended up in one of the academic institutions from which he had once encouraged John O'Brien to flee, his literary work does not fit into the institutional narrative McGurl tells. It becomes instead an unlikely exception in a story about

the institutional establishment of literary likeness. The minor role of his work in McGurl's book thus tells its own cautionary tale: that an eclectic or experimental body of work—as Sorrentino's most certainly is, with styles that can change radically from book to book—cannot be drawn easily into institutional literary history precisely because of its particularity. Then again, Sorrentino's work does not fit seamlessly into Dalkey Archive Press either. Instead, his work gives uncertain form to the press, it and the many other unlikely books that comprise Dalkey Archive's booklist. Dalkey Archive Press coalesces around and agitates on behalf of literary histories that remain alternative to those instituted more forcefully by market strategies and dominant academic discourses. In doing so, it offers an elaborate model for assessing and assembling the history of contemporary literature today.

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/   **Notes**   /

<sup>1</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (New York: Vintage Books, 1986): 2.377.

<sup>2</sup> Flann O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1993), 7.

<sup>3</sup> O'Brien, *Dalkey Archive*, 35.

<sup>4</sup> In "An Interview with John O'Brien," *dalkeyarchive.com*, 2000 and 2004, <http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/interview-with-john-obrien/>, John O'Brien states his reasons for establishing the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1980, which he sees as the necessary antecedent to the press: "The writers I was interested in—Gilbert Sorrentino, Paul Metcalf, Wallace Markfield, Luisa Valenzuela—were not being written about . . . and it was difficult for me to write about them with any expectation that what I wrote would get published in journals at that time. If you wrote the 5,000th essay on Saul Bellow, you had a pretty good chance of getting it published because editors knew who he was and so publishing another essay on Bellow was safe. . . . So, the critical establishment (however you want to define this, from academic journals to the *New York Times Book Review*) had a lock on what writers would be covered, as well as how they would be covered."

<sup>5</sup> John O'Brien to Gilbert Sorrentino, 14 October 1980, The Gilbert Sorrentino Papers, Stanford University.

<sup>6</sup> Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of the Creative Writing Program* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Doherty, "State-Funded Fiction: Minimalism, National Memory, and the Return to Realism in the Post-Postmodern Age," *American Literary History* 27 (2015): 89. While Doherty points out that the relationship between institutions and aesthetics is not determinative, opting for the more capacious "overdetermined," both she and

McGurl emphasize a directionality leading from institutional cause to literary effect, though both trouble that directionality in sophisticated ways. Loren Glass's recent book on Grove Press and the *Evergreen Review* works in this line as well, with Glass arguing successfully for the "incorporation of the avant-garde" by reading through the lens of a very successful publishing house. I do not disagree with the approaches these scholars take. They offer maps that tell us how we arrived where we are. My position is somewhat closer to Merve Emre's in "Ironic Institutions: Counterculture Fictions and the American Express Company," *American Literature* 87 (2015), where she conceives of a "paraliterary institution," which she defines as "an institution that uses literature to organize practices of self and sociality, but has little to do with the conventional sites and spaces of literary production" (113). Emre's position resonates with my own because she recognizes that institutions emerge from different ways of reading and interacting with literature. While Emre looks to institutions that are not traditionally associated with literary production, however, I propose that we can see such institutional derivation at work within the literary field by reading through Dalkey Archive Press's booklist.

<sup>8</sup> McGurl, *Program Era*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Robert L. Caserio, "Unintelligible Specificity and the Writing of Gay Literary History," *American Literary History* 27 (2015): 150.

<sup>12</sup> John O'Brien, *Interview with Black Writers* (New York: Liveright, 1973).

<sup>13</sup> In "An Interview with Jeremy Davies by Michelle Pretorius," *Word Riot* (2012), <http://www.wordriot.org/archives/3746>, Jeremy M. Davies, then senior editor at Dalkey Archive Press, stated, "There would be no Dalkey Archive without Gilbert Sorrentino—our first book was a reprint of his *Splendide Hotel* [sic], and his advice guided a good number of the Press's early acquisitions and has great influence here to this day. (A good way to get something noticed is to say, 'Sorrentino loved this book . . .') His death in 2006 was a serious blow to the Press and American letters both."

