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Identity: A Chamber of Torture

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Abstract: What emerges from the Twentieth-century is the relativity of external reality paralleled by the decomposition of the self. Identity is an unstable and nebulous concept that social constructionist theories have transformed into a series of external embodiments, hence reducing it to a myth. But when self-constituting ties are severed, identity begins to unravel. With Luigi Pirandello's and Franz Kafka's narrative, the self must be confirmed by the judgment of the Other. In the dynamic relationship between the "I" and the Other, Pirandello chooses the former, and Kafka the latter. With Pirandello, the individual becomes a madman, but with Kafka, the choice of the Other transforms the individual into a monster.

Keywords: Erving Goffman, Franz Kafka, George Herbert Mead, Identity, Luigi Pirandello

To Grace, waiting for you to become who you are

The analogy between theatre and 'real life' is an old one. People are assigned roles in society, just as they are in theatre, and those roles are sustained by others' expectations. The sociologist Erving Goffman takes the analogy to the level of face-to-face interaction, defining interaction as "the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence" (8). As Goffman points out, in an encounter each performer has to communicate his own image to the Other. Gestures, clothing and décor are the objects that enhance the dramatic realization. But because performances are never perfect, one, sometimes, is found 'out of character' thus revealing the truth behind the stage. That is, the true self.

Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936) and Franz Kafka (1883–1924) have produced texts in which the conditions of human society require us to play, to some degree, a part. They have in common a dramatic understating: the self is not necessarily what it appears to be. Kafka is searching for a metaphysical transcendence

beyond the absurd of an impermeable bureaucracy. Pirandello's reality, on the other hand, is social or socio-psychological. The reality is made of conventions, standard of behaviors imposed by society. Pirandello terms this imposition 'mask,' social masks, and the mask has a reality of its own. With reason, Kafka's biographer Max Brod terms Kafka's disposition as one of "deep pessimism" (48), while Michael Subialka defines Pirandello's pessimism as "almost apocalyptic" (77). Theirs is a narrative that relates to a moment of "nihilistic idealism" across Europe short before World War I (Harrison 1996: 8), a modernist attitude rooted in the "impoverishment of human existence" generated from cultural materialism (Dombroski 1992: 23). The dissolution of the ego is not only the mainstream of modernist thought, but also a common theoretic frame between Pirandello and Kafka.[1] In essence, the ego does not disappear, it grows more complex instead, and in virtue of its depth, it acts, reacts, and suffers. Loyal to the modernist tradition, Kafka and Pirandello, analyze the body to penetrate the soul. Theorists, novelists, essayists, philosophers who are led at last by the same conclusion: modern man is sick. With them, the reader embraces that negative existential ontology that is a defining moment of Western philosophy from Schopenhauer to Heidegger. The individual is isolated. The message is clear: culture/civilization is a disease. Then comes all the rest: *The Wasteland* and the existentialist suggestion: the absurdity of a world with no God. With this in mind the question is: why does humanity suffer? Is it the human condition or some external fault? I will answer immediately so to address the core of this manuscript: the Other is the root of evil.

With "Hell is – other people!" Jen-Paul Sartre summarizes our incapacity to escape the watchful gaze of the Other around us.[2] The presence of the Other compels the self to think and act in tune with the group. Accordingly, Goffman writes that "when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey" (3). That is to say, more often than not we are called to recite. The individual acts in a calculating manner in order to enhance from the Other a specific

[1] The reference to the "dissolution of the ego" is a dated one. Already present in Tilgher (1923), Krutch (1953), and Heffner (1957).

[2] Sartre later clarified that for "Hell is – other people!" he did not mean to say that interpersonal relations are hellish relations. Instead, "I mean that if relations with someone else are twisted, vitiated, then that other person can only be hell" (Sartre et al. 1976: 199). Otherwise stated, we are trapped (as in Hell) within other people and subject to their perceptions and judgment of us.

response, "chiefly because the tradition of his group or social status require this kind of expression" (3). But what happens when our expectations are different from the Other's expectations? When desires, values, ideas, personality no longer match those of the reference group? In order to solve this issue, I will use as reference Pirandello's two main novels *The Late Mattia Pascal* [Il fu Mattia Pascal] (1904) and *One, None and a Hundred Thousand* [Uno, nessuno e centomila] (1926), and Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915). Those are texts that offer suffering, cruelty, and truth to an extent that one must wonder if the individual has any freedom left. With Pirandello and Kafka, we must face the Twentieth-century paradoxical notion of identity in which the self wants to withdraw from collective demands but simultaneously must accept these instances as poles of reference for a dynamic relationship. In the endless choice between the "I" and the Other, Pirandello chooses the former, and Kafka the latter. With Pirandello, the individual becomes an outcast, but with Kafka, the choice of the Other transforms the individual into a monster.

