

Nobel Prize in Literature 1934



Luigi Pirandello

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1934 was awarded to Luigi Pirandello "*for his bold and ingenious revival of dramatic and scenic art*".

The work of Luigi Pirandello is extensive. As an author of novellas he certainly is without equal in output, even in the primary country of this literary genre. Boccaccio's *Decameron* contains one hundred novellas; Pirandello's *Novelle per un anno* (1922-37) has one for each day of the year. They offer much variation in subject matter as well as in character: descriptions of life either purely realistic or philosophically profound or paradoxical, as often marked by humour as by satire. There are also creations of a jaunty poetic imagination in which the demands of reality give way to an ideal and creative truth.

The common feature of all these novellas is the effortless improvisation that gives them spontaneity, élan, and life. But since the limited scope of the novella demands a particularly strict composition, we also find the result of improvisation. In his hurried treatment of the subject Pirandello may soon lose control, without any concern for the

overall impression. Although his novellas reveal much originality, they are hardly representative of the accomplished master; this is readily apparent when one notes the many motifs which were later employed in his dramatic work.

Nor do his novels mark the zenith of his literary achievement. Although his early novels were imbued with the same ideas with which he made his profoundly original contribution to the modern theatre, he reserved the definitive shaping of these ideas for the theatre.

In the short survey that is possible here, we can mention only one of these novels in which a distinctive feature of his concept of our times, his disgust and fear of materialism which mechanizes life, appears most strongly. The novel is *Si gira* (1916) [*Shoot!*], titled after a technical term of the cinema, «Shoot one». The expression warns the actors when the shooting of a scene begins. The narrator is the one who «shoots», that is, the cameraman of a large film industry. He finds a special meaning in his work. For him, life with all its good and evil is reduced to the material of images mechanically produced for a thoughtless pastime; it has no other purpose. The photographic apparatus becomes a demon which swallows everything and unrolls it on the film reel, thus giving it an outward appearance of reality, an appearance which is, in essence, spiritual death and emptiness. Our modern existence revolves and runs with the same lifeless speed, completely mechanized as if it were destroyed and annihilated. The author's attitude is expressed with extreme intensity. The mere plot is devastating enough.

That is the background of Pirandello's dramas, limited as they most often are to purely psychological problems. The bitterness of our present era must have had much influence on the plays' pessimistic philosophy even if this philosophy is based on the author's nature.

Maschere Nude (1918-21), the title he gave to his collection of plays, is difficult to translate because of its complexity. Literally this expressions means «naked masks», but «masks» usually indicates a bare surface. In this case, however, the word is applied to the disguise which hides one from others and from one's self and which signifies to Pirandello

the form of the selfa surface with an unfathomable being behind it. «Veiled» masks, analyzed and dissolved with penetrating clarity: this is the portrayal of human beings in his dramas - men are unmasked. That is the meaning of the phrase.

The most remarkable feature of Pirandello's art is his almost magical power to turn psychological analysis into good theatre. Usually the theatre requires human stereotypes; here the spirit is like a shadow, obscurity behind obscurity, and one cannot decide what is more or less central inside. Finally one racks his brains, for there is no centre. Everything is relative, nothing can be grasped completely, and yet the plays can sometimes seize, captivate, and charm even the great international public. This result is wholly paradoxical. As the author himself explained, it depends on the fact that his works «arise out of images taken from life which have passed through a filter of ideas and which hold me completely captive». It is the image which is fundamental, not, as many have believed, the abstract idea disguised afterwards by an image.

It has been said that Pirandello has but a «single», idea, the illusory nature of the personality, of the «I». The charge is easy to prove. The author is indeed obsessed with that idea. However, even if the idea is expanded to include the relativity of everything man believes he sees and understands, this charge is unfair.

Pirandello's dramatic art did not at first break with general literary tendencies. He treated social and ethical problems, the conflict between parenthood and the social structure with its inflexible notions of honour and decency, and the difficulties that human goodness finds in protecting itself against the same adversaries. All this was presented in morally as well as logically complicated situations and ended either in victory or defeat. These problems had their natural counterpart in the analysis of the «I» of the characters who were as relative as the idea against which they were fighting.

