

Luigi Pirandello's Concept of Life and His Way to Fascism



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SYNOPSIS

This article investigates Pirandello's adhesion to the Italian Fascist Party by examining articles, interviews, letters, and essays with the aim of shedding light on the political dimension of this choice, so frequently mitigated by the critics, and of showing its relations to the author's concept of life. Finally, by taking a close look at leading themes in the novel *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, the article raises the questions: To what extent is this text permeated with ideological elements? In what ways, similarly, does it transmit a view of the world that would connect Pirandello's thinking to ideas that were mainstream in the society of his time.

KEYWORDS

Fascism; form; life; democracy; tyranny; uselessness of efforts; science; waiting.

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JOINING THE NATIONAL FASCIST PARTY

In a telegram to *Il Duce* on 17 September 1924, Luigi Pirandello asked to be made a member of the National Fascist Party, claiming to be its 'most humble and obedient supporter'. Two days later the message was published in the newspaper *L'Impero*: 'Your Excellency, I feel that for me this is the most propitious moment to declare a faith that I have always nourished and served in silence. If Your Excellency considers me worthy of joining the National Fascist Party, I would be proud to have the highest honour of occupying the position of its most humble and obedient supporter. With total devotion, Luigi Pirandello'.¹

¹ This request by Pirandello to Mussolini was published in *L'Impero*, 19 September 1924; this journal is defined by Giudice (1963, p. 425) as 'one of the most agitated and factious fascist



It should be remembered that on 30 May 1924, Giacomo Matteotti, a member of the Socialist Party, had delivered a speech to Parliament strongly criticising the government and denouncing the conditions of violence and aggression in which the last elections had been held, and that soon after, on 10 June, he was abducted in Rome by fascists in broad daylight while going to the Chamber of Deputies to denounce the corruption committed by Mussolini's government in licensing oil extraction in Sicily and Emilia to the American company Sinclair Oil.² The body of Matteotti was found on 16 August. In retaliation, on 12 September, Armando Casalini, deputy of National Fascist Party, was killed by the communist carpenter Giovanni Corvi. Pirandello joined the fascist party five days after Casalini's death and one month after the discovery of Matteotti's body. In an interview with Telesio Interlandi the following day, when asked to state his reasons for joining the Fascist Party,³ Pirandello answered: 'in one word: Matteotti'. The meaning of this laconic declaration was made clear by Interlandi himself as he sought to explain its motivations: 'The obscene speculation made on the body of the Unitary deputy, the industrialisation of his body up to the most revolting consequences, the campaign of lies and falsehoods that have thrived on that macabre scene [...] the clear perception of the terrible danger for the country left to its poisoners'.⁴

In the face of the Matteotti assassination, Pirandello seems unalarmed and unperturbed. Would it therefore be incorrect to say that Pirandello consented and was an accomplice to that line of violence, remaining totally blind to the excessive deeds and actions of the fascists? In fact, the *squadristi* (or 'Blackshirts') who were responsible for this violence, and who were comprised in large part by Arditi veterans (elite special forces of the Royal Italian Army who had served in the First World War), were in the practice of organising punitive campaigns against any political adversary of the party, including trade unions, *Case del popolo* (social and cultural community centres), and so on. They were also behind the assassination of Don Minzoni in 1923, and the beatings which led to the deaths of Giovanni Amendola and Piero Gobetti.

Pirandello's gesture in joining the Fascist Party signifies his implicit consent to the use of violence as a foundational element of fascism. Even if an action is made up of a sequence of motor acts, it inevitably refers to intentions, projects, motivations, and finally to the reasons that lead a subject to choose a course of action based on his own choice and precise interpretation. The interpretation of an event, similarly, does not

journals'. One year before, Mussolini had received Pirandello at Chigi Palace on 22 October 1923.

- 2 Various essays show the complicity between profiteers and the regime as the cause of the Matteotti assassination, given that the deputy was inquiring about the ordinances on oil research by Sinclair oil and on the gaming industry (see Canali 1997; Mandelli 2012; Pagnini 2018).
- 3 Telesio Interlandi, who had a close relationship with Mussolini from the birth of 'Fasci di combattimento', played the role of forerunner of the regime positions, by means of the newspapers he headed. He was always anti-Semitic, and in 1938 he gave life to the magazine *La difesa della razza* ('The defense of the race'). Arrested in 1945, he managed to escape and stay hidden until the amnesty for fascist crimes.
- 4 'L'oscena speculazione compiuta sul cadavere del deputato unitario, l'industrializzazione di quel cadavere spinta fino alle più rivoltanti conseguenze, la campagna di menzogne e di falsità prosperante su quel macabro terreno [...] la chiara percezione del tremendo pericolo che corre il paese abbandonato ai suoi avvelenatori' (*L'Impero*, 19 September 1924).



simply add itself to the action but constitutes it. It is in this context, and with respect to this historical moment, that Pirandello's telegram requesting to join the Fascist Party must be understood. In terms of the political legitimacy of the regime, the telegram arrived at its weakest moment, when crisis was poised to overwhelm it. As we will see, many critics have sought to define Pirandello's motivations as opportunistic rather than ideological, or to ascribe it to different aims altogether: the writer's innate tendency to go against the tide, his rooted distrust in the traditional political parties, his hostility to democracy, his need for certainties beyond the boundaries of his own relativism. Whatever the case, one fact is certain: that human action possesses an intrinsic value, both ethical and political, transcending the contingency of its motivations. The choice goes back to a judgement grounded on a variety of ideas and dispositions; to choose involves a form of judgement that requires a leading principle, to such an extent that personal opinions live via the selected choices, and ultimately persist on values.⁵

Facing a large number of empirical facts, the meaning they have for the human conscience in accomplishing them time after time has to be found, and this means discovering the value, the nucleus by which they are substantiated and warranted. Making a decision also concerns subjective values, which constitute a sort of moral imperative, so that personal responsibility is never suppressed for decisions made in service of these values. We must therefore ask what values contributed to Pirandello's decision to join the fascist party, and what idea of society is there embodied. Pirandello may have been impelled to join fascism because he perceived the movement as a hope for Italy; this way of framing it, however, recasts the Matteotti assassination as founding act of a national renaissance — a perspective we find difficult to justify. Some light may be shed, however, by trying to understand Pirandello's decision in the context of the conflict between conservative forces and the innovative social pressures of that period.

