The Late Mattia Pascal

[Il Fu Mattia Pascal]

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by

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Translated from the Italian by

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Shall we say that the theatre of Pirandello is a higher and more perfect expression of his peculiar art than his tales or his novels? That has been said. And a certain body of fact is there to support such a contention. It is Pirandello's drama that has won him world-wide recognition, whereas his prose work, though for thirty years it has held him in a high position in Italian letters, remained national in circulation and even in Italy was the delight of an elect few. Many of his comedies, besides, are reworkings of his short stories; as though he himself regarded the latter as incomplete expressions of the vision they contained. In the third place, one might say that since the novelty of Pirandello's art consists rather in his method of dissecting life than in his judgment of life, his geometrical, symmetrical, theorematic situations are more vivid in the clashing dialogue of people on a stage than in the less animated form of prose narrative.

These considerations do not all apply, however, to "The Late Mattia Pascal."

That we have a first class drama in this novel is evident from the fact that Pirandello himself used the amusing situation in the first part of the story as the theme of one of his Sicilian comedies: "Liolà"; and in a more important sense the book as a whole is to be counted among the sources that have inspired the "new" theatre in Italy. Chiarelli's "The Mask and the Face" was a play that "made a school"; and that school, the "grotesque," may be thought of as an offspring of "The Late Mattia Pascal." The novel, also, falls naturally into a special place in the repertory of Pirandello's more characteristic themes. It is a variation of the situation in "Henry IV"--where the mask, the fiction, is first offered by circumstances, then deliberately assumed, to be violently torn off in the case of Mattia Pascal, to be retained and utilized in the case of "Henry IV."

But "The Late Mattia Pascal" has this advantage over the Pirandello play: that whereas the latter, from the conditions of stage production, must show a situation cut out from life and given an almost artificial independence of its

own, the novel presents the whole picture. It has leisure to demonstrate how the fiction grows out of life, how, if it be deliberately assumed, any one would, naturally and logically, have so assumed it. And it shows, besides, some of the effects of the fiction on character: if Adriano Meis cannot escape wholly from Mattia Pascal, neither can Mattia Pascal escape wholly from Adriano Meis. The novel, in a word, possesses intrinsically that humanity, that humanness, which the Pirandello play more often suggests than contains.

It is curious to note, however, that if "The Late Mattia Pascal," despite the fact that it was written twenty years ago, has entered into the patrimony of the "new" (the post-war) literature of Italy, that rejuvenation (rejuvenation rather than revival) has been due not to Pirandello's dramatic successes but to other influences. When we say "D'Annunzianism," the term conveys a note of disparagement to D'Annunzio that is not intended. The disparagement is aimed at the imitators of an art, which, in its own time, was new and which in its own domain was original. Nevertheless religions are rarely destroyed without some attacks upon the idols that symbolize them, and without the erection of new idols in the places of the old. Pirandello (along with Verga who did not live to enjoy it, along with Oriani, along with Manzoni--real revivals, these last two) has profited by the reaction against the literature of "bravura"; and of his works the one that has gained most is "The Late Mattia Pascal."

These young Italians are doing many interesting things in many fields! They are asking their rulers to govern, their priests to pray, their teachers to teach, their workmen to work, and their writers--to say something. The new vogue of "The Late Mattia Pascal" rests on the fact that it says something, and says something in such a way that the novel remains interesting because of what it says, and not only because of the way it says it. "The Late Mattia Pascal" is a compact, carefully developed novel, with two good stretches of story-telling, each equipped with a psychological preparation worked out to the last detail. It has a big idea, exemplified in characters skilfully chosen and consistently evolved on the background of their particular environment. It is a work accordingly universal in its bearing, but specific in the milieu it describes.

One or two things in this milieu may seem exotic to an American. The self-expressiveness, on occasion, of Marianna Dondi-Pescatore might appear

overdrawn to some of us--though it is not. We have to remember, again, that there is no divorce in Italy; that therefore Mattia Pascal cannot be free of Romilda Pescatore; that, therefore, Adriano Meis cannot marry Adriana Paleari. We have to remember, finally, that life in over-populated Europe is based on the defensive principle; that a man is guilty until proved innocent; that unless his papers are in order, unless he can tell who he is, where he came from, and why he came from there, he cannot find employment, transact business, or establish social connections of any important kind. Some critics may not agree with Pirandello in his attitude toward the episode--that trick, for which he is sometimes accused, of laughing at his audiences--arousing interest in situations out of which nothing comes. The criticism of such devices, if criticism there be, is, however, that they show excess, rather than lack, of technique. How many producers, for example, have not suggested an "ending" to "Right You Are" ("Cosi e se vi pare")--only an afterthought revealing that no ending is the most powerful ending of them all!

