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## The Order of Writing and Death in Pirandello's *Il fu Mattia Pascal*

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This essay examines the philosophical dimension of Pirandello's idea of writing and the different literary genres included in *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (1904). The analysis begins with Pirandello's representation of journalism in the moment in which Mattia discovers his "death"; it continues with the bureaucratic writing responsible for Mattia's social identity, and finally it focuses on the tomb inscription that concludes the novel. What role does Pirandello attribute to writing in the search for human identity? How does writing relate to death as a fundamental theme of *Il fu Mattia Pascal*? What are the implications of Pirandello's order of writing for the autobiographical dimension of the novel? These are the main questions I address in my essay while assessing the present meaning of Pirandello's masterpiece.

From the start Mattia discredits writing by stating that he had no interest in it. He resorts to writing his autobiography because his story is very original and strange; he hopes that a curious reader would find some instruction in reading his life. Pirandello-Mattia Pascal's "autobiographical pact" with the reader reveals his intention to address not only the extraordinary cases of his life but also the practice through which his multiple identities are produced. Writing and reading go hand in hand and it is not by chance that the first space in which we meet Mattia is a library. Mattia works in the Boccamazza library, which he describes in negative and grotesque terms: the books are abandoned to the rats, covered with dust; confusion and a sense of desolation prevails everywhere. The library's condition confirms Pirandello's emphasis on the neglect of writing and reading at the beginning of the novel.

When Mattia for the first time caught himself leafing through a book taken at random from one of the library's shelves he "shuddered in horror" (provai un brivido d'orrore) (56). When he at last starts reading books of philosophy he does not trust them: "Pesano tanto: eppure, chi se ne ciba e li mette in corpo, vive tra le nuvole. Mi sconcertarono peggio il cervello, già di per

sé balzano" (50). ("They are weighty tones and yet the man who feeds on them and absorbs them, lives in the clouds. They added my brain even further, and it was already unstable.") Finally, the sight of the sea made him fall in a kind of trance. The sea itself tells him to abandon the books behind: "Lascia i libri di filosofia" ("Leave philosophy alone" 57).

Mattia becomes desperate and leaves his hometown, Miragno, after the delusions of an unhappy marriage and the tragedy of having to witness the deaths of two daughters and of his mother. The key episode in the narrative takes place when Mattia reads of "his own" suicide in a newspaper. The article that announces Mattia's death is the result of a mistake: a suicide in his hometown was erroneously identified as the very same Mattia. Lodoletta, the author of this article, summarizes the social construction of Mattia's death through the most conventional and banal rhetoric. Being a failed poet himself, Lodoletta uses quotations from Dante's *Inferno* in an escalation of false statements about Mattia's life and death. The written language gives reality to Mattia's identity through the civic register of birth and death, and the social construct made possible by the obituary and the newspaper.

The philosophical implication of this crucial episode points to the empty substance of one's own social identity and opens the road to the search for new utopian, literary identities made possible by naming and writing:

Stava a me: potevo e dovevo essere l'artefice del mio destino, nella misura che la Fortuna aveva voluto concedermi [. . .] Or che cos'ero io, se non un uomo inventato. Una invenzione ambulante che voleva e, del resto, doveva forzatamente stare per sé, pur calata nella realtà. (83, 93).

"It was up to me: I had to be the architect of my new destiny, just as Fortune had decreed for me [. . .] I was nothing other than an imaginary man now. I was a walking invention who was happy to be alone, even though framed in the context of reality. (89, 97).

Mattia chooses his new name, Adriano Meis, uniting fragments of conversation in which he hears the names of Roman emperor Adriano and of the Italian intellectual Camillo Meis (1817-1891). Pure chance is at the base of this choice because

Pirandello questions the alphabetical order that is related to writing:

Per sottrarmi alle riflessioni fastidiose e inutili, mi mettevo talvolta a riempire interi fogli di carta della mia nuova firma, provandomi a scrivere con altra grafia, tenendo la penna diversamente di come la tenevo prima. A un certo punto però stracciavo la carta e buttavo via la penna. Io potevo benissimo essere anche analfabeta. (95-96)

To distract myself from disturbing and useless thoughts, I sometimes sat down and filled entire sheets of paper with my new signature, trying out different styles of handwriting, holding the pen differently from how I used to hold it before. Eventually I tore up the paper and threw away the pen. I might as well have been illiterate. (99-100)