Then, what has to be done?

Social selves

The texts under analysis are to be read under the scrutiny of social constructionist theories for as social organizations play a role in the constitution of who we are, we depend on "a stable social context for maintaining our identities" (Sweeney 1990: 34). Specifically, how do we go about constructing identity in the first place? Let us turn to Jean–Paul Sartre. In his monumental work, *Being and Nothingness* (first edition, 1943) in order to explain the concept of 'Bad Faith,' Sartre wants us to imagine a Parisian waiter whose actions are not quite right: "a little too precise, a little too rapid" (59). He is charming with the clients but "a little too eagerly […] a little too solicitous" (59). We might feel that there is something off about his behavior without being able to elaborate more. Sartre, on the other hand, knows better: "[w]e need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at being a waiter in a café" (59). That is to say that the man is not merely 'being a water' but pretending to be one according to a pre-existing script, a ready-made role. His gestures, his movements, even his voice are simply an act, a choreographed dance created not by his nature but by what he thinks is people's view of a waiter. The waiter is everyone and everywhere. Every job or social role comes with demands and obligations. The lawyer must

wear a suit, the politician must enforce the rules, the teacher must discipline the students. If everyone has a line to read and everyone has expectations to meet, then Shakespeare is correct: "[a]ll the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players" (*As You Like It* 2. 6.: 146–47).[3]

Of course, if identity is at stake the discussion necessarily shifts from philosophy to sociological implications. Social-constructionist theories of the Self have a clear standpoint: the self has to be socially recognized by others in order to exist. George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) and Erving Goffman (1922–1982) promoted a theory of the self as 'social object.' With Goffman, the self is as an adaptable and malleable entity that is utterly shaped by the nexus of social roles, expectations formed by the interaction with the social world, the audience, and the stage of daily acting. Strictly speaking, selves do not exist independently of social contexts, self is not "an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die," but it is "often bolted down in social establishments" (254). Similarly, Mead considers the self only in relation to other selves: "[t]he human individual is a self only in so far as he takes the attitude of another toward himself" (25) by which Mead means that the individual belongs to a group that cooperates for a common activity. In other words, the individual must become a generalized Other. "Each person, however, over the course of his or her personal history, is a member of a unique combination of social categories" (Stets & Burke 2000: 225), and of course each category comes with expectations with regard to one's own and others' behaviors.[4] But then what happens when those activities, or expectations, do not belong, or no longer belong to one's own nature? Indeed, using Goffman's words there is sometimes a "crucial discrepancy between our all-too-human selves and our socialized selves" (36). If life becomes a pre–existing ceremony, as Sartre and Shakespeare claim, what are the consequences for those who do not accept to adapt, or even perform?

In order to answer these questions, I will dissect fictional characters with the intention of casting a light on the process of expecting, interpreting, assimilating, and rejecting the perception of others. With a full knowledge that art is mimesis of life and literature is a window into reality, what I am actually doing is observing how we react to the outsider gaze.

[3] The reference to the play "As You Like It" contains the act, the scene, and line numbers.

[4] Scholarship in social identity theory and identity theory is too vast to summarize. For a fuller discussion, I suggest Turner et al. (1987) as ice-breaker text. Stryker (1980) offers theories that deal principally with the components of a structured society, such as expectations.

Pirandello: outcasts and madmen

Pirandello mimics himself by reproducing thematic blocks from the structure of a short story to that of a novel and finally re-elaborating the whole for the theater. With Luca Somigli, Pirandello's world is a "universe empty of meaning" (86). And that is because with Pirandello there are no absolutes. The Twentieth-century has accepted the impossibility of obtaining absolute knowledge. After Quantum physics and its discoveries, terms such as truth, evidence, and certainty are replaced by concepts such as probability and temporality. Reality cannot then be grasped in its totality. Pirandello's work must therefore be placed within the Weltanschauung of reaction to positivism, naturalism, and determinism within the vitalist philosophies of life and the tragedy of the modern soul. With Pirandello, the reader is immersed in a nihilist universe where possibilities are denied: the possibility to discern sanity from madness, right from wrong, reality from illusion.[5] The issue of relativism is well expressed in the 1917 drama *Right You Are! (if You Think So).* The ambiguous relationship within the Ponza family is meant to never reach a definitive version of truth. The intertwined points of view make it impossible for any of the characters to discover what truth is. Similarly, it seems difficult to determine the motives of the central characters in "Each in His Own Way" (1924) as it is not possible to decipher whether Henry in "Henry IV" (1921) is sane or mad.

