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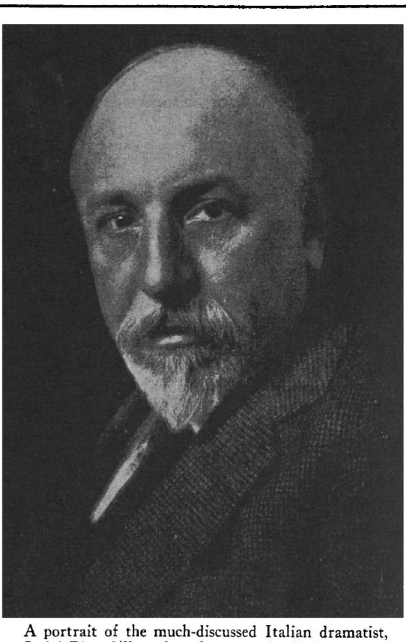

A portrait of the much-discussed Italian dramatist, Luigi Pirandello, whose latest work, *L'Amica delle Mogli,* has provoked the usual acrimonious division of opinion abroad among critics who have seen it.

PIRANDELLO, PARADOX

By
FREDERICKA V. BLANKNER

"FORM and movement, the two necessities, there they stand, facing each other, eternal, opposite, irreconcilable; each nothing without the other; forever struggling to combine; their union impossible, and were it possible, death; this is life as I see it, this is all my art."

Thus, during one of our Florentine conversations Luigi Pirandello, leader of the *teatro del pensiero,* synthesized his vision of reality. The force which regulates the phantasmagoria of persons and events we call "life" is resolved by this most distinguished dramatist of post-war Italy into the two contesting impulses of form and movement. Since, as is natural, Pirandello's dream-creatures are dominated by these same impulses, a knowledge of their meaning is essential to an understanding of his art.

This form-movement concept, in which relativity plays a part, might be a derivative in art of modern philosophy and science, particularly of the *élan vital* and of Einstein. Yet one feels that in Pirandello the idea is spontaneous and personal, not a conscious derivation but an independent parallel discovery.

Pirandello feels that he was born with this vision. It was present in his first short-story thirty-five years ago and it is present in his latest drama. For such a concept of life could not change. The vision has clarified, there have been new "phantasms," as Pirandello calls his characters—the possible number of creatures and situations is infinite in art as it is in life—but there have been no new tendencies. The change has been in technique, a development which has reached its highest point thus far in one of Pirandello's latest produced plays, *Diana and Tuda.*

Compare *Diana and Tuda* with *Six Characters in Search of an*

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Author, for example. Although the earlier play is one of Pirandello's greatest, the light of his vision struggled there through clouds of tangled veils, smoke-red, purple, and grey, whirling and torn in a night-storm. In *Diana and Tuda* it gleams through a medium as clear and chaste as alabaster. Chaos has become creation.

The result is classic—pure in the Greek sense. Pirandello feels *Diana and Tuda* to be his masterpiece because in it he has most perfectly expressed his life-concept of form and movement. From this point of view it will probably remain so. In its simplicity there is a decided suggestion of the ultimate.

"I see life," says Pirandello, "as a tragedy."

It is a tragedy of inevitable, continual frustration, of man's tenacious, desperate struggle to accomplish the impossible, to conciliate the two necessities which are eternally in antithesis: to vitalize movement, casting it into form, to vitalize form, stirring it into movement.

It is the tragedy of all men, be they engaged in business or in art. Your personal tragedy, is it not either the monotony of something of which you are tired but which never changes or of something that you loved which has changed? Does not your sense of tragedy arise from the ill-adjusted form-movement condition in yourself—because you are not dead enough to be indifferent, and not live enough to alter the old situation or, in the opposite circumstance, to adapt yourself completely to the new?

It is the tragedy of the irresistible force meeting the immovable object, and the human soul crushed between them, forever.

Of the two opposite tragedies, that of stability within the fixed form of the body or of circumstance and that of change, man feels perhaps more painfully the tragedy of change—change in himself, in others, in all the values of life. Life itself is continually slipping away from him. A moment that he would fall upon to clasp forever has fled before he can clasp it; and he is clutching to his breast not the desired moment but a different one, the new present, which in turn dissolves into nothing as he clasps it. If only he could seize and conclude something! The blessedness of knowing: "This is done!"