Mattia can only say his new name (Adriano Meis); he is unable to write it and unwilling to have it printed in a visiting-card: "Non avevo ancora biglietti da visita: provavo un certo ritegno a farmeli stampare col mio nuovo nome. Miserie! Non si può forse fare a meno de biglietti da visita? Si dà a voce il proprio nome, e via" (101). ("I did not yet have any cards; I felt somewhat reluctant to have them printed in my new name. In any case, surely one can do without visiting-cards; it ought to be enough just to say one's name and have done with it" 106). Mattia insists on the difference between what is said in a written name and the pure discourse of the human soul:

Le anime hanno un loro particolare modo d'intendersi, d'entrare in intimità, fino a darsi del tu, mentre le nostre persone sono tuttavia impacciate nel commercio delle parole comuni, nella schiavitù delle esigenze sociali. Han bisogni lor propri e loro proprie aspirazioni, di cui il corpo non si dà per inteso, quando veda l'impossibilità di soddisfarli e di tradurle in atto. (133-134)

Our souls can communicate in their own particular way, enter into a kind of familiarity, indeed intimacy, whilst our outward persons remain entangled in the business of everyday exchanges, enslaved by social requirements. Our souls have their own needs and their own aspirations, but these are not necessarily taken into account by the body when it recognizes it is impossible to satisfy them and express them in action. (137-138)

In his search for identity Mattia-Pirandello traces the history of technologizing the word from the world of orality to writing (the signature) and print (the visiting-card). He becomes aware of the weaknesses of writing as technology and in a Platonic language holds that writing and human communication cannot overcome the alterity of human soul. I use the term "alterity," so popular in contemporary philosophy, because it helps to understand Pirandello's original and radical view of language and writing. In a different and not religious context he addresses problems very similar to those articulated by Emmanuel Levinas in his distinction between the "saying" and the "said."

To a certain extent Mattia-Pirandello's attitude can constitute a literary preamble to Levinas' notions as long as they question the ontology of human consciousness and open the road to the search for pure process of signification not based on the said but in what he calls "saying": "Saying is this passivity of passivity and this dedication to the other, this sincerity. Not the communication of a said, which would immediately cover over and extinguish or absorb the said, but saying holding open its openness, without excuses, evasions or alibis, delivering itself without saying anything said." (Levinas 143). For Levinas, an ethical approach to human identity entails a notion of alterity based on this fundamental tension between the saying and the said that prevents any uncritical thematization and representation of the self and the other. At the beginning of twentieth century, Pirandello in his own terms was already addressing the ethical questions that became fundamental in contemporary philosophy much later, particularly after World War II.

Mattia rejects alphabetic writing and rhetoric, Greek philosophy and Roman rhetoric as responsible for producing individual consciousness. Mattia is willing to erase his consciousness as a self-enclosed, self-sufficient and rhetorical construction:

La retorica, sicuro, ha foggato questa bella frase con tanto di petto in fuori: "Ho la mia coscienza e mi basta." Già! Cicerone aveva già detto: Mea mihi conscientia pluris est quam hominum sermo. Cicerone però, diciamo la verità, eloquenza, eloquenza, ma. . . Dio ne scampi e liberi, caro signore! Nojoso più di un principiante di violino! (102)

Naturally, rhetoric had produced this fine statement, to be declared with head held high: "I have my own conscience

and it is enough for me." Cicero also said: "Mea mihi conscientia pluris est quam hominum sermo." Mind you, let's be honest about Cicero, he is certainly eloquent, but. . . God save and preserve us, he is a prize bore, worse than a learner violinist!" (107)

Mattia would like to appreciate humanity as part of the life of the universe, not as self-consciousness separated from it. His attitude is very close to the one fully developed by Vitangelo Moscarda in the conclusion of *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand*, where he wishes to become a "cloud," a "tree," and so on: in other words, to become one with the universe, totally projected and realized in exteriority. Pirandello's philosophy holds here a phenomenological approach to the problem of consciousness that anticipates some aspects of Jean-Paul Sartre's approach. For Sartre there is no transcendental ego in consciousness. Consciousness is empty; the ego is in the world as an object among other objects. Sartre developed a radical critique of the representational theories of knowledge because they violate the human sense of life. He insisted that when we see a tree or a mountain we are really seeing a tree or a mountain, not our ideas of them. From this perspective, consciousness becomes involved with our concrete relationship to the world, the other human beings, and to ourselves (Sartre 1999).

