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Author

Messbarger, Rebecca

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A Study of the Relationship Between Pirandello's *I vecchi e i giovani* and *Il fu Mattia Pascal*

In terms of plot, style and theme, Pirandello's two novels, *Il fu Mattia Pascal* and *I vecchi e i giovani* appear to have little in common. The first, a tragic-comic tale of one man's failed attempt to become totally self-determining appears wholly unrelated to *I vecchi e i giovani*. The latter work has often been referred to as an historical novel because of its focus on a period of violent change critical in Sicilian history and in the author's own life. But these two seemingly unrelated novels are so intimately connected that *I vecchi e i giovani* could be considered the sequel to *Il fu Mattia Pascal*.

In the central chapter, "Il lanternino," of *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, the author filters his vision of the tragedy of human existence through the metaphor of the tiny lantern. The "lanternino" is defined as that fragile light produced by the mind of each individual that casts a comforting circle of brightness around the solitary soul. This light shields man from the truth that he is alone in a dark void and subsequently that his existence has no meaning. The "lanternino" represents the illusory hopes, constructions and beliefs that individuals project onto their lives in order to feel meaningful. In *I vecchi e i giovani*, the transparent, self-conscious metaphor of the "lanternino" is subtly diffused into the powerful chiaroscuro imagery which dominates the work. Everywhere in this brooding novel permeates the striking contrast between light and dark visions of the unreal and the horrifyingly real. The chiaroscuro imagery of *I vecchi e i giovani* reaches beyond a purely

natural level of description and rises to a psychological plateau. Pirandello paints with light and dark to reflect the conflict between hopeful illusions and bitter despair within the human mind. *I vecchi e i giovani* unmistakably recalls the "lanternino" of the earlier novel but goes beyond *Il fu Mattia Pascal* by exploring the existential despair when the light goes out.

"Il Lanternino" both literally and thematically is the central chapter of *Il fu Mattia Pascal* and illustrates that just as the individual, as an obligatory member of society, necessarily adheres to a collective system of beliefs, so to he/she invents a foundation of beliefs (forms) that justify his/her personal existence. The lanternino represents Pirandello's tragic belief that self-deception is necessary to survive.

In this chapter, Adriano Meis, Pascal's invented self, suffers temporary blindness due to an operation. Signor Anselmo, the eccentric, elderly landlord and theosopher, attempts to comfort Meis by explaining that the darkness of a physical blindness is a minor discomfort in comparison to the endless night of existential despair. The protagonist summarizes Anselmo's concept of how man, by clinging to illusions, avoids facing the black void that cradles his being.

E questo sentimento della vita per il signor Anselmo era appunto come un lanternino che ciascuno di noi porta in se acceso; un lanternino che ci fa vedere sperduti su la terra, e ci fa vedere il male e il bene; un lanternino che proietta tutt'intorno a noi un cerchio più o meno ampio di luce, di là dal quale è l'ombra nera, l'ombra paurosa che non esisterebbe, se il lanternino non fosse acceso in noi, ma che noi dobbiamo pur troppo creder vera, fintanto ch'esso si mantiene vivo in noi. Spento alla fine a un soffio, ci accoglierà davvero quell'ombra fittizia, ci accoglierà la notte perpetua dopo il giorno fumoso della nostra illusione, o non rimaremo noi piuttosto alla merce dell'Essere, che avrà soltanto rotto le vane forme della nostra ragione?¹

For Anselmo, this "lanternino," as the diminutive form suggests, is a frail, miniscule light blown out almost effortlessly with a "soffio," a puff of air. With that "soffio" comes the death of illusions and eternal darkness, "la notte perpetua." Pirandello, in his work *L'Umorismo* makes plain his pessimistic conception of existence that the metaphor attempts to poetically visualize. He describes the burden of man's self-

consciousness that leads him to project artificial sense and meaning onto the continuous flux of disconnected events known as life:

All'uomo,....nascendo è toccato questo triste privilegio di sentirsi vivere, con la bella illusione che ne risulta: di prendere cioè come una realtà fuori di se questo suo interno sentimento della vita, mutabile e vario.²

Thus, the "lanternino" has the contrary function of both shield and threat to man's existence. It shields man from the truth that he has no special significance or ordered place in the universe and thus the "lanternino" protects against existential despair. However, the precarious existence of these illusions that weakly guard against the "ombra," menacing reality, make despair all the more likely when the lanternino is blown out.