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It is change that torments so many of Pirandello's women. When the knowledge of this ineluctable change in what she would conserve bursts upon the understanding of the mother in *Two in One,* her thwarted outcry is, *"Non voglio,"* "No, I do not want it, no, no, *no!"* But the feeble human negative is powerless: and change continues even while the soul is commanding it to stay.

Most disconcerting of the changes is that of personality: the ego is relative to all, even to itself, which varies with the varying moment. Its sanity, its virtue, are relative. The relativity of sanity particularly, the question as to exactly who is mad—seed of the tricks and topsy-turvy in the famous *Henry IV* and in *Cap and Bells*—has peculiarly hypnotized Pirandello. This relativity, which one might call a corollary to the proposition of form and movement, is as penetrative in his drama as is the form-movement idea itself—and more obvious. The notable example is, of course, *Right You Are If You Think You Are,* where the relation between truth, sanity, and personality is the main theme.

No ego is single, but multiple: one for one, another for another, and many even for itself.

"But who, then," asks the ego in dismay, "am I?"

"You are whatever the persons who know you think you are. All of them, even though their opinions be in mutual disagreement, are right—if they think so."

"And what is my neighbor?"

"He is whatever he seems to be to you. Appearance is the only reality. Indeed if a dream were characterized by regularity, it could not even be distinguished from reality."

"But appearance is often illusion!"

" 'Illusion,' so-called, is more potent than 'reality,' so-called. There is no reality apart from illusion, from that made by belief. Whatever seems, through virtue of its seeming, does not 'seem' but 'is.' It is so if it seems so to you. That is the only truth. Each creates his truth for himself."

"But absolute truth exists? Certainly there is something I can do

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with confidence, and say, 'This is good.' "

"No; good also is relative, and often, like your own soul, is inconsistent. From a 'good' act or an 'evil' act arise countless contradictions and contrarieties—right which becomes wrong and wrong which becomes right, a continual interflow of opposites. And your motives for doing either are both good and bad."

"But what, then, are facts?" queries the soul, more and more lost.

"Facts are the past when the spirit yields and life goes out of them. Of themselves they have no existence," comes the answer. "Facts are what we assume them to be. It is we who create facts, individually. A fact has as many various existences as it has observers or chroniclers. An absolute fact!"—laughter—"that is in very truth an illusion!"

"No absolute?" persists the soul.

"Art, perhaps—Art, which is above time and space. Art before it is devitalized by expression, while the phantasms—'more real than human creatures, though less living,'—are still pure idea, perfect in their dream existence, will-less, immortal, immutable. Art—and the fact of the existence of the human soul."

"But on earth, in living itself, is there nothing that I can define and say, 'This is this, no more and no less. Herein is the absolute truth about this'?"

"Nothing. There is no absolute truth."

"But I cannot believe it! Am I going mad—or have I been mad? I have been seeking absolute truth, absolute reality, throughout the ages!"

"The fact that you ask whether or not you 'have been' or 'are' mad shows that even yet you have not really understood. Sanity is not an absolute condition. It depends upon circumstances and upon the opinions of yourself and your associates. As for your search for absolute truth, absolute reality; you have not found it because you have been seeking what in human life does not exist. Life, death, and your soul are relative. If there is an absolute truth, it is that there is none."

"Then,"—failing in the upper reaches, concerned again with the

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personal, "I can never know my friend as he is intimately to himself? And my friend can never know me as I am to myself?"

"No, you can never know how anything seems to anyone else, only how it seems to you (and that alters every instant, is never twice the same). You are and always will remain isolate. Alone, the soul may beat at the bars of its isolation, but it will be powerless. It must remain stranger to all, a different stranger to each, stranger even to itself, each instant isolate from what it was and from what it is to be."

Sometimes the truth that there is no absolute truth nor absolute personality pierces reason and consciousness with a single sudden blade. Then the soul, like Ersilia Drei in *Clothing the Naked,* confused by the very infinity of its selves, too weak for the sound of their wrangling with themselves and with others, unable to maintain any one of them and choosing to leave them all, turns away from the madhouse that is life and dies.

Is this the aberration of a solitary artist or, rather than fantasy, is it reality? In the most inner sense is not Pirandello, scorner of the external "real," a realist? Particularly, since uncertainty is the world's reality since the war.