Anselmo Paleari is the character in the novel trying to convince Mattia that the limits of human consciousness are imaginary: "Il limite è illusorio, è relativo al poco lume nostro, della nostra individualità: nella realtà della natura non esiste." ("The boundary is an illusion and relative to the sparseness of our light, of our individuality: in nature's reality it does not exist." 162). Pirandello will develop this idea in his fundamental theoretical essay *On Humour* (1908),<sup>1</sup> notably dedicated to the memory of "Mattia Pascal librarian." Pirandello questions the metaphysics of consciousness that in the novel Paleari ironically calls "Lanternisofia" ("Lanternosophy"), alluding to the metaphysics of light as knowledge. Paleari puts into question the "lanterni," big lamps, big ideas, and abstract philosophical terms such as Truth, Virtue, Beauty, and Honor. He denies that humanity should go back to the "surviving lanterns which great men now dead have left burning on their tombs" (160) ("alle lucernette superstiti, a quelle che i grandi morti lasciarono su le loro

tombe") (157-58). He quotes here "My lamp" ("La mia lampada"), a poem by Niccolò Tommaseo that alludes to the power of poetry to ignite virtue in human beings. Paleari's critical and philosophical stance suggests that the lamp of modern men does not contain the holy oil that fed the Poet's lamp: they have to find inspiration in themselves and to *hear* the clamor of the world around them (161, my emphasis).

Paleari's attitude coincides with Pirandello's critique of writing and includes a dismissal of religion and of the ideology of science and progress. Following a stance widespread in Giacomo Leopardi's poetic and philosophical works,<sup>2</sup> Pirandello-Mattia holds that science impoverishes humanity and that progress has no connection with happiness (111). Science creates the illusion of an easier and more comfortable existence but it cannot change the horizon of human suffering:

Anche ammettendo che la renda veramente più facile, con tutte le sue macchine così difficili e complicate, domando io: E qual peggior servizio a chi sia condannato a una brigata vana che rendergliela facile e quasi meccanica?" (107)

Even if we concede that life is easier with all these awkward, complex machines, what I want to know is, what worse turn can you do for someone condemned to a pointless daily drudge, than make it easy and almost automatic for him? (112)

The problem with science is that it wants only to deal with life, knowledge, and identity, forgetting the role of death, metamorphosis, and change (123). Science is unable to recognize the limits of human life and follows the dream of the infinite or of an infinite written knowledge. In his second (philosophical) foreword Mattia-Pirandello clarifies that he refuses precisely this scientific attitude to literature and knowledge started with Copernicus:

Non mi par più tempo, questo, di scriver libri, neppure per ischerzo. In considerazione anche della letteratura, come per tutto il resto, io debbo ripetere il mio solito ritornello: Maledetto sia Copernico!

I don't think these are times for writing books, not even as a joke. As regards literature, like everything else, as usual I

blame Copernicus. (17)

Pirandello-Mattia chooses a performative attitude toward naming and subjectivity; he rejects the fixed identity produced by writing and conceives human subjectivity as never completed and always related to one's own past identity, and representative of other individualities. Notwithstanding Mattia's monologue, Pirandello's philosophical reflections lead to a dialogic and ethical approach to the problem of human subjectivity that maintains a profound originality even in our new century and in the millennium.<sup>3</sup>

Adriano Meis cannot but be representative of Mattia Pascal and live his individual and "social" life as the result of the memory of Mattia's past, of Mattia's old relationships. Little by little Mattia-Adriano realizes the limits of the freedom that he originally thought to be infinite: "-Liberio!- dicevo ancora; ma già cominciavo a penetrare il senso e a misurare i confini di questa mia libertà" (122). "Free!" I still felt able to say; but I was already beginning to recognize the true meaning of this freedom and measure its boundaries (126). Mattia-Adriano's freedom from a fixed identity is limited by social conventions; he cannot interact in civil society, have a normal life: "era bella, sì, senza dubbio quella mia libertà così sconfinata, ma anche un tantino tiranna, ecco, se non mi consentiva neppure di comperarmi un cagnolino." (97) ("although I enjoyed my limitless freedom, of course, nevertheless it was just a little dictatorial, one might say, if it did not even permit me to buy myself a dog" 102). Mattia-Adriano points out the presence of similar limits to freedom in democracy that he considers as "tyranny disguised as freedom" (128).<sup>4</sup>

What began as a literary utopia—the novel of the multiple imaginary identities as opposed to the social and technological construction of reality, turns out to be a rational and lucid critique of absolute freedom and anarchy. Conversely, Mattia-Adriano realizes that he cannot get rid of writing and that, on the contrary, writing as fundamental technology of human discourse shapes and conditions our mindset and our thinking. To escape from society and civil life Mattia had to neglect and question writing; to re-enter human social life Mattia-Pirandello must now resort to writing. He can now write his name, but the only moment in which he actually writes his bare name is Adriano Meis' suicide note: "Adriano Meis. Che altro? Nulla. L'indirizzo

e la data" (212). ("Adrian Meis, my address and the date, nothing else" 213).