Consider again Interlandi's interview of Pirandello in 1924. Pirandello agrees with the suppression of the dissenting press, abolition of the Chamber of Deputies, and reform of the Senate so that it consists of a mixed Assembly formed with administrators and representatives of basic state institutions. The writer, in giving his remarks, points out: 'I didn't say as simply and directly as it appears from your interview that I would like to see "the suppression of the opposing press". I said that, as it has been applied, the decree concerning the press, which is an exceptional measure to avoid a bleak and ugly campaign of one-sided hate, has in fact repressed very little, with the only effect of making its own application both empty and harmful. Empty, because the nefarious fruit of the hate campaign may well have been Mr Casalini's death; harmful because it has been used, and continues to be used, as an easy pretence for shouting about "restrictions on freedom".'⁶ Gaspare Giudice observes that one month later, when the dissenting press is actually suppressed, 'Pirandello will not disapprove: indeed, he will remain an advocate for the regime' (Giudice 1963, p. 431).⁷

5 The current reflection began to move within some philosophical streams during the second half of the 19th century; they paid attention to history and progressively shed light on the interconnections between the world of values and the world of historical facts.

6 The letter was published in *L'Impero*, 24 September 1924.

7 In this part of the interview with Interlandi, Pirandello appears to anticipate the totalitarian structure outlined by Mussolini some months later, in the discourse of 3 January 1925.



Ada Fichera underlines that Pirandello's move to fascism at that 'specific juncture in history is not a coincidence' since Pirandello himself declares, in an interview to *Il Piccolo* in Trieste on 21 October 1924, that 'If you are hinting at my recent decision to join the Fascist Party, I'll tell you that I did it with the aim of helping fascism in its work of renewing and reconstructing'; in the article published in the evening edition, the word 'fascism' is changed to 'the party' (Fichera 2017, p. 69, 65).

In 1925, Pirandello moreover signs the 'Manifesto of fascist intellectuals' which gives clear justification for the *squadristi*: 'Firm young men, armed, wearing the black shirts, commanded in military fashion, have acted against the law in order to set up a new law, as an armed force against the State to start the new State'.⁸

These events were met with strong reactions from Pirandello's contemporaries. Adriano Tilgher, for example, ended all relations with the writer, and Giovanni Amendola's comment about 'vulgar men' in the newspaper was ostensibly directed at Pirandello and his decision to join the Fascist Party.⁹ Conversely, these same events were played down by post-war critics.

THE CRITICS' DEFENCE OF PIRANDELLO

Nino Borsellino claims that Pirandello caught the most compliant aspects of intellectual and moral compromise within politics, therefore his adhesion to fascism and particularly to the charisma of the new leader 'should be seen as a gesture of support vis-à-vis a figure capable of exceptional creative powers'; moreover the critics recall that, beyond the honours he received from the regime, Pirandello often affirmed his non-involvement in politics: 'I'm apolitical, I'm only a man in the world'.¹⁰ Clearly Borsellino does not take into account the fact that Pirandello, during his first journey to the United States at the end of 1923, was not shy with his opinions, generally of an antidemocratic tenor, on social and political issues.¹¹

Italian critics have often shown a tendency to overlook Luigi Pirandello's membership in the National Fascist Party, and those who mention it typically take one of two

8 According to Saitta, fascism arose as an 'anti-liberal and antidemocratic, anti-working class, and antisocialist dictatorship' and should be defined as an 'armed social reaction' (Saitta 1962, p. 594).

9 See Amendola, Giovanni: 'Un uomo volgare'. *Il Mondo*, 25. 9. 1924, and the answer by Pirandello: 'Lettera aperta agli amici firmatari della protesta in sua difesa contro l'articolo: Un uomo volgare'. *L'Impero*, 30. 10. 1924. The critic Adriano Tilgher, who had previously sustained and promoted Pirandello, moved from *Il Tempo* to *Il Mondo*, sharing the antifascism of Amendola; although strongly impressed by the writer's adhesion to fascism, he did not subscribe to the paper by Amendola with the aim of giving regard to Pirandello as a writer. In any case, on 1 June 1927, Tilgher fiercely attacked *Diana e la Tuda*.

10 Interview by Giuseppe Villaroel, *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 8 May 1924; on 12 June 1926, Pirandello claims: 'Io sono fascista. E non da ora; sono trent'anni che faccio il fascista' ('I am a fascist — and for a long time. It is thirty years that I am a fascist'; *Il pensiero* in Bergamo; see Giudice 1963, p. 441).

11 To have a broader look at the opinions about Pirandello as a fascist, see Scarpellini 1989; Aguirre d'Amico 1992; Pedullà 1994; Providenti 2000; Barbina 1967.



attitudes. The first tends to minimise Pirandello's politics, or separate the writer from the man, seeking to demonstrate that his works reflect neither the fascist lexicon nor its ideology. Borsellino, for example, claims that Pirandello's fascism was not particularly experienced or celebrated, and Sciascia maintains that Pirandello's criticisms of the parliamentary system do not betray a fascist tendency but merely his desire to be different, a symptom of the kind of 'stubbornness' that characterises 'a Sicilian man'. This assertion refers to two main facts regarding Pirandello: first, that he joined the National Fascist Party at a moment when it faced the possibility of a heavy loss of approval; and second, that he gave frequent expression to his anti-democratic views, starting with the well-known sequence in *Il fu Mattia Pascal* in which democracy is defined as 'tyranny masked as freedom'. Pirandello confirmed these views once more in an interview with Giuseppe Villaroel for the *Giornale d'Italia* in May 1924, stating, 'I am anti-democratic par excellence'.¹²

It must be noted that Sciascia uses the words 'clumsy manner' and Borsellino speaks of 'improvisations' to refer to Pirandello's adhesion to the fascist party, in this way diminishing the value of his actions. Later on, Borsellino appears to revise his position and to connect Pirandello's adhesion to the 'mussolinism' of that historic period, characterised by many social conflicts, by a widespread rejection of the ideals of the Italian Risorgimento, and by electoral compromises. So that, seeking a quick solution to Italy's problems, Pirandello came to see fascism as the only political movement in the history of modern Italy able to overcome them all at once, by handing over all power to a charismatic person believed to represent a greater will for redemption (Borsellino 2004, p. 154).¹³

According to Giudice, Pirandello's attraction to fascism had a complex origin in the writer's personal history and middle class background. Giudice underlines that when Pirandello died, his funeral, as laid out in his will, did not follow the fascist tendency of a large official ceremony. We must remember, however, that Pirandello's will was written in 1911, so it is hard to make the argument that his choice was linked to a desire to take his leave by 'slamming the door in the regime's face' (cf. Borsellino 2004, p. 102, 150; Giudice 1963, p. 463).

Mario Soldati states that Pirandello 'was a fervent and committed fascist in practice, even if he claimed in theory to be apolitical', and Asor Rosa claims that the writer's adhesion to fascism was the culmination of the criticisms advanced by the middle classes towards the parliamentary and liberal-democratic regime, a disapproval 'that for many meant turning to fascism'.¹⁴

Eugenio Garin maintains: 'Despite all appearances, I would never call him a fascist. One finds in him the end of all insecurities, the anxiety typical of his time'.¹⁵ Gianfranco Vené, by contrast, does not find any attenuating circumstances in Pi-

12 *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 8 May 1924.