The reserve and simplicity of Pirandello's language--a language "de-regionalized" and slightly colored with a flat and unpretentious classicism--are of no great consolation to a translator. Pirandello ought to be clever when he isn't; and the fact that he isn't gives a tartness, a sharpness, a chuckle to the mood of his sentence before which, I confess, I throw up my hands. This man, Pascal, is always smiling at himself, however benevolently he smiles at other people. Adriano Meis, perhaps, is more plain and matter of fact. I note the detail simply to point out that there is a slight differentiation in manner in the two parts of the book--the career of Adriano Meis being enclosed, as it were, by the jest of Mattia Pascal and the outcome of that jest.

I have suppressed a few paragraphs--details of Mattia Pascal's education in poetry; characterizations, at Monte Carlo, of people not otherwise figuring in the story; the analysis of the style of Lodoletta's obituary. I have adapted one or two scenes where a pun compelled a detour; I have given, for special reasons, a new ending to the episode of the wedding ring. Otherwise the rendering should be fairly exact, though not by any means literal.

I have taken over with some liberty the unsyntactical "free" sentence--so characteristically Italian, since the syntax is supplied by the "acting"--by gesture

and facial expression. This free sentence is, however, a native property of our own language, though I don't know how many generations of grammarians have tried to rob us of it.

A. L.

CONTENTS

A PIRANDELLO PREFACE

[APPENDIX TO THE 1921 (THE MONDADORI) EDITION OF "IL FU MATTIA PASCAL,"]

According to the morning papers of New York, January 25, 1921, Mr. Albert Heintz of Buffalo, having to choose between his love for his wife and his love for a second young lady, conceives the notion of inviting the two women to a conference with him that some decision may be arrived at in the matter.

The women meet with him, according to plan, and after a long discussion, an agreement is reached: all three decide to commit suicide.

Mrs. Heintz goes home and shoots herself.

Whereupon Mr. Heintz and the young lady discover that on the death of the wife all obstacles to their happiness have been removed. They conclude that it is wiser not to commit suicide, as they had arranged, but to get married instead. The police think differently, however, and the couple is arrested.

A commonplace solution to an interesting situation!

* * *

Suppose now some unlucky author were to think of putting such a situation into a novel or a play. We may be sure that his first care would be to devise ways and means, even drastic ways and means, for correcting the absurdity of Mrs. Heintz's suicide, for making it seem natural and logical in some way or other.

But we may be equally sure that, however ingenious he might be, ninety-nine critics out of every hundred would still declare the suicide absurd and the work

unconvincing.

The reason is that Life, despite its brazen absurdities, little and big, has the invaluable privilege of dispensing with that idiotic verisimilitude to which Art believes itself in duty bound to defer. The absurdities of Life need not look plausible for the simple reason that they are true, whereas the absurdities of Art, to seem true, must be careful to appear plausible; and plausible as they now become, they cease to be absurdities.

A situation in life may be absurd. A work of art, if it is really a work of art, may not.

It follows that to call a work of art absurd and improbable in terms of life is sheer nonsense. We may call it such in terms of art, but in terms of art only.

* * *

In the world of natural history there is a Kingdom reserved for zoology because it is inhabited by animals.

Among the animals which so inhabit it is man.

And the zoologist may talk of man and say, for example, that man is not a quadruped but a biped, and that he does not have the tail that the monkey, the donkey, or the peacock has.

This "man" of which the zoologist speaks can never be so unfortunate as to lose, let us say, a leg and replace it with a wooden one; or to lose an eye and replace it with a glass one. The zoologist's man always has two legs, of which neither is of wood; and always two eyes, of which neither is of glass.