Mattia-Adriano accepts writing to rejoin human society. This means first of all to take on the possibility of a fixed identity, to renounce the utopian search for new identities, ultimately to "die." The Mattia who at the end of the novel returns to his hometown is no longer the same man who abandoned it. The use of writing that he implements in his memories can only be a "funerary" kind of writing, deeply implicated with death, openly admitting its incapacity to fully represent his life and death. The disruptive awareness of death that pervades Mattia's consciousness at the end of the novel makes clear the hopelessness of trying to write the complete life of a human being in a book. Contemporary theory of autobiography particularly stresses this double impossibility and the alterity of death. I am thinking of Jacques Derrida's *Mémoires for Paul de Man* and his assertion that "funerary speech and writing do not follow upon death; they work upon life in what we call autobiography" (22). On the other hand, I would argue that funerary speech is precisely what makes autobiography an ethical enterprise, opening the road to an ethical dimension of subjectivity and keeping alive the drive to find meaning in one's own life.

The reader should not consider only the fantastic (and comic) story of Mattia's double death, reiterated in the paradoxical episode in Pisa when the late Mattia Pascal took both the earlier Mattia Pascal and Adrian Meis as "dead men" for a walk (218). Under the cover of this fantastic and comic story the humorist Pirandello discloses an important philosophical reflection on writing and death that becomes apparent in the conclusion of the novel.

Mattia's wife in his absence has remarried and had a child with Pomino, Mattia's former friend. He leaves them to their new life and lives now with Aunt Scolastica, who offers him a home with her. He spends most of his time in the Library with don Eligio and it takes him about six months to write his strange funerary autobiography. Don Eligio helps him in writing and promises to keep secret everything they wrote, "as if he had been told under the seal of the confessional" ("come se l'avesse saputo sotto il sigillo della confessione"). Don Eligio, who is still far from organizing the library and the dusty old books, suggests a possible meaning in Mattia's extraordinary experience: "che

fuori della legge e fuori di quelle particolarità, lieti o tristi che sieno, per cui noi siamo noi, caro signor Pascal, non è possibile vivere." (239) ("that it is not possible to live outside the law and outside that framework of details, fortunate or unfortunate as they may be, that make us what we are, my dear Signor Pascal" 240-1).

This cannot be Mattia's conclusion, since there cannot be an idyllic ending in a literary genre such as the novel (Bakhtin, 1986). Mattia cannot say what kind of wisdom he can possibly have gained from his experiences and he cannot really say who he is. He, as many other novelistic heroes in modern literature, remains in an uncertain and undecided position even at the end of his vicissitudes. Suffice to mention here Renzo Tramaglino and the ironic, anti-idyllic end of Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed* that Pirandello considers as a favorite example of humoristic literature. Although he may now accept the order of writing, Mattia still does not feel represented by it; there is no *pars construens* in his view except for realizing the limits of identity construction through writing and social institutions. The final image of the novel is Mattia's tombstone inscription:

COLPITO DA AVVERSI FATI

MATTIA PASCAL

BIBLIOTECARIO

CUOR GENEROSO ANIMA APERTA

QUI VOLONTARIO RIPOSA

LA PIETA' DEI CONCITTADINI

QUESTA LAPIDE POSE

VICTIM OF ADVERSE CIRCUMSTANCES

MATTIA PASCAL

LIBRARIAN

WARM HEART, GENEROUS SPIRIT

HERE HE RESTS BY HIS OWN CHOICE.

THE LOVE OF HIS FELLOW CITIZENS

PROVIDES THIS STONE.

Ironically, the tomb hosts the body of another, unknown human being. The final image of the novel is a gesture of compassion: Mattia taking the wreath to the grave of this unknown suicide that mistakenly still keeps Mattia's name. What is the meaning of this final scene? Is Pirandello simply concerned with the problem of multiple personalities and alluding to the para-

doxes of Mattia's story and of human life in general? What are the autobiographical implications of this novel?

In 1903, the year before publishing *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, Pirandello faces a financial disaster and finds his wife ill, both mentally and physically. In those circumstances he thinks of committing suicide. In Mattia's story we clearly find some elements of Pirandello's life, but life and art are not the same thing even though they have a reciprocal responsibility. It would be easier to create without referring to one's own life or to live without taking into account an artistic or imaginary possibility. Pirandello could not escape from this double responsibility toward art and life, as he declares in the "Note on the scruples involved in controlling the imagination" that he added to the novel (245-251). For these reasons *Il fu Mattia Pascal* offers his profitable artistic and autobiographical reflections to the attentive reader.