13 Note that Borsellino uses the term 'mussolinism' instead of fascism to speak about the Pirandello's political conversion.

14 Soldati, Mario: 'Brutto segno se Pirandello va forte'. *Il Giorno*, 20. 12. 1966, the first of three articles published by the newspaper (10. 1. 1967, 27. 1. 1967); Asor Rosa 1974, p. 1434.

15 Garin, Eugenio: 'Omero sotto il fascismo, interview by Nello Ajello'. *La Repubblica*, 9 October 1987.



randello's fascist sympathies; whatever 'tormented thought' might have shaped the writer's views, they did not 'give him any qualms about the advent of fascism but, on the contrary, led the writer to see in fascism a "moment of truth" in the life of the nation' (Venè 1972, p. 277).

According to Giuseppe Petronio, Pirandello's conception of life and art matured between 1889 and 1904, fusing together 'a patriotic passion offended by the inglorious end' of Risorgimento ideals, with anti-democratic and anti-socialist sentiments (Petronio 1986, p. 250). One finds evidence of these claims, for example, in the soliloquy of the drunk man in *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, and a sequence that seems to aim at Ada Negri in which the author writes of 'Karl Marx's algebra books' and 'the criminal nonsense of the many misfit professional charlatans, and today, naturally, socialists' (Pirandello 2006, p. 121), attitudes that Pirandello repeats in his novel *I vecchi e i giovani* ('The young and the old'). In any case, Pirandello 'was certainly not a pre-fascist, a claim that, in the context of the 1890s, is at very least an exaggeration', nor was he 'a supporter of the common people' as others believe. He was, like many other middle-class intellectuals, an enemy of democracy and socialism, and an opponent of science as well: 'he dreamed of a strong man, but in his own way, with a moral rage totally absent in others' (Petronio 1986, pp. 251–252).

Another persevering idea among the critics is that a distinction can be made between Pirandello's political choices and his literary works, since the latter do not show any trace of fascist lexicon or ideology. In our view, the notion that an author may be separated in this way from his literary production does not in itself appear implausible; in the case of Pirandello, however, we wonder to what extent this notion — that his works remained unaffected by his political ideology — may be maintained.¹⁶

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE CHOICE

Despite widely varying interpretations of Pirandello's adhesion to fascism, we believe his motivations are made clear in the context of his repeated public and private declarations of support for Mussolini and the fascist regime. As early as April 1924, he tells the *Giornale di Sicilia* that he holds Mussolini in the 'highest esteem'.¹⁷ In an interview published by *L'Impero* on 12 March 1927, he claims that 'In all of history Mussolini has no equal, for there has never been a leader who knew how to give his peo-

¹⁶ According to Giudice, given that the experience of life is reflected within the works, the writer's acts of social behaviour must be not ignored, because 'tout se tient' (Giudice 1963, p. 417). The critics' position towards the Nazis philosopher Heidegger moves in the same way: with respect to the reading made by Victor Farias of the relationships between philosophy and the political choices of the philosopher for Nazism (who never recanted), the common critique reconfirms that it is necessary to consider the man distinct from his works (Farias 1988). According to Emmanuel Faye too, the hypothesis that the ideas of any human being are not separable from his lived life is empty (Faye 2012).

¹⁷ Interview to *Giornale di Sicilia* on 10 April 1924: Mussolini 'has the highest merit to have created and to have placed in value Italy' ('ha l'altissimo merito di avere creato e di avere messo in valore l'Italia').



ple such a vivid impression of his personality': 'how gladly, dear friends, would I set to work as a gravedigger to get rid of all the corpses infecting Italy!' Pirandello thus considers the necessity of 'fascistically' cleansing from Italy 'all those who believe to be alive but are not'.¹⁸

References to 'Il Duce' can be found everywhere in his letters to Marta Abba,¹⁹ often in the context of seeking help for his theatre projects, with the indirect aim of preserving his relationship with the actress (his 'light'). In 1929 Pirandello was nominated Academic of Italy, after a long and anxious wait for the nomination, as he states in a letter dated 19 March 1929. In a letter dated 26 March 1929, he claims to be 'proud' that Il Duce would consider him, adding that the enemies are sure now to lose their arrogance. Several days later, in a letter dated 29 March, he confirms to Mussolini his 'total profound devotion'. In a letter dated 4 March 1932, Marta Abba describes how she was received by Mussolini, and expresses her disappointment that during the meeting there was no discussion of the future of their theatre project. Pirandello replies that, in spite of this, he must 'raise the myth of Mussolini higher' and 'exalt him as the nation's saviour' even if Il Duce accuses him of having a 'bad character' (6 February 1932).²⁰ Pirandello writes again a few days later to tell Marta Abba enthusiastically about meeting Mussolini, who listened to his proposal for the foundation of the National Dramatic Theatre with great attention.²¹ Then he gives his impression of Mussolini as a 'rough and unrefined human specimen, born to command with contempt for mediocre and vulgar people [...] Nevertheless I know that in a cruel time like this one [...] such a man is necessary; necessary to preserve the myth we gave life to, and despite all to believe in and to stay faithful to this myth, as to an indispensable hardness that in certain moments we must usefully impose upon ourselves' (14 February 1932). Pirandello's faith is so total, so blind, that it forces him to overlook Mussolini's negative traits, and treat fascism as an historic necessity.

In a letter of 6 December 1932, Pirandello mentions another meeting with Il Duce, and his disappointment upon finding Mussolini to be tired, sick, and depressed (even if reliable, as usual) when he was expecting to find a 'giant'. When he asks about the project, which has been neglected since the dismissal of Giuseppe Bottai, Il Duce answers that the situation is 'tragic' and the risk of war is present: 'Concerning performances, the people will have to be satisfied with those available to mass audiences,

18 'A colloquio con Pirandello', interview by Umberto Gentili. *L'Impero*, 12 March 1927. We may recall that when Toscanini was attacked by the fascists in Bologna on 14 May 1931 because he refused to play *Giovinetta* and the royal hymn, Pirandello wrote: 'they did wrong to slap him, but for the reason that these slaps would have had a great resonance abroad, as they really had' (Letter to Marta Abba on 22 May 1931).

19 Luigi Pirandello: *Lettere a Marta Abba, 1925-1936*. Milano, Mondadori 2013. Hereafter the letters are cited by date. It is notable that from 7 July 1933, Pirandello begins to add, or use exclusively, the year denomination of the fascist era.

20 Pirandello believed to have gained many enemies in the occasion of his talk about Verga to the Academy of Italy on 3 December 1931, when he claimed that D'Annunzio was at fault in the triumph of *words style* over Verga's *things style*.