Early in the novel, when Mattia Pascal begins to understand exactly how meaningless his life really is, he comes dangerously close to finding his own "lanternino" extinguished. Left to himself too long as caretaker in a library that has no patrons, he reads books of philosophy to fill his time. Pascal meditates to excess on the sorry state of his life. The comprehension of the emptiness both within himself and all around him finally becomes overwhelming, "Così, sempre, fino alla morte, senz alcun mutamento, mai...L'immobilità della condizione di quella mia esistenza mi suggeriva allora pensieri subiti, strani, quasi lampi di follia."³ An important and recurrent theme in this novel that is fundamental in *I vecchi e i giovani* is here revealed: thinking too much is the greatest threat to the internal equilibrium of an individual. Pascal instinctively reacts to the frightening discovery that his life, in fact life itself has no meaning, by running away. Out of self-preservation Pascal abandons his static, cerebral world and attempts to flee from himself. This escape leads him to invent the new self Adriano Meis.

The underlying pessimism of *Il fu Mattia Pascal* is strikingly more acute in Pirandello's novel *I vecchi e i giovani*. The comic and bizarre elements of *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, which temper the bitter conclusions of the tale, are absent in *I vecchi e i giovani*. *Il fu Mattia Pascal* is told in first person, which lends intimacy and makes the reader a more active participant in the adventure, the language is lively and there is more action and dialogue. In contrast, the later novel is written in third

person, has little dialogue or action and is filled with detailed description. By comparison, it is immediately apparent that *I vecchi e i giovani* is a more oppressive, darker portrait of life than *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, and the rhetorical devices employed by the author serve to accentuate his hopeless vision of the human condition. Critic Sarah D'Alberti eloquently summarizes the hopeless portrait of man's existence presented in *I vecchi e i giovani*:

Ci troviamo, con *I vecchi e i giovani* di fronte ad una struttura psicologica fatta di amarezza e di delusione, in cui la vita, che è svuotata di ogni valore; ma anche così svuotata, la vita è sempre qualche cosa che l'uomo deve soffrire e a cui non può sottrarsi, anche se intimamente non può o non vuole accettarla.⁴

I vecchi e i giovani illustrates the existential crisis outlined in *Il fu Mattia Pascal* no longer in terms of one individual, but in terms of a whole society. This novel develops the philosophy of the "lanternino" in terms of the collective body. It focuses on the beliefs and illusions of a society in a particular period in history. It is 1893 in Sicily, the year of the Fasci movement. It is a moment of intense change, a violent upheaval of the old order politically, socially and economically. The struggle, as the title suggests is fought primarily between the old and the new generations. One value system, one set of illusions is challenged and eventually replaced by a new set of illusions, both of which in Pirandello's view are equally absurd.

I vecchi e i giovani opens as the sun rises over the decadent Sicilian landscape brutally accentuating the misery of its inhabitants:

Pioviggiava ancora a scosse nell'alba livida tra il vento che spirava gelido a raffiche da ponente; e a ogni raffica, su quel lembo di paese emergente or ora, appena, cruccioso, dalle fosche ombre umide della notte tempestosa, pareva scorresse un brivido, dalla città, alta e velata sul colle, alle vallate, ai poggi, ai piani irti ancora di stoppie annerite, fino al mare laggiù, torbido e rabbuffato. Pioggia e vento parevano un'ostinata crudeltà del cielo sopra la desolazione di quelle piagge estreme della Sicilia....⁵

There is nothing hopeful in this sunrise. It is an "alba livida," an ashen-colored dawn, bruised as the adjective "livida" suggests and torn asunder by violent, icy winds and a wretched downpour. Nature cruelly

assaults the already desolate human domain. The sunrise, which normally connotes beginning, rebirth and hope here only highlights the images of death and decay associated with the human world. Nature in this opening depiction appears as another ruthless oppressor persecuting and ravaging Sicily.