In several of his plays it is the idea others have of a personality and the effect they experience from it which becomes the principal subject. Others know us only as we know them, imperfectly; and yet we make definitive judgments. It is under the atmospheric pressure of these judgments that the consciousness of one's self can be changed. In *Tutto*

per bene (1920) [*All For The Best*] this psychological process is carried to its conclusion. In *Vestire gli ignudi* (1923) [*To Clothe the Naked*] the motif is turned upside down and assumes a moving tragic character. A lost life, an «I», no longer finding anything in itself, desires death but, turning entirely to the outside, has a last pathetic wish to have a proper shroud in the beautifying idea which others have of its former being. In this gripping play even lying appears by its anguish as a kind of innocence.

But the author does not stop here; several of his plays deal with the lie in the world of relativity and examine with a penetrating logic how more or less criminal this lie is. In *La vita che ti diedi* (1924) [*The Life I Gave You*] the right to unreality receives beautiful and great expression. A woman, having lost her only son, no longer has anything which holds her to life; yet the very violence of the blow reawakens in her a strength which dispels death, as light dispels darkness. All has become shadows; she feels that not only herself but all existence is «such stuff as dreams are made of». In her heart she guards both the memory and the dream, and now they are able to surpass all other things. The son to whom she gave life, who always filled her soul, fills it still. There no void is possible; the son cannot be removed. He remains in her presence, a form she cannot grasp; she feels him there as much as she is able to feel anything. Thus the relativity of truth has taken the shape of a simple and sublime mystery.

The same relativity appears as an enigma in *Così è (se vi pare)* (1918) [*Right You Are (If You Think You Are)*]. The play is called a parable, which means that its singular story makes no pretensions to reality. It is a bold and ingenious fabrication which imparts wisdom. The circumstances of a family, recently settled in a provincial city, become intolerable to the other inhabitants of the town. Of the three members of the family, the husband, the wife, and the mother-in-law, either the husband or the mother-in-law, each otherwise reasonable, must be viewed as seized with absurd ideas about the identity of the wife. The last speaker always has the final say on the issue, but a comparison of the conflicting statements leaves it in doubt. The questionings and the confrontation of the two characters are described with great dramatic art and with a knowledge of the most subtle

maladies of the soul. The wife should be able to resolve the puzzle, but when she appears she is veiled like the goddess of knowledge and speaks mysteriously; to each of the interested parties she represents what she must be in order for that person to preserve his image of her. In reality she is the symbol of the truth which no one can grasp in its entirety.

The play is also a brilliant satire on man's curiosity and false wisdom; in it Pirandello presents a catalogue of types and reveals a penetrating self-conceit, either partially or completely ridiculous, in those attempting to discover truth. The whole remains a masterpiece in its own right.

The central problem in the author's dramatic work, however, is the analysis of the «I» - its dissolution in contrary elements, the negation of its unity as illusory, and the symbolical description of the *Maschere nude*. Thanks to the inexhaustible productivity of his mind, Pirandello attacks the problem from different sides, some of which have already been mentioned

By sounding the depths of madness, he makes important discoveries. In the tragedy of *Enrico IV* (1922)

Henry IV], for example, the strongest impression comes from the struggle of the personality for its identity in the eternally flowing torrent of time. In *Il giuoco delle parti* (1919) [*The Rules of the Game*] Pirandello creates a drama of pure abstractions: he uses the artificial notions of duty to which members of society can be subjected by the force of tradition with resolute logic for an action completely contrary to expectation. As by a stroke of a magic wand, the game of abstractions fills the scene with an extremely captivating life.

Sei Personaggi in cerca d'autore (1921) [*Six Characters in Search of an Author*] is a game similar to that described earlier and at the same time its very opposite; it is both profoundly serious and full of ideas. Here unrestrained creative imagination rather than abstraction dominates. It is the true drama of poetic creation; it is also the settling of accounts between the theatre and truth, between appearance and reality. Moreover, it is the half-despairing message of art to the soul of a ravaged age, of fragmentary scenes both



fulminating and explosive. This flood of violent feeling and superior intellectuality, rich in poetry, is truly the inspiration of genius. The world-wide success of the play, which proves that it has to some extent been understood, is as extraordinary as the piece itself There is neither the necessity nor the time to recall its magically startling details.

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