21 After the meeting with Mussolini, several contacts with Bottai will take place (see the letters on 2. 4. 1932; 6. 4. 1932; 13. 4. 1932; 14. 4. 1932; 17. 4. 1932; 4. 5. 1932; Tuesday, 5. 1932).



the stadiums and the cinema'. Pirandello is crushed, as this means the end of his dreams for a national theatre with Marta Abba. But this does not seem to affect the writer's ties to the regime, as we learn in his letter of 19 March 1934, in which he writes that he had 'to attend the Duce's speech at the second quinquennial assembly of the regime, wearing a black shirt'. Ceaselessly seeking Mussolini's approval, Pirandello expresses his disappointment that Il Duce did not like his libretto for Gian Francesco Malipiero's opera *La favola del figlio cambiato* ('The fable of the changeling son'), which was considered so insulting to church and monarchy that it was immediately banned.²²

Later in 1934, the Real Italian Academy organised the fourth Volta Conference on dramatic theatre, with the express aim of disseminating Italian genius abroad, in accordance with the regime's policy for publicising the moral and cultural renewal of the nation. The convention involved prestigious international artists and intellectuals, such as the dramatists Jacques Copeau and Gerhart Hauptmann, actor and set designer Edward Gordon Craig, and architect Joseph Gregor. The aim, as with every Volta Conference, was to legitimise the 'fascistisation' of culture and sciences. Pirandello was nominated president of the conference on 9 November 1933, while Gabriele d'Annunzio was involved, at Mussolini's request, in the staging of his *La figlia di Iorio* ('The daughter of Iorio'), directed by Pirandello. Given their public hostility towards one another, the pairing of Pirandello with D'Annunzio created quite a stir. Pirandello was in the habit of making parodies of D'Annunzio's heroes, tearing his experimental works to shreds.²³ However, with the careful planning of Silvio D'Amico and Atonio Bruers, an ex-legionary who had already acted as mediator between Mussolini and D'Annunzio at Fiume, these differences were resolved. D'Amico and Bruers arranged a public reconciliation between the two writers through a press campaign managed by Galeazzo Ciano. Pirandello's letters to Marta Abba on 2 and 9 March 1934 attest to the spirit of animosity and mutual disdain in which he regarded the project; nevertheless, he managed to hire the actress, assuring her generous remuneration, and putting her sister to work as well. Despite common fears of the controversies in cinema, sport, and radio, Pirandello limited his opening statements, on 8 October 1934, to an argument on the necessity of a mass theatre. In his closing speech, he praised Il Duce and defined him as 'a great creative mind capable of bringing together and kindling the minds of the Italian people'.²⁴ If the play itself was not a total failure, nor could it be considered a success, according to Gordon Craig, who judged it 'not very good theatre' made up of naïve set designs, weak performances, poor direction and 'a very meager outcome' (Pedullà 1991, pp. 31–51).²⁵

In spite of his many reasons for getting his plays produced, Pirandello would steadfastly defend the war in Ethiopia, even at the expense of his own profits and

22 The central censorship was instituted in 1931 with the aim of controlling the texts performed as plays.

23 In the past, in *La Critica* 18. 12. 1895, Pirandello had considered as 'extremely ridiculous' *Le vergini delle rocce*: cf. Fried 2014.

24 'Discorso del presidente del convegno S. E. Luigi Pirandello'. In: Reale Accademia d'Italia Fondazione Alessandro Volta: *Atti dei convegni*. IV convegno di lettere 8–14 ottobre 1934.

25 Craig was a famous English actor, set designer, director, and producer of theatre.



image, both in England and in the United States. In his letter of 21 July 1935, he writes that he was immediately beset upon his arrival in New York by a multitude of reporters and photographers: 'Here I found the whole press antagonising our feat in Africa, in the name of infamous democratic principles. But I stood my ground with everyone [...] I don't know how much this fact might be useful to my affairs, but I don't care!' He makes similar remarks in an earlier letter dated 7 July 1935, writing, 'I don't care; what I care about above all is that Italy overcome all difficulties and obstacles and win!'

After winning the Nobel Prize, it seemed that Pirandello's project for the foundation of a national theatre would be rejuvenated, and Pirandello enthusiastically describes his meeting with Il Duce to Marta Abba in a letter of 19 February 1935, proposing that the next theatrical season open on the anniversary of the march on Rome. The renewal of his collaboration with Bottai further strengthens his conviction: 'it seems we have finally arrived at our dream'.²⁶ But the dream would soon vanish, and in a letter dated 14 January 1936, Pirandello realises that the fascist regime will give priority to Cinecittà, in order to produce propaganda movies for the masses (whereas the theatre is considered a medium for the elite). Given the failure of the project, Marta Abba decided to leave Italy to work abroad. In our opinion, this separation, which is definitive, threw Pirandello into 'an abyss of endless sadness' and a depression that will give him the sensation that he is 'sinking'. In the last letter before his death, Pirandello writes to Abba: 'when I think of the distance, I feel myself falling into my atrocious solitude, as into an abyss of despair' (4 December 1936).

'LA VITA CREATA' 1923: THE PATH FROM ARTISTIC TO POLITICAL FORM

One of the central ideas of Pirandello's essays is that life creates a *form* in which to exist, but that this form, in turn, imprisons and sentences life to death. For this reason, art cannot assume its objective representation as main parameter²⁷ because this would then hinder the 'free spontaneous and immediate motion of the form'.²⁸ Consequently, according to Pirandello, artistic creation does not consist in reproducing reality, but in inventing a fine and original form, distinct from the simple reproduction of models without originality or sentiment, and equally free from any social-historical or anthropological conditioning. The artistic creation conveys the subjective elements of consciousness, in which sentiments and representations are connected, which means in turn that the artistic product must be subjected to modifications in the process of becoming a work of art, whose truth is formed by fantasy. According to Pirandello, art is not knowledge but involves rather the mutation of things: creation and form interact with sentiment and the psychic material, and representations cannot transcend sentiments, impulses, or memory. For these reasons, in Pirandello's

²⁶ See also the letters on 14. 2. 1935 and 17. 2. 1935. For more about the collaboration with Bottai, see the letters on 1. 3. 1935; 18. 4. 1935; 8. 4. 1935; 17. 4. 1935.

²⁷ See the writer's reflections against naturalism and its concept of art as the objective representation of nature, written in 1908 (Pirandello 1960b).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 200.



view, art involves the creation of form by an individual, with the aim of giving reality a subjective interpretation.

Even later, in his reflections on theatre and literature, Pirandello focuses on the conflict between life, which moves and changes continuously, and the form in which it is set: 'life is a continuous blurred flow and it has no other form than the one we give it each time, infinitely varied and continuously variable. Everyone, in fact, must make his life for himself; but this invention is never free'²⁹; whereas only art, 'when it is true art, creates freely' (Pirandello 1960c, p. 987).