From the opening pages of *I vecchi e i giovani*, Pirandello paints the landscape with dark and light imagery. He describes the dawn with the oxymoron "alba livida" which immediately juxtaposes light and dark. The first rays illuminate the gray Sicilian landscape which emerges out of "fosche ombre," a hazy obscurity. The adjectives "velata" and "annerite" also reinforce the dichotomy between light and dark, between life and death, hope and despair. The device of chiaroscuro adds drama and tension. The metaphor of "il lanternino" in *Il fu Mattia Pascal* equates light with illusion. Pirandello adds a new dimension to this concept in *I vecchi e i giovani*, evidenced by his association of light and Nature. The concrete, visible light (alba) of the sun is real, and rather than softening the agony of human misery as does man's inner "lanternino," it makes it apparent. Nature is not merely indifferent to man but spotlights his failures and inherent weaknesses. Nature in *I vecchi e i giovani* represents tangible reality in constant flux as opposed to man's world of contrived forms.

Once the author sets the sullen mood with his description of the desolate, Sicilian terrain, he introduces a cast of characters who, in varying degrees, have removed themselves from reality. According to critic Carlo Salinari, the characters of *I vecchi e i giovani* are essentially distinguished one from the other by the way their subjective world-perception interacts with cruel reality: "...nella loro differenziazione i personaggi vivono in una sola dimensione: il modo come configurano se stessi e il mondo delle illusioni che essi scambiano per realtà."⁶

Of all the characters, Mauro Mortara and Don Ippolito have most securely locked themselves inside the gates of a construed reality. They have built replicas of the past, well fortified against the intrusion of truth about themselves and their ideology. These two characters in particular hold onto the illusions of one generation's collective lantern, which, now obsolete, grows ever dimmer outshone by the lantern of the next generation.

Mauro Mortara, a simple farmer who fought with Garibaldi for the unification of Italy and the autonomy of his land, is lost in the past. He remains committed to his belief in a united *patria* which he fought to bring into existence but which has since lost sight of the old ideals and which is being challenged with increasing fervor by a revolution-hungry youth.

Don Ippolito is even more dangerously withdrawn from the rest of the world. Unlike Mortara, the Bourbon prince has consciously separated himself from the present and has carefully constructed an impenetrable, self-contained, facsimile of the past. Although the existence of the Bourbon rule in the two Sicilies has not been recognized for over thirty years, Don Ippolito refuses to admit his fall from power, and instead keeps,

una guardia di venticinque uomini con la divisa borbonica nel suo feudo di Colimbeta, dove fin dal 1860 si era esiliato per attestare la sua fiera fedeltà al passato governo delle Due Sicilie....⁷

In *I vecchi e i giovani*, Pirandello does not resurrect the metaphor of the "lanternino" of the earlier novel to illustrate the conflict between illusion and reality. Instead the author recalls the metaphor and all of its connotations in a modified, more subtle image of "la fiamma," the flame. In reference to the individual, "la fiamma" signifies the force of hope and belief in one's self-worth that incites enthusiasm and action to change the state of things. In terms of the collective body, "la fiamma" refers to an ideology or belief which a society actively fights to preserve or to realize. The power of "la fiamma" in *I vecchi e i giovani* is, like the "lanternino," a source of hope, however illusory, but in the latter novel a new aspect is associated with this light, its potential to burn dangerously out of control. In this second novel everything is heightened to the extreme. The "fiamma" a dynamic and dangerous image has replaced the fragile "lanternino." The flame's brilliant light dramatically heightens the contrast with the darkness that lies beyond the singular and collective illusions and therefore presents a double jeopardy. Not only can the flame destroy in its zeal and force, but there is a direct relationship between the power and brightness of this light and how debilitating the horror when the flame is extin-

guished; the more fervent the belief in the illusions, the greater the despair when the light goes out.

