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Author

Collins, Richard

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Pirandello's Wheelbarrow: A Revenge on Imagology

Carlo Michelstaedter was already considered one of the brightest minds of his generation by the time he was twenty three. This was also the year he completed his *tesi di laurea*, and after having submitted it, returned home and took his own life. Ten years earlier Nietzsche died.

The one and only time Pirandello mentioned Michelstaedter—as Daniela Bini points out—was in an interview for *Quadrivio* only a month before his own death; he referred to him as an example of those unhappy thinkers who ‘wanted to make form and substance coincide absolutely and in every instance and were overwhelmed.’ With this statement Pirandello recognized an affinity on a basic philosophical point: the contradictoriness of life whose essence is flux but that must be fixed if it is somehow to be grasped. It must give itself a form. This form, however, is death; it stops the life that it tries to define. Pirandello shares this belief with Michelstaedter, but considers the pursuit of such coincidence (of ‘form and substance’) totally inane, insofar as it has only two possible conclusions: suicide, as in the case of Michelstaedter . . . or madness, as in the case of Nietzsche. (Bini 62)

When a reader first comes across Pirandello's notion of the “sentimento del contrario” explicated in *L'Umorismo*, one has to be willing to enter into a dialectic in which the criteria for objective reality is surrendered. Each and every time a situation appears to have been clarified a new series of reasonings emerge which contradict the very clarification previously attained. This “feeling of contradiction” represents the vulnerability which ubiquitously manifests itself within the image/images we hold of ourselves and of others, as well as the image/images others have of our own person and of themselves. This apparent theory of relativity in which a person's mind becomes the measure of all things is not however the point of arrival for Pirandello's extravagant brainstorming. Nor is Pirandello the pessimist we have heard about and read about for almost a century.

Pirandello goes well beyond a mere recipe for relativity as he also goes well beyond surrendering to issues of identity and truth. He has told us that the truth

is concealed, hidden, it eludes us by means of a brief glimpse allowed upon it, perhaps it even energizes a certain flirtation with death, it alters itself without any regard for the temporal or the spatial, and then again, it becomes concealed. Pirandello's truth is not one which finds tranquility in the prescriptions of the medical sciences, nor is it an issue to be resolved in the laborious attempts of uncovering the various layers which make up its constitution. The individuals which fill his pages cannot be cured by prying nor can they be assisted by being forced to confront their illness. Their world and the truth inhabiting it must be left alone, unrevealed and unsolved.

What does one do, however, in a world where this is not the case, in a world where we are forced to confront not only our perception of our being but the very perceptions others have created of our being. What are we to do the very first time we realize the incongruencies constituting our person? How is it possible that all these images of our being all belong to one person bearing one name received at birth? These are the questions for which Pirandello lifted his pen.

Precisely what does Pirandello's pen tell us? This: that the lack of coherence between the various images thrust upon a person does not necessarily yield infertility or the need to abandon oneself. On the contrary, implies Pirandello, it is the multiplicity of images interacting with one another that allow for rich fertility. Pirandello gives life to the very process which allows us to identify the fragmentation of our feelings, therefore ourselves, and then provokes us into a creative frame of mind in which a static world can potentially be transformed into one of multi-faceted possibilities.

How does this process begin for Pirandello? The direction he takes in the exploration of what constitutes truth (even if an objective one has been surrendered), and more importantly the role of man's consciousness regarding the images of truth, appears to privilege the circumstances at hand. What is truth? How do individuals perceive truth? Will confrontations, rules, documents provide truth? These are the questions which capture our attention. Alone, however, such questions cannot be held responsible for retaining and promoting one's inquisitiveness. Methodology must always and already accompany the development of the investigation.

In tradition with modern thinkers beginning with Kant, Pirandello diligently displays the view that life is in a constant state of flux and that man's attempts to somehow bring this flux to a halt separate him from the natural course of life. To insist on the construction of a definitive form, of a single clarification, would be the equivalent of denying the range of possibilities with which Pirandello's narrative grabs our attention. This, however, is exactly what happens to most of us. Our identity is constructed by a series of compromises between our perception of the self and the perception others have of our being. Once we find

a role for ourselves which appears to function within our surroundings we embrace it and in time this construct solidifies. The crisis arises when we are faced with the arbitrariness and randomness with which this construct was formed.

The acknowledgement of the possibility of a self-nothingness mastered by autonomous image productions (the random compromises constituting our being) is brought to light in the short story "La carriola," in which a lawyer suddenly becomes aware that his family, his occupation and even his own name have become foreign. The lawyer realizes that for himself he has not been, he has been only for others.