<sup>14</sup> Loren Glass, *Counterculture Colophon: Grove Press, the Evergreen Review, and the Incorporation of the Avant-Garde* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013): 1–33.

<sup>15</sup> Gilbert Sorrentino to John O'Brien, 20 August 1971, in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* / Dalkey Archive Press Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>16</sup> Sorrentino to O'Brien, 26 July 1972, in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* / Dalkey Archive Press Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>17</sup> Sorrentino to O'Brien, 27 May 1972, in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* / Dalkey Archive Press Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>18</sup> Sorrentino to O'Brien, 27 Sept 1974, in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* / Dalkey Archive Press Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>19</sup> Even critics of contemporary literature such as Kathryn Hume (whose most recent works range over dozens of books) and Caren Irr (whose work treats more than one

hundred texts) can only claim to engage one aspect of contemporary literary expression. See Kathryn Hume, *Aggressive Fictions: Reading the Contemporary American Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012). See also Caren Irr, *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Sorrentino to O'Brien, 27 Sept 1974, in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* | Dalkey Archive Press Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>21</sup> Ian S. McNiven, "*Literchoor Is My Beat*": *A Life of James Laughlin, Publisher of New Directions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 82–83.

<sup>22</sup> John O'Brien to Gilbert Sorrentino, 14 October 1980, The Gilbert Sorrentino Papers, Stanford University.

<sup>23</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, an author whose work O'Brien has supported with both the *Review* and the press, points out in the title essay of her collection *Invisible Author* that avant-garde writing and reception suffers under the strategies of male posturing, leaving many women experimentalists in the role of "invisible authors" to their more boisterous male counterparts. As Urmila Seshagiri writes in "Making It New: Persephone Books and the Modernist Project," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 59 (2013) about the London-based feminist press, Persephone Books, "Despite decades of dedicated scholarship, impassioned activism, and progressive publishing, literary culture at the turn of the twenty-first century continued to devalue the talents of women writers" (242). One interesting offshoot of Dalkey Archive is the small publishing house known as Dorothy, a Publishing Project, run by Danielle Dutton and her husband, Martin Riker. Riker was second-in-charge at Dalkey Archive Press for several years before leaving the press, and Dutton worked for a brief period in design and production for Dalkey Archive. Her new press, which publishes authors who would fit quite comfortably in the Dalkey list, publishes women writers almost exclusively.

<sup>24</sup> O'Brien established the press while teaching at the Illinois Benedictine College. It subsequently moved to Illinois State University for a time and then to the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. In 2015, the press began a new affiliation with the University of Houston-Victoria.

<sup>25</sup> Sorrentino to O'Brien, 8 February 1974, in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* | Dalkey Archive Press Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Gilbert Sorrentino, "Introduction," in *Cadenza* by Ralph Cusack (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1984), 5–6.

<sup>28</sup> Sorrentino to O'Brien, 9 August 1983, in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* | Dalkey Archive Press Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>29</sup> Sorrentino to O'Brien, 6 September 1980, in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* | Dalkey Archive Press Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>30</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, 9.837–42.

<sup>31</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, 9.147–51.

<sup>32</sup> Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), 20.

<sup>33</sup> Anne Clissmann, *Flann O'Brien, A Critical Introduction to His Writings: The Story-Teller's Book-Web* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1975), 106.

<sup>34</sup> O'Brien, *Dalkey Archive*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 34–35.

<sup>39</sup> In a letter to Sorrentino from May 10, 1980, John O'Brien wrote that he planned to name his little magazine "Black and White." His reasons were, he wrote, "1) too obvious to mention; 2) that's the way I see the world and that's the way this journal will see literature." Whether O'Brien makes reference to Sorrentino's book of poetry or to Saint Augustine's speech in his first point remains unclear. O'Brien to Sorrentino, 10 May 1980, The Gilbert Sorrentino Papers, Stanford University.

<sup>40</sup> Gilbert Sorrentino, *Mulligan Stew* (New York: Grove Press, 1979), first unnumbered page. Due to the strange space these pages occupy in Sorrentino's novel, I number them from the first to the eleventh unnumbered page.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Sorrentino, *Mulligan Stew*, second unnumbered page.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, seventh unnumbered page.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, eleventh unnumbered page.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> McGurl, *Program Era*, 33.