In discussing the putative relationship between Pirandello's political convictions and his literary work, we must naturally consider how his conception of life, in connection to his ideas on form, is inevitably connected to the historical context of political fascism. In fact Pirandello himself offers a text that goes a long way in reconstructing this connection, showing clearly how the artistic form is continuous with the political form that characterises the fascist regime. On 28 October 1923, the first anniversary of the march on Rome, all Italian newspapers commemorate the event, particularly *L'Idea Nazionale* (affiliated with the nationalists) which devotes the entire second page to commemorative texts by various authors, including Enrico Corradini, Alfredo Rocco, Giovanni Gentile, Luigi Federzoni, and others. Pirandello also contributed a brief text with the title 'La vita creata' ('The created life'), in which Mussolini is inserted into his concept of the form:

It is impossible not to bless Mussolini, on the part of one who has always perceived this imminent tragedy of life, which requires a form to consist somehow, but which immediately, within the form where it consists, senses death; for the reason that life, as it must and will always move and change over and over again, sees itself imprisoned in all forms, and thus pushes and beats and exhausts it, and at last escapes. Mussolini, who so manifestly perceives this double and tragic necessity, of form and of movement, and who with so much power decides that this movement will be kept in check, and that the form will never be empty, a meaningless idol, but will be host to that pulsating and trembling life, in such a way that it always created anew from one moment to the next, always ready to act for its own affirmation and to impose it on others. The revolutionary movement He started with the march on Rome, and now all the means of his new government appear to me, in politics, as the proper and necessary fulfilment of this conception of life.³⁰

²⁹ See the article in the magazine *Messaggero della domenica*, 30 July 1918.

³⁰ 'Non può non essere benedetto Mussolini, da uno che ha sempre sentito questa immanente tragedia della vita, la quale per consistere in qualche modo ha bisogno d'una forma; ma subito, nella forma in cui consiste, sente la morte; perché dovendo e volendo di continuo muoversi e mutare, in ogni forma si vede come imprigionata, e vi urge dentro e vi tempesta e la logora e alla fine ne evade: Mussolini che così chiaramente mostra di sentire questa doppia e tragica necessità della forma e del movimento, e che con tanta potenza vuole che il movimento trovi in una forma ordinata il suo freno, e che la forma non sia mai vuota, idolo vano, ma dentro accolga pulsante e fremente la vita, per modo che essa ne sia di momento in momento ricreata e pronta sempre all'atto che la affermi a se stessa e la imponga agli altri. Il moto rivoluzionario da Lui iniziato con la marcia su Roma e ora tutti i modi



As we see from the first lines, Pirandello's focus is on the way his own concept of life links him to Il Duce within the world of ideas. This is reinforced by his recurrent use of the verb 'sentire' (to perceive), referring both to himself and to Mussolini, and by referring to himself in such a way — 'da uno' ('on the part of one') — that his whole identity is constituted by the ideas he goes on to profess about life. This also makes up the thematic core of Pirandello's first period, as elaborated in his essay on *L'Umoreismo*, whose first edition in 1908 was dedicated 'To the late Mattia Pascal, librarian':

Life is a continuous flow that we try to halt, to fix in stable and determinate forms [...] The forms, in which we try to halt, to fix in ourselves this continuous flow, are the concepts, the ideas in which we seek to preserve ourselves with coherence, as well as all the pretenses we create, the conditions, the state in which we eventually settle. But within ourselves, within what we call anima, which is to say the life inside us, the flow continues, indistinct, below the banks, beyond the limits we impose, by composing a consciousness, constructing a personality. In certain stormy moments, when we are hit by the flow, all our artificial forms fall miserably away, and even what does not flow below the banks and beyond the limits [...] in certain moments of overflow, overruns and upsets everything (Pirandello 1960a, pp. 151–152).³¹

Hence, this never-ending dynamics between fixed form and the flow of life reveals a certain disparity, by which the succession of fixed forms can only ever hold the vital movement temporarily. But here, by means of a radical change in the argument, Pirandello attributes to Mussolini the ability to put a stop to that movement, and to contain and compress in an ordered form all the dynamics of life, much in the way that fascism-form, like a marble sarcophagus, was actually doing through the new institutional management of the ethical state.³² Seeking to justify the strongly anti-movement tendencies of fascism after its ascent to power, Pirandello tries to find agreement among actual events; in this way, he avoids the complexity, dynamics, and

del suo nuovo governo mi sembrano, in politica, l'attuazione propria e necessaria di questa concezione della vita.'

- 31 'La vita è un flusso continuo che noi cerchiamo d'arrestare, di fissare in forme stabili e determinate, dentro e fuori di noi, perché noi già siamo forme fissate, forme che si muovono in mezzo ad altre immobili, e che però possono seguire il flusso della vita, fino a tanto che, irrigidendosi man mano, il movimento, già a poco a poco rallentato, non cessi. Le forme, in cui cerchiamo d'arrestare, di fissare in noi questo flusso continuo, sono i concetti, sono gli ideali a cui vorremmo serbarci coerenti, tutte le finzioni che ci creiamo, le condizioni lo stato in cui tendiamo a stabilirci. Ma dentro di noi stessi, in ciò che noi chiamiamo anima, e che è la vita in noi, il flusso continua, indistinto, sotto gli argini, oltre i limiti che noi imponiamo, componendoci una coscienza, costruendoci una personalità. In certi momenti tempestosi, investite dal flusso, tutte quelle nostre forme fittizie crollano miseramente; e anche quello che non scorre sotto gli argini e oltre i limiti [...] in certi momenti di piena straripa e sconvolge tutto.'
- 32 The political translation of Gentile's thought actualised itself in the conception of the universal subject as central, and identified in the State conceived as the embodiment of morality; this idea is the prerequisite for the ethical fascist State, asserted as the absolute agent totally aside from subjective rights.



polyphony of society and its tensions. On the contrary, he finds a certain congruity with his own conception of life in the act of tightening control in service of the imposed political form.

The argument, in passing from the literary form to a more general, philosophical idea of life, is grounded on a crucial gap in the reasoning: it lacks the concept of illusion, that is, the illusion which must be taken as a reality outside oneself, the sentiment of life from the perspective of each individual. It is worth remembering that the concept of illusion permeates Pirandello's reflections in *L'Umoreismo*: 'he sees everywhere a misleading or false or affected construction of the sentiment and by means of a sharp, subtle and detailed analysis he deconstructs and decomposes it' (ibid., p. 156).³³ Conversely, within the transition to the political form, it is possible to regulate form-fixity and life-flow by giving to everything a shape without relationship to bare life, devoid of illusion; this has rather to do with the act of hiding the proper relationship, with the aim of conforming reasoning to the actual phenomenology of the regime. In fact, the masking of bare life occurs through displacements, tensions, opposing intensities, hybridisations, instabilities, brought to light by Pirandello himself. At the same time, by way of his artistic work, he breaks the veil and discovers the illusion, the same illusion that is suppressed in his argument for fascism. This suppression of illusion is key to Pirandello's reasoning since, given that life may consist only in assuming a form, given that the same form is committed to a particular illusion; to follow this logic to its conclusion, one would be compelled to admit that fascism itself, as a form, must inevitably disclose its being as an illusion. Had Pirandello followed his own logic in this way, he would have been able to see, like a prophet, not a vision of the future but of a present that nobody else could see.