The multitude of characters in this novel must each be understood in terms of how distant their personal reality remains from the truth. The premise of the novel may be reduced, as Salinari suggests, to a depiction of the battle between illusion and truth waged in the human psyche: "...i personaggi qui contano per il modo illusorio che si creano, per il modo in cui presentano se stessi, e per il modo tragico in cui quelle costruzioni di cartapesta crollano."⁸ The extent to which the "fiamma" burns in the mind and heart of the character is therefore the most fundamental, distinguishing property.

Spiradone Covazza is a pessimist whose "fiamma" is dimly light. A leading voice of the rising movement (I Fasci), he attacks the naive optimism of the members of this revolutionary party. In the following passage, Covazza draws a comparison between his own controlled, cynical view of the possibility for change, which is founded in reason, and the emotional, unrealistic aspirations of the overzealous youths in the movement. Repeatedly, Covazza employs the metaphor "la fiamma" to dramatize the force and fury that drives the rebels in their fight for change. Covazza strikes out against the members of the Fasci who criticize his careful, pragmatic approach. He bitterly attacks the blind idealism that he sees as the most disabling disease of any real effort towards realizing the party platform:

Ma volevano dire ch'egli provasse un acre piacere nel mettere avanti così, fuor di tempo e di luogo, le verità più spiacevoli, nello spegnere col gelo delle sue argomentazioni ogni entusiasmo, ogni fiamma d'idealità, a cui pur tuttavia era tratto irresistibilmente ad accostarsi. Scarafaggio con ali di falena — lo aveva definito su la 'Nuova Età' Lino Apes: accostatosi alla fiamma, spariva la falena, restava lo scarafaggio. Calunnia e ingratitude! Egli stimava dover suo, invece, servarsi così frigido in mezzo a tante fiamme giovanili; che se queste non eran fuochi di paglia, alla fine si sarebbe scaldato anche lui; e se erano, faceva il bene di tutti, spegnendoli.⁹

Light and dark, illusion and reality are constantly and emphatically contrasted in this passage. This is one of the most transparent examples of Pirandello's technique of *chiaroscuro* on a psychological level.

With icy words such as “gelo” and “frigido,” Covazza describes his cynical viewpoint, which wants to squelch the “fiamma d’idealità,” the dangerous romanticism of the young party members. The metaphor in this passage, which describes Covazza as a roach whose wings have been burned off, suggests that he, like the idealistic youth he offends with his cynicism, once burned with hope. His “fiamma,” however, fatally met with reality and now he is left with the uncomfortable chore of recognizing illusions for what they are. Covazza is yoked with the burden of truth. In his refusal to court a romantic vision of himself and the cause, he is incapable of hope. Even more distressing is that he is completely alone with reality. He, the “scarafaggio,” a disgusting, base insect, stands by himself opposed by the “fiamme giovanili” and the “fuochi di paglia.” Like the scarafaggio however he is protected by a hard shell, the shell of cool realism, which assures his survival while the youths will inevitably be destroyed by their idealism.

Lando Laurentano, the leader of the Fasci movement, is caught between the world of passion and the world of reason. He is enticed by the force and freedom of the “fiamma” yet his life is rooted in rationality and he can see the danger of trusting too strongly in an ideal. The image of fire returns in his rhetoric to describe that force which compels men to fight for their beliefs which he contrasts with the “freddo lume de[gl]i...intelletti accorti e calcolatori.” According to Lando, the fire of hope that should have united Italy was burned out by the careful and the reasonable ones.