And we cannot argue with this zoologist. For if we confront him with Mr. A. who has a wooden leg, or a glass eye, he answers that he does not know the gentleman, because Mr. A. is not "man" but "a man."

It is true that we, in our turn, can retort to the zoologist that the "man" he

knows does not exist, but that individual men do exist, and may even have wooden legs and glass eyes.

We may ask at this point whether certain commentators regard themselves as zoologists or as literary critics when, in reviewing a novel, or a short-story, or a comedy, they condemn this or that character, this or that situation, this or that motive, not in terms of art, as would be proper, but in terms of a humanity which they seem to know to perfection, as though it really existed outside that infinite variety of individuals who are in a position to commit the above mentioned absurdities--absurdities which do not need to seem logical and natural because they are true.

In my own experience with such criticism I have observed one curious thing: that whereas the zoologist understands that man is distinguished from other animals by the fact, among others, that he can think while animals cannot, these critics regard thinking--the trait most distinctive of mankind, that is--not, if you please, as an excess, but rather as a downright lack of humanity in many of my not over-cheerful characters. "Human-ity" would seem, in their view, to reside rather in feel-ing than in reasoning.

But--if I may be permitted a generality in my turn--is it not true that a man never thinks so hard (I don't say, so well) as when he is unhappy and in distress, precisely because he is determined to discover why he is unhappy, who is responsible for his being so, and whether he deserves it all? Whereas, when he is happy, when everything is going well with him, he does not reason at all, accepting his good fortune as though it were his due.

It is the lot of the lower animals to suffer without thinking. But for these critics, a man who is unhappy and thinks (thinks--because he is unhappy) is not "human"; from which it would follow that a man cannot suffer unless he is a beast, and that only when he is a beast can he be "human."

* * *

But recently I have found a critic to whom I am very grateful. In connection with the "unhuman" and it would seem incurable "cerebrality"--|n connection

with the paradoxical "implausibility"--of my plots and my characters, he has asked such critics how they arrive at their criteria for so judging the world of my art.

"From 'normal life,' so-called?" he asks. "But what is normal life but a system of relationships which we select from the chaos of daily happenings and arbitrarily call 'normal'?" And he concludes that "the world of an artist can be judged only by criteria derived from that world itself."

To remove any suspicion that I am praising this critic because he praises me, I hasten to add that in spite of this view of his, in fact because of this view of his, he is inclined to judge my work unfavorably; for he thinks that I fail to give a universally human value and a universally human significance to my plots and my people; so much so, that he is not sure whether I have not deliberately confined myself to the portrayal of certain curious individualities, certain psychological situations of a very special, a very particular, scope.

But supposing it should prove that the universally human value and significance of some of my plots and of some of my people, in the conflict, as he puts it, between reality and illusion, between the individual aspect and the social reflection of this aspect, resides, in the first instance, in the significance and value we must assign to that primal conflict--which, through the irony of Life, is always and inevitably found to have been an insubstantial one? (For--necessarily, alas!--every reality of today is bound to prove an illusion tomorrow, a necessary illusion, indeed, since outside of it there is no reality for us.) Supposing, again, that the same universally human import should prove to reside in this fact: that a man or a woman, placed by themselves or by forces outside themselves, in a painful situation which is socially abnormal and as absurd as you care to make it, remain in that situation, endure it, "act" it out before others, only so long as they fail, whether through blindness or incredible good faith, to recognize it? (Because the moment they do so recognize it, as in a mirror placed before their eyes, they refuse to endure it any longer; they realize all the horror there is in it; and they rectify it, or, failing in the attempt to do so, succumb to it.) Supposing, finally, it should reside in this further fact: that a socially abnormal situation may be accepted, even though it be thus revealed in a mirror (which in this case would be presenting our illusion itself

to our eyes), and then we continue to "act" it, submitting to all the horror it involves, so long as we can do so behind the breath-stifling mask which we (or other people or cruel circumstances) have placed upon our faces--until, that is, under this mask, some feeling of ours is so deeply hurt that we at last rebel, tear off the mask, hurl it aside, and trample it under foot?

"Then suddenly," says my critic, "a flood of humanity engulfs these characters: these marionettes become creatures of flesh and blood, and words that burn the soul and wrench the heart pour from their lips!"