In the text, Pirandello assumes that life is continually 'created anew' in the given form, and 'ready to the act' of consisting: 'I believe [...] to be able, as few others are able, to understand the beauty of this continuous creation of reality by Mussolini'.³⁴ The aesthetic opinion is grounded on the specificity of the creative act, which is at the opposite pole of the reproduction of material reality 'as a phonograph or a cinematograph would make'. The work is a creative act and not a simple reproduction, hence the aesthetic world is constructed only by dividing form from life, even if the form specifically contains the evocation of life. Therefore, placed before any realised form, one could forget the desire, keep the concept and forget the phenomenon, maintain the form and forget the offered image. When this happens, the life expressed by a form is deprived of its dynamicity, devitalised, petrified. In the case of Pirandello, who understood this situation as the true law aging in the world, and fantasy as the driving force of creative activity, the literary form is the means for disclosing the continuous illusory constructions that the humoristic reflection decomposes, one after the other, bringing to know the 'serious and painful side' of life (Pirandello 1960a, p. 146). One might think that if the literary form is a creative act, the political form would appear in the same way; however, the literary form is the realisation of the

33 'This reflection insinuates itself everywhere and decomposes everything: every image of the sentiment, every ideal appearance, every semblance of reality, every illusion' (Pirandello 1960a, p. 146).

34 Luigi Pirandello, interview to the reporter of *L'Idea Nazionale*, 23 October 1923.



imagination, and is freely chosen by the author, whereas the political form imposes itself as the form within which life must flow. Consequently, life is not created by politics, but rather suspended, so that it represents a total reversal of the initial assumption made in the case of the literary form.

In this transmutation of the literary form into the political one, the parameters of will and imposition substitute those of will and representation, bringing about a further twist in the argument. As it appears from works like *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, the key to reading Pirandello's narration can be found in a search to be freed from the forms into which life has been forced, by the yearning of freedom vis-à-vis each form imposed on the subject by society. Conversely, in the present text, the form prescribed by fascism creates a life adapted to sustain a particular action, which then moves immediately from the speculative field of its consistency to the social field where it is imposed on the whole population. To speak about imposing a form on the people means to move it into the range of structural violence, namely into the illiberal nature proper to all impositions. Consequently, this transformed conception of form implies a more sinister character. Furthermore, the imposition of the form appears to be in conflict with Pirandello's idea of life as uninterrupted flow: to impose a prescribed form on the dynamics of life means suppressing the plurality of vital forms and denying the manifold that characterises life that has been preserved by the creative imagination. The result is the denial and death of the free movement of life. In fact, in that same year (1923), life was about to be enclosed within the order of a political regime devoted to maintain the fixity of social hierarchies, and to obtain these results expressly through the use of violence. But the semantics of this part of Pirandello's argument is grounded on his use of the generic word '*atto*' ('act'), whose meaning is so abstract and vague that it tends to cleanse away any contextual references to repression and the *squadrisimo*, namely to the forms in which fascist power was expressed.

In fact, in the last sentence of his commemorative text, Pirandello does formulate the correspondence between fascism and his conception of life in terms of '*la propria e necessaria attuazione*' ('the proper and necessary fulfilment'). Fascism is not only appropriate, in these terms, but a historic necessity. This late concept was widespread among his peers — Giuseppe Prezzolini and Giovanni Gentile, for example —, and it was repeated by Pirandello himself in a letter to Marta Abba on 14 February 1932 (cited above), in which he writes that '*such a man [as Mussolini] is necessary*'.

In most cases, the word '*necessary*' is used to express a wish for something to happen, the utility or opportunity it represents, or for a behaviour to take place with the purpose of solving a problem or set of problems. Conversely, when the term is used after an event has happened, the purpose is to justify that event, to strengthen it, to fix it eternally on the basis of presumed natural or historical laws, insofar as it is presented as logically true or linked to a moral obligation. The logic of *a posteriori* necessity is thus strictly deterministic and finalistic. The word '*necessity*' is also linked to the concept of '*decadence*', meaning that something new may begin only if the old (decadent) nation is first completely destroyed, as was first proclaimed by the Futurists and the Florentine magazines and reviews. The word '*decadence*' thus conveys a qualitative concept, moral or even religious in character, providing the condition and necessity for the myth of rebirth, of resurrection — a myth that is all too easy to



manipulate for ideological purposes. The historic necessity asserted by fascism implies the impossibility of any other choice, so that fascism is framed as the realisation of the necessary development of human history. This line of argument does not take into account the historic character of the event, its origins, or processes, thus causing it to disappear from the argument, along with fascism's opponents. Thus, a phrase like 'fascism is necessary' has no basis in science but derives its persuasive force instead from the socio-pragmatic range of political action, declaring as necessity the fact as it unfolds, and forcing those to whom it is addressed to adapt their thoughts and actions accordingly. In these terms, to define an event as a necessity is merely a strategy for securing the event itself, a rhetorical tool designed to preserve the current state of affairs in perpetuity.

'SONO TRENT'ANNI CHE FACCIO IL FASCISTA'

In an interview edited by Giuseppe Villaroel³⁵ Pirandello says, 'I am antidemocratic par excellence'; on 12 June 1926 he declares, 'I am a fascist — and for a long time. It is thirty years that I am a fascist'.³⁶ Whatever caution we should take interpreting an author's claims about himself, such claims do warrant a closer look at his literary work, to see if the sentiments they express are manifest there. More specifically, the question we wish to ask is if and where Pirandello's proto-fascism hides itself.

As we have seen, Pirandello was publically apolitical for most of his life, except for his occasional expressions of admiration for the domestic patriotism of Garibaldi. His adhesion to fascism seems to have sprung from his critiques of Italian monarchy, and profound doubts about democracy, which had been destabilised by many scandals and shifting alliances. The reasons put forward by Pirandello's literary critics are: his disgust with contemporary socialism, as it arises in his novel *I vecchi e i giovani*, for example, where socialists are depicted as corrupt politicians; his aversion to democracy, as it is framed in *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (a form of 'tyranny masked as freedom'); and his understanding of fascism as a force of life that rises up against the forms of Italian society from the 1920s. Of course, it is anachronistic to speak of fascism before the First World War, since the term only appears in 1919; yet it is also clear that the war coincided with a profound schism in Italy, giving rise to anti-democratic sentiments, anti-parliamentarianism, imperialism, nationalism, anti-socialism, racism, anti-Semitism — all of these will be taken up by fascism and the fascist regime.³⁷ As we have argued above, Pirandello was compelled to join the fascist party because he believed that it had given political expression to his feelings, his sense of life, and not only his political convictions. Anxieties about the changing world, fear of social tensions and conflicts, the need for an anchor in the face of imminent chaos, all of these

³⁵ *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 8 May 1924.