After reviewing his library and the books on which his rational, calculated comprehension of life is based, Lando condemns these artificial forms, which collectively are better known as myths. He realizes the scientific approach to life is a meaningless projection of reason on a flood of unconnected accidents. The “freddo lume” is merely the attempt by intellectuals to legitimize their “lanternino” by founding their illusions in pessimism and logic. Lando voices the fear already seen in *Il fu Mattia Pascal*; to think too much is dangerous: “Composizioni artificiali, vita fissata, rappresa in forme immutabili, costruzioni logiche, architetture mentali, induzioni, deduzioni — via! via! via! Muoversi, vivere, non pensare!”¹⁰ Immediately after he reaches this conclusion, however, Lando returns to intellectualizing about the capability

of the masses to bring about any change in the social structure: "Sarebbero sorti nelle maggioranze una volontà e un sentimento così forti da promuovere subito il crollo? Mancava in esse ancora la coscienza e l'educazione necessarie."¹¹ His inability to escape the logical, pessimistic understanding of life demonstrates that, as seen with Covazza, once one breaks down the illusions, there is no turning back to former innocence.

Each of the characters in this novel demonstrates that the contemplation of oneself and comprehension of the significance of one's existence comes suddenly and brings despair and death either physical or spiritual. For the following characters the light of the "lanternino" is blown out and the darkness is seen. It is impossible for them to hope and therefore impossible for them to carry on. Donna Caterina first dies in spirit, and when her absolute will to die is finally satisfied, she dies bodily as well. Corrado Selmi finds peace in suicide "spogliandosi di tutte le miserie, liberandosi di tutti gli ostacoli..."¹² Dianella escapes the horrors of her reality by dying to the world in insanity. Francesco D'Atri, unable to bear the falsity of his existence beseeches death to envelope him in total darkness: "Ah, il bujo, il bujo, un luogo di riposo: la morte, sì! Tutta quella guerra faceva vincere volentieri il ribrezzo della morte."¹³

The only character that has the potential to survive, aware of the ugly truth about himself and the world, is Flamminio Salvo. A ruthless opportunist who views life only in terms of material gain, he is dead to his humanity. Salvo, as he himself recognizes, has mastered the art of not thinking. The most dramatic example of his ability to divorce himself from his conscience and remain untouched by the horrible events that surround him is his reaction to his daughter's insanity and the brutal murders of two of his most intimate friends, Aurelio Costa and Nicoletta Capolino: "Nulla: non sentiva più nulla: nessuna pietà, né affetto per nessuno. Un fastidio enorme anzi afa, afa sentiva ormai di tutto."¹⁴ The image of "la fiamma" returns in this scene. The only thing that Salvo is compelled to do at the tragic news is to smoke a cigar: "Ah come volentieri avrebbe fumato un sigaro!"¹⁵ The image of the burning cigar metaphorically recalls the burning bodies of his two friends who were mutilated and then set on

fire. The hyperbolic imbalance between these two images brutally illustrates the emptiness of this character. Also, the image of the cigar summons the previous connotations of "la fiamma," the fire within the individual that incites passion and hope. Salvo has no "lanternino," no hope except in the conquest of material satisfaction.

Death is a central theme in this novel and the author portrays death always with an exaggerated emphasis on the crude and the macabre. The most vivid and brutal depiction of death is that of Aurelio and Nicoletta:

Ailora la carrozza era stata assalata da ogni parte, e l'uno e l'altra, tempestati prima di coltellate, di martellate, erano stramazati, poi sbranati addirittura, come da una canea inferocita; anche la carrozza, anche la carrozza era stata sconquassata; ridotta in pezzi; e, quando su la catasta formata dai raggi delle ruote, dagli sportelli, dai sedili, erano stati gettati i miserandi resti irriconoscibili dei due corpi....¹⁶

Nowhere in this scene or elsewhere in the novel is death ever romanticized. The author's fascination with the grotesque particulars of death may be interpreted as his own attempt to see past the "lanternino" to the dark side.

The dismembered bodies of Nicoletta and Aurelio are burned. In this hideous vision, the image of the "fiamma" recurs. Both Nicoletta and Aurelio desire to actively change and control their worlds and they are literally and figuratively burned by their illusion. When the horror occurs these two are on a journey to escape the economic, political, moral and social controls oppressing them. The result of their pursuit of freedom sharply contrasts with the bitter-sweet conclusion of Pascal's affair with self-determination. The brutality of this scene expresses the much more extreme pessimism that life is never meant to be meaningful, and those who attempt to liberate themselves from this horrible truth will inevitably come to a bad end.

