

Pirandello: *The Lost Face*

THE MEDIEVAL TORPOR of Sicily at the time of Luigi Pirandello's birth might have suggested to his imagination some sense of the inescapable, but little of that quality of unpredictable quick-change identifiable in all his mature writings. Nominally, Italy achieved national unity during his childhood; but Sicilians—inbred taciturn, isolated—continued to speak of travel to Florence as “going to the Continent.” Moreover, young Pirandello was raised quietly to assume his wealthy father's business, ownership of island sulphur mines. At eighteen he would have quit his studies, in order to support his fiancée; but his father insisted that he enter the University after he complained of the incompetence of Roman instruction.

Since his own engagement dissolved during the next few years, Pirandello agreed in 1894 to marry his father's choice, a girl whom he hardly knew except as the daughter of his father's business partner. They were settled in Rome on generous family allowances. Suddenly, floods destroyed the Sicilian sulphur mines; and the severe shock unsettled his wife's mind. For years, while he supported his family as professor of Italian literature at the Roman Normal School, his wife filled his hours at home with wild accusations of infidelity. Gradually he saw himself becoming only the shadow of the image her mind held. He was tortured too by thoughts of lives he might have led. But not until after the first World War would he allow his wife to be taken from him and to be placed in a nursing home.

By then his importance as a writer was beginning to be recognized. Between 1889 and 1912 he had published five collections of verse whose cynicism was disciplined by epigram-

matic humor. A deeper, more relentless kind of tragic humor, however, is evident in his short stories, written at the suggestion of Capuana and Verga, fellow Sicilian writers in Rome who had already found provincial life, however squalid or incongruous, worthy of art. He began to plan twenty-four volumes of fifteen stories apiece; but because later his interests turned to the drama, only fifteen volumes were completed in his lifetime. Mostly they are stories of harrowing peasant life in Sicily and of bourgeois illusions: but the torment of self-division is already as significant as any class division here. The land of volcanic ash and sulphur offers a natural symbol for a wasteland which the errant knight fails to redeem, time and again. Pirandello's men of impulse and quiet perplexities contrast ironically with D'Annunzio's cult of the superman. Yet they often possess a native grace and dignity which elevates them above naturalistic primitives. Old comedies of error and mistaken identity become, in Pirandello quests for truth amid the transitory acts of man. During these same years, the problem of plural personality reappears in the seven novels on which Pirandello was working. Always a kind of introspective patience tries to outwit dilemmas that cannot be outwitted.

By 1915, James Joyce had helped Pirandello find a publisher; but only the postwar period, disenchanted by the death of men and ideals and increasingly aware of the dark functions of the unconscious, could fully appreciate Pirandello's downward journey into the maze that man had become. He had already written five plays—mainly Sicilian folk drama—before the war. Afterwards (at the urging of a comic actor!) the stage occupied his imagination thoroughly, resulting in such original plays as *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Henry IV*, both written within a five-week period. Half of his fifty-odd plays are dramatizations of his stories, with occasional commentators added and lengthy stage directions inserted to overcome the difficulties inherent in a drama of ideas—the solution employed by George Bernard Shaw and Eugene O'Neill as well. The theatre, which depends on roles assumed and discarded and which filters the playwright's intentions through actor and director, was the perfect medium for Pirandello's concern with truth's transitory nature.

His esthetic had already been presented, in 1908, through two volumes of essays, *Art and Science* and *Humor*. The creative act of the artist is equated within the personal myth-making of everyman; and the failure of complete self-knowledge in each, when "being and seeming" contradict each other, results in a profound comedy of the absurd. Trying to dramatize this philosophy, Pirandello wrote quickly, driven more now by its desperate illusiveness than by poverty.

In 1934, Pirandello received the Nobel prize for literature. But his search, not for success but for certainty, could never stop. Publicly he accepted Mussolini; yet his last plays betray an "inward exile" from fascist politics, confirmed by his refusal to be buried in a "black shirt" uniform.

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Candid Comments

ONE OF the quickest ways to meet new people is to pick up the wrong ball on a golf course.

THE PARENTS of a large brood of children deserve a lot of credit; in fact, they can't get along without it.

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