³⁶ *Il pensiero*, newspaper in Bergamo, see Giudice 1963, p. 441.

³⁷ In this regard it is meaningful that the expression 'right-wing revolution' was coined by Hugo von Hoffmannsthal in 1927 during the conference in Munich entitled 'Literature as a spiritual space of the nation' (see von Hoffmannsthal 1983, later re-published as *La rivoluzione conservatrice*).



constitute the background on which political fascism, once it appears, may be perceived and recognised as the most suitable solution. In the case of Pirandello, a profound interweaving of political and personal motives may explain why he remained fascist until his death; it also justifies a re-examination of his work in search of the specific ways in which these motives are interwoven. At stake here are the feelings and values that compelled Pirandello to join the Fascist Party, not his perceived opportunism or imprudence.

The re-reading of *Il fu Mattia Pascal* which we propose (and from which this paper is derived³⁸) first came about with the idea of analysing the text to reconstruct the worldview it transmits. Our investigation was not based on any assumptions regarding the conceptual or teleological positions of the novel, nor did we aim to read the novel, composed in 1904, from the perspective of the author's later declarations in support of fascism (1924). Above all, we did not assume that fascism was inevitable — neither in the case of Pirandello nor in that of Italian society —, in preference for the view that fascism is not innate, but develops within a specific historical context based on the choices and mutual influences of individuals and institutions. In any case, the rise of the regime was the political fulfilment of a deep feeling that belonged not only to Pirandello but to a large number of his contemporaries. Furthermore, Pirandello himself thought that 'in his work, the artist reflects, or might not reflect, the life of his time, because he is himself a product of the culture and of the moral life of his same time' (Pirandello 1960, p. 1038). Hence, even if Pirandello's adhesion to the Fascist Party did not transform him into an activist, or his works into an apology for fascist ideas, anyway we may ask to what point his literary production may be permeated with ideological elements.

The story of *Mattia Pascal* as a whole may be viewed as the representation of the concept of the 'futility thesis', whereby — following Albert O. Hirschman — any action that attempts at social transformation will produce no result whatsoever (Hirschman 1991). It is an argumentative strategy used to deprive of its power any progressive attempt at change. The final line of the novel — 'so solo che sono il fu Mattia Pascal' ('I know only that I am the late Mattia Pascal') — marks the return to the starting point, a declaration of impotence before the necessity of transformation. It is a feeling that may describe anybody who has been separated from his or her social and historical context; and it is known that breaking the link between human and society is a prerequisite to any reactionary or conservative politics, since a subject who lives in this atomised state can no longer identify with values transcending immediate necessity.

Mattia Pascal is initially happy to escape the familiar prison of his life. Later, when he wishes to return to his old life, he must get by without his identity card, living a shadowy life between the library and his uncle's house. It is a sort of non-life for a passive subject, waiting for someone else capable of reviving him. The daily life of the main character — first as *Mattia Pascal*, later as *Adriano Meis*, and finally as *Mattia Pascal* once more — provides material for a broader interpretation linked to ideas and themes connected to the cultural and historical context in which it was written. The concept of individualism, typical of various schools of thought of the period,

38 See Brandi, Luciana — Ceccoli, Ubaldo — Barbarulli, Clotilde: *L'attesa dell'uomo in grigio: Pirandello e Il fu Mattia Pascal*, in prep.



arises from the act of declaring one's freedom — a kind of auto-determination realised by Mattia Pascal when he reinvents himself as Adriano Meis, the new man. This idea is linked to the domain of instrumental reason, and implies conceiving of others as a function of the self, and the whole community from the same perspective. The outcome is a relativism that involves an apparent respect for other people's values but is concentrated on personal realisation, with the effect that it takes the subject out of any concrete lived or historical reality, reducing everything to what is useful to the self:

*I was alone now, and no one on the earth could be more alone than I, with every tie dissolved, every obligation removed, free, new, completely my own master, without the burden of my past, and with the future before me, which I could shape as I pleased (2, 45).*³⁹

The self of Mattia Pascal appears closed in its shell, and his behaviour is linked to a conventional code that protects him from others and prevents any dialogical relationship:

*For that matter, I was living with myself and by myself almost exclusively. I occasionally exchanged a few words with hotel clerks, with waiters or fellow guests, but never out of any desire to stir up a conversation (2, 51).*⁴⁰

This idea of freedom, totally concentrated on the self, has unavoidable repercussions on his political tendencies, since one's act of self-realisation may come into conflict with those of others, perceived as simply mean-spirited or troublesome. In social terms, this feeling is diametrically opposed to any sense of connection to a community. The egocentric modalities of self-realisation culminate in a sense of unlimited power and freedom: 'l'anima mi tumultuava nella gioja di quella nuova libertà' ('my soul was running riot, in the joy of this new freedom') (2, 47), a radical freedom without constraints. But it is not long before this liberty will ring false, since it nourishes and is nourished by a pessimistic view of the world. Mattia Pascal becomes aware of the 'fraud' of his own 'illusion'.

The daily life of Mattia Pascal turns out to be intertwined with elements from the cultural and historical context of the main character and his story, namely the attack on democracy in response to the drunk man and the attack to science synthesised by the invective 'A curse on Copernicus!' These attacks recall the cultural and politi-

³⁹ 'Ero solo ormai, e più solo di com'ero non avrei potuto essere su la terra, sciolto nel presente d'ogni legame e d'ogni obbligo, libero, nuovo e assolutamente padrone di me, senza più il fardello del mio passato e con l'avvenire dinanzi, che avrei potuto foggarmi a piacer mio.' The numbers at the end of each cited text from *Il fu Mattia Pascal* refer to the page and line of the first edition of the novel (published periodically in *La Nuova Antologia* from 16 April to 16 June 1904) as it is memorialised within the Banca Dati 800-900 at the C.N.R. Institute O.V.I. (Opera Vocabolario Italiano) in Florence.