Yes, assuredly!--Because these characters have now discovered their own particular individual faces hitherto concealed under the masks they have been wearing, masks which made these people marionettes in the hands of themselves or of other people, rendering them hard, wooden, angular, without finish, without delicacy, complicated, out of plumb, as everything must be when, not freely but of violent necessity, it is forced into an abnormal, an improbable, a paradoxical situation,--a situation, in their case, so abnormal, so improbable, so paradoxical that at last they have been able to endure it no longer, and have smashed their way out of it back to "normality."

The mix-up, if mix-up there be, is accordingly deliberate; the mechanism, if mechanism there be, is accordingly deliberate; but it is so willed not by me, but by the story, by the characters themselves. And there is no attempt to conceal it, either. Often the cogs are fitted together--deliberately fitted together--in plain view, so that we can see how the machine is made: it is a mask for the playing of a part. It is an interplay of roles; what we would like to be (or what we ought to be); what other people think us to be; while what we really are we do not, up to a certain point, know even ourselves. It is an awkward, hesitant, uncertain metaphor of our real personality.. It. is a fiction (often childishly artificial) which we build up about our real life, or which others build up about us. At any rate, it is a real mechanism in which each, deliberately I repeat, makes a marionette of himself; until at last, in disgust, he sends the whole thing flying with a kick!

I believe I need now go no farther than to congratulate my own inventiveness, if, with all its scruples, it has revealed as real defects the defects which it has

deliberately created--defects of that factitious illusion which the characters themselves have set up about their own lives, or which others have built up about them; the defects, in short, that the mask has until it is torn off.

* * *

But a greater consolation still has come to me from Life (from the daily papers, to be exact) some twenty years after the first publication of "The Late Mattia Pascal."

This story too, in spite of the gratifying commendation with which it was received, was also regarded by some people as "implausible," if not "impossible."

Well, Life has furnished me the proof of its essential verity, and with a surprising fullness even in minute details which I had thought out by myself in creating it in my own mind.

I quote from an evening paper of Milan (the Corriere della Sera), under date of March 20, 1920:

"A LIVING MAN VISITS HIS OWN GRAVE!"

"A remarkable case of bigamy, deriving from the alleged death of a husband, has just been reported from the Calvairate district. On Dec. 26, 1916, some peasants discovered the corpse of a man floating in the so-called Five-Dam Canal. He was dressed in a brown sweater and a pair of brown trousers.

"The matter was reported to the police, who started an investigation. The body was shortly identified by a certain Maria Tedeschi (a good-looking woman of about forty), by a certain Luigi Longoni, and by a certain Luigi Maioli, as that of the Tedeschi woman's husband, an electrician by trade, named Ambrose Casati, son of Luigi Casati, born in 1869. In fact, the description of the corpse tallied closely with that of Casati.

"It is now apparent, however, that this identification was not wholly

disinterested, at least as regards the man Maioli and the Tedeschi woman. The real Casati was alive all the time. However, on Feb. 21, 1915, he had been convicted of some crime against property and sent to prison. Before that he had not been living with his wife, although no legal separation had been obtained.

"After seven months of widowhood, the Tedeschi woman was married to Maioli, without encountering any difficulties whatever at the license bureau.

"Casati was released from prison on March 8, 1917; but not till a few days ago did he discover that he was 'dead,' that his wife had married again and disappeared. The discovery also was quite accidental. Casati needed some document or other and went to the Hall of Records in Piazza Missori for the certificates of his 'civil status.' The clerk at the window observed, however:

"'But you are dead, my dear Mr. Casati. Your legal residence is the Musocco Cemetery, city lot 44, grave 550.'

"Casati's protests were quite in vain.

"He must now take legal steps to have his 'resurrection' verified by a court, so that his record with the City registrar may be brought up to date. Such action on his part will automatically annul the second marriage of his 'widow.'

"Casati was not at all downcast over his strange predicament. He took the thing as a joke; and to enjoy the situation to the full, he visited the Musocco Cemetery to honor his own memory; and while there, even laid a bouquet and lighted a votive candle on his own grave!"

A man drowned in a canal! The corpse discovered, and later identified by the wife and the person she is later to marry! The return of the dead man to his home town; and even a visit to his own grave!