Io vedo non ciò che di me è morto; vedo che non sono mai stato vivo, vedo la forma che gli altri, non io, mi hanno data, e sento che in questa forma la mia vita, una mia vera vita, non c'è mai stata. (*Novelle* 312)

The lawyer also knows, however, that he cannot reverse the images which have been projected upon him and which have all along guided the events of his life. The abyss which separates the externally projected images thrust upon him on behalf of his family and profession and the images which he would like to hold for himself create a vacuum in which the feeling of contradiction is self-evident. It is out of this abyss that the lawyer finds a way to counter-attack the fate which he no longer controls and perhaps never did. Everyday, in total privacy, the lawyer takes the hind legs of the family's dog into his hands and walks around the desk in his office. In this non-sensical act, the protagonist is able, for a few brief moments everyday, to break away from the images which have thus dictated his life.

Adriano Tilgher writes:

But in man, no matter how uncouth, life splits in two: even to the most uncouth of men it is essential to be and to know that he is, to live and to know that he lives. In man, life has projected and detached from itself as its own opposite something that Pirandello calls the feeling of life and that I would call, in philosophically stricter terms, consciousness, reflection, thought. In such detachment, with the attendant delusion of assuming as objectively and externally existing reality this mutable inner feeling of life, there lies the first cause of human misery. For once it has detached itself from life, the feeling of life (or consciousness as we may call it) by filtering through the brain tends to cool off, to clarify and idealize itself; from the particular, changeable, ephemeral state it was, it will eventually crystallize into a general, abstract idea (see Pirandello's essay "L'Umoreismo" [in the book of the same name], second edition, pp. 168ff.). (Tilgher 21)

These ideas which individuals crystallize will form the barriers from which they will observe and understand life's images. From these images individuals then proceed to construct truth. Precisely from the probability that there lacks an awareness of one's own fictions and images, Pirandello turns to the written word in order to develop the unrealities of characters, thus individuals. Again, we must caution ourselves from categorical relativity and we are encouraged to enter into the domain of image-production. "Pirandello had long asserted the necessity of fictions in the process of self-creation," states Caputi, "but he had not previously pondered so intently the implications of living with fictions created with a full awareness that they are fictions."¹

Pirandello's methodology relies on progressive development precisely because its own scaffolding agrees with the temporal flux. As conditions change so does the image-production. Pirandello's text constructs the dialectic between time and image and simultaneously is at its service. The scaffolding, comprised of characters and their language games, survives for its own subjectivism. The lawyer is aware of his fictitious being and he goes on to revenge himself against those fictions. Thomas Harrison states it diligently:

The real obstruction to life occurs not when consciousness recognizes the distance between itself and the images by which it lives, but when these images reveal themselves to be no longer its own, when they take on a logic all their own, becoming autonomous and neglecting the volition of the character they ostensibly served. (Harrison 194)

Pirandello has no interest in creating a hierarchy in which one image validates itself more than another. What is significant is the very notion that we are so intimately involved with the totality of image-production. Pirandello fuels the process in which image A is contradicted by image B resulting in a third possibility, image C. Just as we are part of the world around other individuals, the process calls for a coming to terms with others' perceptions of the world.

Pirandello's text provokes a process of self-realization which already possesses the ubiquitous discrepancies existing within our self-perceived image and the images of ourselves projected upon us by others. Pirandello captures each and every one of our image-productions through a character who remains passive until the final scene; when he does act he does so in his office, almost alone, confirming his own alienation.

One, willingly or not, breathes life into the possibilities of ten separate images when he or she walks into a room in which there are nine other people, the tenth image being the one each of us holds for ourselves. The concern of our protagonist relates solely to the dog and the image it holds of the master is

essentially inconsequential. Vitangelo Moscarda of *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, published in 1926, suffers from the same ailment as our lawyer, but Moscarda seeks revenge actively and socially while our silent honorable citizen does so in the privacy of his office.

Il titolo del romanzo illustra la filosofia dell'autore: l'uomo è *uno*, cioè quello che egli crede di essere, e *nessuno*, perché non riesce ad adattarsi alla forma che gli altri gli danno o che cerca di darsi lui stesso. *Centomila* sono le diverse forme che le diverse persone gli danno. Dunque questo è un romanzo sulla « forma », e contiene teorie presenti in molte opere teatrali. Moscarda vuole mostrare di non essere ciò che gli altri ritengono che sia, e la sua rivolta contro il mondo, da lui operata per provare che l'opinione altrui era sbagliata, lo porta a scoprire sé stesso. (Valentini 132)

Moscarda searches for the one image underlying the thousands of images resulting in yet another manifestation of nothingness. The lawyer searches for an image which negates the presence of the thousands of images surrounding him. This in turn allows him to manifest a certain something which has meaning for his being and only his being. Moscarda is unable to achieve even that.