Mattia-Pirandello's experience confirms that the human subject cannot represent its own death and can appreciate death only by considering the death of other human beings. Before escaping from his hometown and looking for a new identity Mattia had to witness the death of two daughters and of his father and mother. These deaths made Mattia aware of his own mortality. After losing the daughters and his parents Mattia cannot preserve some parts of himself and the subjective possibilities inherent in sharing his life with those loved ones. Part of him died and he faced for the first time the possibility of his own death. Not only did Mattia lose his most affectionate family members, he also lost most of his properties due to the sudden death of his father. Writing and money are prominent features of one's own identity in bourgeois society. Pirandello, like Leopardi, considers these features artificial and contrary to human nature.<sup>5</sup> By losing his properties and neglecting writing Mattia enters the ideal condition to look for a "pure" and "natural" identity.

What follows in the narrative is focused on Mattia's two false suicides, but in reality he was already dead before the first and second staged death. The first "death" was the consequence of the death of the members of his family; the second was due to his decision to rejoin social life, after experiencing the impossibility of a neutral and outlaw life. More importantly, before Mattia's false suicides there is a "real" one in the narrative, committed by a young man he met gambling in Monte Carlo. Here Mattia

shows his compassion by covering the horribly disfigured face of the suicide with a handkerchief to protect the corpse from the flies and the indiscrete eyes of people looking for a "spectacle" (75). This compassionate gesture anticipates and prefigures the final scene of the novel.

Adriano Meis' suicide represents the death of a part of Pirandello-Mattia's personality but it cannot give the sense of his life or complete death. For Pirandello, death is a crucial part of human life but the human subject cannot write or represent or witness it. Pirandello-Mattia's autobiographical project is doomed to be "blind" and to remain incomplete. The fact that Mattia can see only from one eye and has the other defective may allude precisely to the "blindness" caused by death. The autobiographer cannot see or write his own death and gain a complete knowledge of his life. That is why Mattia at the end of the novel has to go to the grave of the unknown suicide: by its very presence this tomb testifies to the alterity of death, to the limits and falsity of trying to represent one's own death through writing. Even though he feels as though he has already died twice, with this gesture Mattia recognizes that he has still to meet his own, unique and irreducible death. He finally understands that no one can die for another and that the death of the unknown suicide and those of Mattia Pascal and Adriano Meis cannot substitute for the death of the late Mattia Pascal.

This is the precious outcome of Mattia's story which still speaks to our human condition: the recognition of mortality as a fundamental part of human life, a sense of limit, measure, and compassion in the construction of human identity. Literature and autobiography contrast the illusions created by science, including the notion of the infinite introduced by the idea of creation, Christian culture, and scientific revolution. Pirandello, with Giacomo Leopardi, concludes that the infinite is a creation of human imagination, weakness, and arrogance.<sup>6</sup> Finally, life is a "molto triste buffoneria"<sup>7</sup> (a very sad buffoonery) in which everybody needs to fool themselves, following different kinds of illusions and inventing different identities, only to meet pain, suffering, and death as an irreducible and unavoidable expression of a unique identity. The art of the humorist Pirandello is able to comprehend with lucidity and compassion those illusions along with the limits of human life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Pirandello 1992: 153-154.

<sup>2</sup>See Leopardi's note written in Bologna on June 3, 1826 (Zibaldone 4180).

<sup>3</sup>This Pirandellian approach can also enter into a productive dialogue with Jacques Derrida's *Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation* (1988) where he analyzes the relevance and the limits of the signature and of the politics of the proper name in the formation of individual and collective identities.

<sup>4</sup>It is suggestive to consider the historical link between the beginning of alphabetic writing in Greece and the development of Greek democracy. See Ong 1982. Alphabetic writing pervaded Greek culture, including the use of a written message marking a burial place addressed to an urban public. Fifth-century democratic Athens extended this outside the city and improved the readability of epigraphic texts. From this moment on the critique of writing had political implications.

<sup>5</sup>See Leopardi's note written on June 11, 1821 (Zibaldone 1174).

<sup>6</sup>See Leopardi's note written in Bologna in May 1826 (Zibaldone 4178).

<sup>7</sup>See Pirandello's "Autobiographical Letter" published in *Le Lettere* on October 15, 1924

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