To call Pirandello a cerebral dramatist is to define only his most obvious quality. Reason he considers "the light of the heart," but with Spinoza he knows that "the reason without the heart is void." Pirandello feels the law of form and movement as well as thinks it.

Though his phantasms often mirror relativity, though they are identified with form and movement, they exist not merely to be symbols for those ideas. Symbolism Pirandello holds to be the negation of art. "For symbolism is completely cold: the concept that becomes image. In art, the road leads in the opposite direction: it is the image that becomes concept; this is the path I follow. To make the particular general is the purpose of art, not to make the general particular."

A superficial impression of Pirandello's theatre may suggest the contrary. But study of his art confirms the idea that form, movement, and relativity are not the protagonists of his drama. Nor yet are they its thesis. Rather they make its atmosphere. Like power-

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ful searchlights they play over the mortals who are the protagonists and over their relationships, illuminating the meaning. The glare of the lights is cold, but if one persists in his scrutiny after the first blinding shock, there is the palpitation of living flesh-and-blood creatures, involved in human tragedy.

And the tragedy is high-lighted from within, by a fellow victim. The *Maestro's* personal tragedy is the change that is known as "growing old."

"The tragedy of Giuncano in *Diana and Tuda* is my own. I feel my body, my flesh, aging, aging, aging, falling—into death. ('We think that we have ceased to live,' says Giuncano, 'when we have only ceased to die.') And inside—" he strikes his heart, "—I have not changed. I am the same, alive! That is the Tuda in me, the sentiment—the movement. I feel the same toward life, but I can live no more, every day a little less." He sinks back in his chair, feeling himself far older a man than his sixty years have marked him. Pirandello suffers the tragedy doubly; as the man and even more keenly as the artist. For "in the material of life itself" he is "very poor." As he says, "he has little of life outside his art."

The tragedy of art is opposite to the tragedy of change; it is not the tragedy of movement, but the tragedy of form. If the artist would express his idea he must put it into form, that is, he must be false to it, force it to undergo a metamorphosis, indeed kill it in order to create it; for the unexpressed idea is living, but, once imprisoned in form, it is dead. The finished work of art can no more be the original inspiration of the artist than death can be life. When, as is set forth in *Six Characters in Search of an Author,* interpretation is added to expression, the creator's idea, reborn in the minds of others, becomes a completely different thing, no longer recognizable.

"A statue, I hate it!" Pirandello shudders, as did Giuncano at the same thought. The sculptor Giuncano abandoned art because he was a true artist; he preferred to create nothing, since it was impossible to create a form with movement. "Every time I see a statue I could break it into bits. Form, cold form, frozen, eternalized death!

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"Michelangelo felt this torment more than any of the others. How he despaired and raged, plunging into the marble, twisting his figures, seeking to get some movement into the dead forms, to make them live, *live,* LIVE—for life alone is true. And then, defeated by the inexorable, without hope, he abandoned them, so insatiate was he for real creation, for life. Oh, he was the greatest of the artists!"

"The Futurists?"

"No, they have not solved the problem. They are completely mad: they have scattered form altogether and have only movement."

"La Gioconda?"

"Because the expression changes, even though the form does not? Yes, perhaps there, in *La Gioconda,* there has been a miracle."

Then, resuming, "I am the opposite of D'Annunzio. He is all for *atteggiamento,* pose; I am all for movement."

Pirandello's art has evolved most fittingly into the drama. The pulsation of his world never could have been confined in the essay, for example. "Drama," as the Stage-Director warns one of the *Six Characters,* "is action, and not philosophy." The great natural mobility of the drama—nearest counterfeit, among the art-forms, of living—Pirandello is developing to the utmost, in order to make it an ever more perfect medium for thought.

His restless dialogue has become a phenomenon of uncertainty. Form, movement, relativity, are, as it were, the irregularly repeated facets of his drama. More and more one does not know just how to take it, this dialogue of his; it plays hide and seek with the intelligence; becoming almost a living thing, equivocal as life.

"You see life as a tragedy, *Maestro,* and yet you call many of your plays 'comedies'—" I was thinking of *Six Characters in Search of an Author;* every one of the six is the victim of illegitimacy, orphanage, poverty, shame, loneliness, prostitution, adultery, treachery, age, homelessness, suicide, or sudden death. And yet this "nude masque" bears on its title-page, "Comedy . . ."!