Per sé, Vitangelo Moscarda è nessuno. L'io è infatti essenzialmente un essere-per-l'altro. Ma, per realizzarsi, questa coscienza nella quale si afferma la singolarità deve essere consapevole in tutti; questo senso dell'alterità, questo sentimento della finitudine di ciascuno, del limite individuale e del rapporto vicendevoles, in cui si effettua il rispetto del singolo, e quindi la sua valorizzazione, deve essere pienamente consapevole. Invece tra gli uomini avviene esattamente il contrario. E questo è il dramma dell'essere in cui l'identità dell'io finisce con l'affogare.²

Both characters are conscious of their own multiple image production. The possibility of the lawyer being a "someone" which will confirm one image (identity) over another is always presumed and already surrendered. The possibility of Moscarda discovering a "self" which is not reducible to that which others see yields the *nessuno*, the nothingness of it all. Valentini writes regarding Pirandello's characters:

I suoi personaggi sono sempre influenzati da ciò che egli chiama il « sentimento del contrario ». Ogni qualvolta sembrano esserci sufficienti ragioni per credere qualcosa, sorgono ragioni egualmente buone per credere la cosa opposta.

(Valentini 11; cf. *L'Umorismo*)

Pirandello's characters lead the spectator into an abyss filled with un-realities of perceived images and possibilities of not yet perceived image-productions. Once

the exploration has begun does it become plausible to search even further, for the possibility of symmetries and asymmetries constituting our relation to that which surrounds us. However, it is often the opposite effect which takes place. We prefer to pursue some fixed notion of our being resulting in a denial of the many selves which even the mirror reveals through its limited powers of reflection. Milan Kundera phrases the problematic in the following way:

A person is nothing but his image. Philosophers can tell us that it doesn't matter what the world thinks of us, that nothing matters but what we really are. But philosophers don't understand anything. As long as we live with other people, we are only what other people consider us to be. Thinking about how others see us and trying to make our image as attractive as possible is considered a kind of dissembling or cheating. . . . It's naive to believe that our image is only an illusion that conceals our selves, as the one true essence independent of the eyes of the world . . . our self is a mere illusion, ungraspable and indescribable, misty, while the only reality, all too easily graspable and describable, is our image in the eyes of others. And the worst thing about it is that you are not its master. First you try to paint yourself, then you want at least to influence and control it, but in vain: a single malicious phrase is enough to change you forever into a depressingly simple caricature. (*Immortality* 127)

With respect to the dialectic between living and seeing oneself live, between mastering our images and being mastered by them, we feel compelled to build our own text. Otherwise we take the chance of falling into the dilemma which can be categorized by Kundera's definition of fate: "there comes a moment when the image of our life parts company with the life itself, stands free, and, little by little, begins to rule us" (*Art of the Novel* 128).

The nature of our involvement as a reader is determined by Pirandello's ability in provoking us to identify with the conditions of the « *sentimento del contrario* ». Harrison writes,

In opposition to the "common Lie" by which the reality principle enforces its univocal and monocular visions, Pirandello proposes an "explicit and declared tolerance of dissension and contrast" (*L'Umorismo* 155). In the aesthetics of perplexity "each image, each group of images evokes and attracts contrary ones, and these naturally divide the spirit, which, in its restlessness, is obstinately determined to find or establish the most astonishing relationships between the images" (*L'Umorismo* 141). (Harrison 207)

It is Pirandello's pen which draws us into this topsy-turvy world of odd wheelbarrows. It is Pirandello's humor that allows us to feel the revenge the lawyer experiences in that dictatorial act which somehow revenges his stolen

individuality. Who has not, on many occasions, pensively pondered acts which, to the realm of that conventional reality we all succumb to, would appear totally incommensurable. To say it with Pirandello,

In certi momenti di silenzio interiore, . . . ci sentiamo assaltare da una strana impressione, come se, in un baleno, ci si chiarisse una realtà diversa da quella che normalmente percepiamo, una realtà vivente oltre la vista umana, fuori delle forme dell'umana ragione. (*L'umorismo* 160)

The disparity of behavioral codes cannot be required to bear the weight of rationalistic and conventional expectations and most certainly cannot fall silent to them. It is precisely to the alleviation of such heaviness that Pirandello has raised his pen and given an artistic voice, perhaps not always an operatic voice but certainly one that echoes and echoes and echoes.

Richard Collins
 Department of Italian
 University of California, Los Angeles

Notes

¹Caputi 93. Caputi emphasizes the particular treatment of consciousness achieved in this play, a consciousness which was previously unparalleled in Pirandello's fiction and plays. Of innovative quality is the "stage-by-stage layering" of awareness reflecting the full state of consciousness.

²Croci xxvii. See the introduction by Giovanni Croci to Pirandello's *Uno, nessuno e centomila* for critical analysis of the active role Moscarda undertakes in treating the consciousness of his self-perceived images and the images perceived by others.

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