All the data of fact, in short, though of course without any of the things essential to giving the situation a "universally human value and significance"!

I cannot, of course, presume that the electrician, Mr. Ambrose Casati, had been reading my novel, and that he laid flowers on his own grave in imitation of the late Mattia Pascal!

Life, at any rate, with a delightful contempt for plausibility and probability, was able to find a Government Bureau willing to issue a license to Mr. Maioli and Mrs. Casati, and to find a clergyman willing to unite the couple in marriage, without taking the trouble to verify something that might easily have been ascertained: namely that the husband, Mr. Casati, was in a prison and not in a grave.

No novelist would ever dare allow himself to be so careless! But now it is a satisfaction for me, as I think of the charges of improbability levelled against my novel, to point out the real implausibilities of which Life itself is sometimes guilty, even in novels which, unwittingly, it plagiarizes from Art.

THE LATE MATTIA PASCAL

I

"MY NAME IS MATTIA PASCAL"

One of the few things, in fact about the only thing I was sure of was my name: Mattia Pascal. Of this I took full advantage also. Whenever one of my friends or acquaintances so far lost his head as to come and ask me for a bit of advice on some matter of importance, I would shrug my shoulders, squint my eyes, and answer:

"My name is Mattia Pascal!"

"That's very enlightening, old man! I knew that much already!"

"And you don't feel lucky to know that much?"

There was no reason why he should that I could see. But at the time I had not realized what it meant not to be sure of even that much--not to be able to answer on occasion, as I had formerly answered:

"My name is Mattia Pascal!"

Some people surely will sympathize with me (sympathy comes cheap) when they try to imagine the immense anguish a poor man must feel on suddenly discovering ... well, yes... just a blank; that he knows neither who his father was, nor who his mother was, nor how, nor when, nor where, he was born--if ever he was born at all.... Just as others will be ready to criticize (criticism comes cheaper still) the immorality and viciousness of a society where an innocent

child can be treated that way.

Very well! Thanks for the sympathy and the holy horror! But it is my duty to give notice in advance that it's not quite that way. Indeed, if need should arise, I could give my family tree with the origin and descent of all my house. I could prove that I know my father and my mother, and their fathers and mothers unto several generations, and the doings, through the years, of all those forebears of mine (doings not always to their untarnished credit, I must confess).

Well then?

Well then! It's this way. My case, not the ordinary one, by any means, is so far out of the ordinary in fact, that I have decided to recount it.

For some two years I held a position--mouse-catcher and custodian in one--in the so-called Boccamazza library. Away back in the year 1803, a certain Monsignor Boccamazza, on departing from this life, left his books as a legacy to our village. It was always clear to me that this venerable man of the cloth knew nothing whatever about the dispositions of his fellow-citizens. I suppose he hoped that his benefaction, as time and opportunity favored, would kindle a passion for study in their souls. So far not a spark has ever glowed therein, as I may state with some authority, and with the idea of paying a compliment, rather than not, to my fellow-townsmen. Indeed, our village so little appreciated the gift of the reverend Boccamazza that it has, to this day, refused money even for putting his head, neck, and shoulders into marble; and for years and years the books he left were never removed from the damp and musty store house where they had been piled after his funeral. Eventually, however, they were transported (and imagine in what condition!) to the unused Church of Santa Maria Liberale, a building which, for some reason or other, had been secularized. There the town government entrusted them to any one of its favorites who was looking for a sinecure and who, for two lire a day, was willing to care for them (or to neglect them if he chose), and to stand the noxious odor of all that mildewed paper.

This plum, in the course of human events, fell to me, and I must add that the

first day of my incumbency gave me such a distaste for books and manuscripts in general (some of those under my charge were very precious, I am told) that I should never, never, of my own accord, have thought of increasing the number of them in the world by one. But, as I said, my case is a very strange one; and I now agree that it may prove of interest to some chance reader, who, in fulfillment of Monsignor Boccamazza's pious hope, shall some day wander into the library and stumble upon this manuscript of mine. For I am leaving it to the foundation, with the understanding that no one shall open it till fifty years after my third, last, and final death.

There you have it, exactly! So far I have died twice (and the Lord knows the extent of my regret, I can assure you): the first time I died by mistake; and the second time I died... but that's-my story, as you will see....