The end of the novel represents the culmination of this pessimistic vision of life. Mauro Mortara, the only character with purely noble intentions, sees the meaninglessness of his life and despairs. Again the realization of the emptiness of life is described in terms of light and dark. With his spirit broken by the failure of men in whom he believed, Mauro goes to his room and both physically and metaphorically turns

out the light: "Mauro aveva spento il lume."¹⁷ In the darkness he searches for any shred of hope that might shield him from total despair.

Bisognava che in quel bujo, a ogni costo, assolutamente, trovasse una ragione d'agire, in cui tutte le sue smanie si quietassero, tutte le incertezze del suo intelletto cessassero dal tormentarlo.¹⁸

The "lanternino" is out, however, and he has already seen the dark side. There is no turning back.

Everyone comes to a bad end in this novel, but the death of Mauro is the most tragic. Like Don Quixote, Mauro flees the ugly reality before him and invents his own more honorable world. He is likewise killed in much the same way as Don Quixote, fighting to preserve his noble illusions. The novel ends as it began. The "alba livida" illuminates once again the death and decay of man's world. The sun rises over the dead body of Mortara, killed by soldiers who mistakenly took him for an insurrectionist instead of one, like themselves, fighting for the preservation of the "beloved patria." Again, the aloof light of Nature mercilessly spotlights the failure of man:

La piazza, come schiantata e in fuga anch'essa dietro gli urli del popolo che la disertava, appena il fumo dei fucili si diradò nel livido smortume dell'alba, parve agli occhi dei soldati come trattenuta dal peso di cinque corpi inerti, sparsi qua e là.¹⁹

Il fu Mattia Pascal and *I vecchi e i giovani* are intimately related. The full scope of the significance of the "fiamma" and the pervasive light and dark imagery in *I vecchi e i giovani* cannot be grasped without a careful understanding of "il lanternino." However, Pirandello has taken giant steps away from the easy pessimism of *Il fu Mattia Pascal* and has entered the realm of existential despair. The author no longer leaves his reader smiling smugly at the protagonist's good-natured tolerance of life's hardships. With the gruesome demise of character after character in the later novel, Pirandello dares the reader to face unromantic reality. Pirandello attempts to extinguish, if only momentarily, our own "lanternino."

Rebecca Messbarger
University of Chicago

Notes

1. Luigi Pirandello, *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (Milano: Fratelli Treves, Editori, 1918) 107.
2. A. L. De Castris, "The Experimental Novelist," *Pirandello A Collection of Critical Essays* (1967): 94-95.
3. Pirandello, *Il fu Mattia Pascal* 59.
4. Sarah D'Alberti, *Pirandello Romanziere* (Palermo: S. F. Flaccovio Editore, 1981) 131.
5. Luigi Pirandello, *I vecchi e i giovani* (Milano: Oscar Mondadori, 1932) 9.
6. Carlo Salinari, *Boccaccio Manzoni Pirandello* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1979) 196.
7. Pirandello, *I vecchi e i giovani* 10.
8. Carlo Salinari, *Boccaccio Manzoni Pirandello* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1979) 191.
9. Pirandello, *I vecchi e i giovani* 284.
10. Pirandello, *I vecchi e i giovani* 269.
11. Pirandello, *I vecchi e i giovani* 274.
12. Pirandello, *I vecchi e i giovani* 245.
13. Pirandello, *I vecchi e i giovani* 348.
14. Pirandello, *I vecchi e i giovani* 349.
15. Pirandello, *I vecchi e i giovani* 349.
16. Pirandello, *I vecchi e i giovani* 352.
17. Pirandello, *I vecchi e i giovani* 438.
18. Pirandello, *I vecchi e i giovani* 438.
19. Pirandello, *I vecchi e i giovani* 444.

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