⁴⁰ 'Vivevo, per altro, con me e di me, quasi esclusivamente. Scambiavo appena qualche parola con gli albergatori, coi camerieri, coi vicini di tavola, ma non mai per voglia d'attaccar discorso.'



cal tendencies of the period in which Pirandello was writing this book, and point to a more general conception of life. Copernicus caused everything to be useless from the time in which the Earth was no more the centre of the universe and human beings were reduced to ‘infinitesimal atoms’ (1, 589) thus transforming human history into the ‘stories of worms’:

Are we or are we not on a kind of invisible top, spun by a ray of sunshine, on a little maddened grain of sand, which spins and spins and spins, without knowing why, never reaching an end, as if it enjoyed spinning like this, making us feel first a bit of heat, then a bit of cold, making us die — often in the awareness that we have committed only a series of foolish acts — after fifty or sixty spins? Copernicus, my dear don Eligio, Copernicus has ruined humanity forever. We have all gradually become used to the new idea of our infinite smallness, and we even consider ourselves less that nothing in the universe [...] Stories of worms, at this point, our stories (1, 588).⁴¹

These themes were anticipated in Pirandello’s short story ‘Pallottoline’ (1902), in which Jacopo Maraventano, professor at the meteorological observatory, is indifferent to the daily problems of his wife and daughter but completely fascinated by space, considering the Earth as a microscopic point in cosmic space, a very small ball indeed, where his daughter and every human being is no more than ‘an invisible little worm’. The attack on Copernicus is, in our opinion, an attack on modernity. The so-called scientific revolution progressively frees humanity from tradition, from a medieval conception of the world, and, after some time, leads to the two revolutions of the 19th century: the first in which Darwin declares that man is not different from the animals; the second in which Freud introduces his concept of the self. Pirandello’s attack on modernity takes shape through a particular conception of science in which there is no real progress, only ‘the illusion of making existence easier and more comfortable’ (2, 59). It is with words like these that Adriano Meis speaks in an electric bus to a ‘poor man’, happy to ride around Milan for the price of ‘two coins’:

Why this clatter of machines? And what will man do when machines do everything for him? Will he then realise that what is called progress has nothing to do with happiness? Even if we admire all the inventions that science sincerely believes will enrich our lives (instead they make us poorer, because their price is so high), what joy do they bring us, after all? (2, 58–59)⁴²

41 ‘Siamo o non siamo su un’invisibile trottolina, cui fa da ferza un fil di sole, su un granellino di sabbia impazzito che gira e gira e gira, senza saper perché, senza pervenir mai a destino, come se ci provasse gusto a girar così, per farci sentire ora un po’ più di caldo, ora un po’ più di freddo, e per farci morire — spesso con la coscienza d’aver commesso una sequela di piccole sciocchezze — dopo cinquanta o sessanta giri? Copernico, Copernico, don Eligio mio, ha rovinato l’umanità, irrimediabilmente. Ormai noi tutti ci siamo a poco a poco adattati alla nuova concezione dell’infinita nostra piccolezza, a considerarci anzi men che niente nell’Universo [...] Storie di vermucci, ormai, le nostre.’

42 ‘Perchè tutto questo stordimento di macchine? E che farà l’uomo quando le macchine faranno tutto? Si accorgerà allora che il così detto progresso non ha nulla a che fare con la



In this way, the value of the discovery of electricity by Benjamin Franklin is vastly trivialised, totally ignoring the complex work of research that is behind the advancement of scientific knowledge.

This manner of presenting science belongs to Pirandello's general view of human existence, in which questions are raised to which scientific knowledge is not able to provide any answers, an argument which he had previously raised in *Saggi*, and subsequently returned to in various writings. When science — which gives rise to the modern as the process of humanity's liberation from domination — is trivialised and made empty, democracy may soon follow, insofar as it represents, on a political level, the same process of liberation from absolute powers, in favour of a new basis for considering social categories previously excluded and ignored. From the condition of individual unease, due to the difficulty of obtaining total freedom (in the character of Adriano Meis), Pirandello seems to extend his own perception to a more general condition, that the lack of liberty is produced by democracy itself.⁴³

The real cause of all our sufferings, of this sadness of ours, do you know what it is? Democracy, my dear man, democracy, that is, the governance of the majority. Because when power is in the hands of a single man, this man knows he is one and must make many happy; but when the many govern, they think only of making themselves happy, and the result is the most absurd and hateful of tyrannies: a tyranny masked as freedom (3, 254).⁴⁴

In this sudden outburst by Meis, the definition he presents of democracy as 'tyranny masked as liberty' is announced by the negative emotional tone created by the term 'sadness' (*tristezza*), that percolates over the rest of the novel. The intended definition is grounded on the semantic effects rising from a play of opposites: the commonsense meaning, attributed to the word 'tyranny' (*tirannia*), causes the word to lose its nature as antonym of democracy; the alternation of 'one' (*uno*) and 'many' (*molti*) undermines the distinction between democracy and tyranny; the link to freedom embodied in the word 'democracy' is broken, and the technical politically accepted meaning of people's power is obscured as well, insofar as democracy becomes the opposite of freedom. It acquires a meaning mediated by the commonsense meaning of tyranny, further contaminated by features of sadness that throw a certain greyness onto all judgements, onto the failure of the ideal of democracy, and onto the necessity to escape a stagnation that would exclude every impulse of the nation. The used language

felicità? Di tutte le invenzioni, con cui la scienza crede onestamente d'arricchire l'umanità (e la impoverisce, perchè costano tanto care), che gioja in fondo proviamo noi, anche ammirandole?'

⁴³ Lucignani 1999, p. 168, finds in the piece of the drunk man the 'distant origins' of Pirandello's fascism.

⁴⁴ 'la causa vera di tutti i nostri mali, di questa tristezza nostra, sai qual è? La democrazia, mio caro, la democrazia, cioè il governo della maggioranza. Perchè, quando il potere è in mano d'uno solo, quest'uno sa d'esser uno e di dover contentare molti; ma quando i molti governano, pensano soltanto a contentar se stessi, e si ha allora la tirannia più balorda e più odiosa: la tirannia mascherata da libertà.'



tends to guide the mental attitude towards the word ‘democracy’: on one side its theoretical and historic dynamic is ignored, on the other side it is renamed as the governance of the majority, inducing the reader to adopt a judgment of value, and to adhere to a precise view of the world that takes no heed of history. It is in this loss of memory that Pirandello’s tyranny — a tyranny masked as freedom — can be understood. The information conveyed by the word democracy looks like an objective political definition, but at the same time it has the illocutionary force of a warning that forces the reader to give an appraisal and make a choice.

The attack on modernity and democracy in *Il fu Mattia Pascal* speaks clearly to a rejection of its contemporary world. The protagonist must abandon his search for radical freedom and fulfilment as a ‘totally new man’ in face of the impossibility of avoiding the social rules of life. Pirandello does not consider the human condition as a product of historical conflicts and contradictions but links them to the opposition between life and form, following the idea, proper of certain cultural philosophical contexts of the period, that forms alone exist — not objective reality. These forms are necessary for the emergence of the event of life. At the same time, however, they are perceived as constraints that one strives in vain to overcome. In this sense, identity itself, conceived as an internal artifice, turns out to be a loss of identity: Mattia Pascal, returning to Miragno, does not know who he is, as he awaits his ‘third, last and final death’ (1, 587). The subject, reduced to the sense that he is no one, is compelled to search for stable external reference points — or for another person — that he can rely on. Mattia Pascal is the portrayal of so many men in grey, frightened in the face of social conflicts, enduring a never-ending wait for personal realisation, compelling them to search for an anchor against the chaos, and for a solution to come from the outside. When fascism comes, it is recognised as the answer to the long wait of all the men in grey.

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