"The distinction that I draw between comedy and tragedy as literary types," the playwright explains, "has reference not to materials

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but to tone. *Henry IV,* for example, I call a tragedy; the treatment is more exalted. Humor does not exclude tragedy." Comedy in the sense of a play with "a happy ending" Pirandello could not admit. In the scheme of life as this Italian sees it, there is no reason or place for "happiness." "I am not a pessimist. Only those who do not know my work at all can call me a pessimist. The fact that human life is a tragedy does not mean, necessarily, that it is an evil. Pessimism is an attitude of the spirit. It is what I see that is tragic, not the attitude of my spirit. My spiritual attitude is optimistic: I do not deny; I affirm.

"For I vision life as eternal activity. This is not evil; it is instead a good that the soul in order to be alive must be continually active.

"We ourselves create our lives. There is no reality outside of the reality each one creates for himself, a reality moulded every instant. Indeed, instead of reality, I prefer to call it 'creation.'

"Life is creation. That is why life and art are the same thing, for both are creation: except that art is 'creation on a higher plane,' serene above time and space; and art is freer than life, free from life's material necessities,—from its material motives, its material obstacles. I see the thinkers, too, Spinoza, Kant, all of them, as great artists, because they were great creators.

"To grant the existence of conclusions would be pessimism. But I do not grant their existence. Life never concludes, for life concluded is no longer life, but death. An eternal renewal of forms, uninterrupted, that is life! That is God!" (Again *L'Evolution créatrice.*)

"But we poor human creatures, how can we follow God? Our knees bend under us and ingloriously we stumble and fall, too weak for even a bit of living. The stronger of the fallen rise again. But once more, overcome by the tempest of living, they fall—to rise again, the stronger ones—only to fall and rise eternally. Not living, but a succession of life and death is what we mortals experience as 'life.'

"When we do experience it! For some fall and, resigned to remaining prostrate, let the gale pass over their surrender. O how

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many of these creatures who think they are alive are dead—" in disgust, "dead—dead! They nod and speak and grimace, and think that they are living! Ugh! I shrink from the stench of their corpses as they pass, as I talk to them, as they talk to me. Dead! Complacently decaying in their own inactivity!

"It is not living that is tragedy, but the human sense of it, 'life,' the inevitable frustration of every human attempt to live, that is tragic. For living is a divine and not a human potentiality: humans, even the greatest, grasp only the tatters of living."

Although Pirandello's attitude may be optimistic, his vision remains tragic. Grey, the greyness of pain, tinges his skin, shadows the whiteness of his sparse hair and the Vandyke which taperingly points his face, prolonging its narrowness and accentuating the extreme alertness of his features. Even Pirandello's clothing is grey instinctively.

At first the *Maestro* speaks quietly, slowly; his patience in exposition perhaps alone discloses that he was a professor earlier in his career. Of his idea he is most communicative; but he is by nature reserved in giving himself. He smiles often, though rather absently, more at some fantasy that the conversation has evoked than at the conversation itself. But the clear analyzing gaze above the smile is without hope. His eyes may meet his visitor's directly, yet because of the oddness in the set of one of them, the glance seems evasive. One feels uncomfortably that, with all his friendliness, the real Pirandello is not in those eyes, but behind them, alone in the solitude of the creator, that he is seeing not what is before him, but what lies beyond.

Suddenly, without warning, at the mention of some kindling word "form" or "movement," his living idea leaps within him and he is passive no longer. He bends forward, pressing his hands to his temples with gestures that would be exaggerated in a Nordic, but in a Latin are never grotesque because so natural. The stream of his Italian becomes a torrent. Completely electrified by the theme of life, this man, whom some have supposed to be merely an intellectual

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becomes eloquent and even passionate. Truly the Sicilian and the dramatist, springing to his feet, he strides the room feverishly, no longer stooped but fully erect, as animated as any one of his phantasms, to depict with his own footsteps the progress of living, from new form to new form, pausing at each step in his march to mark the abyss.

What Pirandello means by inert form, and by its opposite, movement, finds its best illustration in Pirandello.

But what of that element of coldness which persists even in the passion of Pirandello, native of that southern island, crucible of disparate races in which the extremes of the Italian temperament are rendered elemental and complete? His outburst is a volcano—in the Arctic. Frozen fire, would it not be the union of form and movement? In flashes in Pirandello himself, whose life has been a dream of it, one glimpses a realization of the miracle.

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