In its most nihilist approach, Pirandello denies tout-court the possibility to know who the Other is. Indeed, "the reader is confronted with the most pessimistic of all positions-nihilism of knowledge, where not the character, nor the author, nor the reader can know the answer" (Fiskin 1948: 44). In a classic essay, Hubert C. Heffner explains Pirandello's conception of man as "subjective isolation" that is trapped within our subjectivism, "we interpret the acts of others in our own terms and our own word" (36).

Famously, Pirandello attached his theoretical success to the dichotomy between dynamic life and illusion, that is the form (mask), the world of social judgments which instead is always static:[6]

[5] Of course, the notion of reality conceived as illusion is well rooted in Western philosophy. The Platonic Cave allegory is the foundational stone of which Pirandello, as a student of philosophy at the University of Bonn, was well aware of.

[6] Relevant to note, the term *persona*, Italian for "person," is also the root for "personality" and the Greek word employed originally to signify "mask." In this vein, a person, as an identity, a personality, is by definition a mask. A more extended summary of the use of the term "persona" is in Heffner (1957).

> [l]ife must obey two needs which, being opposed to each other, do not allow it to consist permanently or to always move. If life always moved, it would never consist: if it consisted forever, it would no longer move. And life must consist and move. (Pirandello, *Maschere Nude*: 231)

Life must be contained in order to exist, it has to assume a shape, a personality, an idea, a leading concept, but the moment it is contained it ceases to live. To live is to have a form but "each form is a death [...] Very few know that. [...] But once they have attained it, they think they have mastered their lives. Instead, however, they begin to die" (Pirandello, "The Wheelbarrow": 121).[7] In other words, the notion of identity is the by-product of the dynamic between life-flow and form: "[i]dentity is nothing more than a fixed form, one of the masks within which we must experience life, and our feelings" (Melcer-Padon 2015: 359). But because each form is conventionally static, a form is somewhat of a mask, a trap, a sort of death.

The concept is well expressed in the essay "On Humor" (1908): human beings, without knowing it, are wearing a mask, an etiquette through which one is recognized by others: "[t]he soul of our race-or the collectivity of which we are a part- lives in each individual soul. The pressures of others' judgment, of other people's ways of feeling and acting, are felt by us in the unconscious" (50). Humor is the tool that allows Pirandello to discover our double nature: to be unique but to be only as social masks.[8] The mask is indeed a social construct in the sense that it is given by the Other: "I see the form that others, not I myself, have given me, and I feel that in this form my life, a true individual life,

[7] An interesting position but one that would take me far from my line of research is George Santayana's view, according to whom to crystallize one's soul into an idea is to transform our conscience into a social duty. "Under our published principles and plighted language we must assiduously hide' all the inequalities of our moods and conduct, and this without hypocrisy, since our deliberate character is more truly ourself than is the flux of our involuntary dreams" (133–134).

[8] While the notion of humorism is essential to understand Pirandello's universe, it is not essential for this manuscript. Humor is at first comic, something runs contrary to the normal expectations of everyday life, it is the "perception of the opposite" (avvertimento del contrario). In a second moment there is mediation and reflection from our side, thus human compassion and sympathy are brought in, it is the "sentiment of the opposite" (sentimento del contrario). In the characteristic passage from perception to sentiment, we understand the other's aspiration and misery. Famous example is that of the old lady done with heavy make-up. At first, she looks ridiculous, but after humorist reflection we perceive that beneath that surface image there is the atavistic desire of tricking time by looking young. Humourism, therefore, becomes a theory of compassion.

has never existed" (Pirandello, "The Wheelbarrow": 121). At large, what is commonly termed 'the crisis of modern consciousness' becomes in Pirandello a split between one's consciousness of one's own identity (Self) and the Other within (society). Consequently, if to have a consciousness, a tragic consciousness, is to be aware of the others in ourselves, then Pirandello's characters are all tragic. Vitangelo Moscarda, the main character in *One, None and a Hundred-thousand,* knows the full extent of his discovery: "it was precisely because I possessed this accurate-mirroring consciousness that I was mad" (55). And dramatically, when sanity comes back after twenty years, Pirandello has Henry IV discover that his private world had more dignity than the outside reality in which "we mask ourselves with that which we appear to be" (*Henry IV*: 44). At the roots of their, to some extent, pathological restlessness, is their incapacity of maintaining the social contract: "[a]s human beings we are presumably creatures of variable impulse with moods and energies that change from one moment to the next. As characters put on for an audience, however, we must not be subject to ups and downs" (Goffman 1990: 37). Instead, Pirandello has designed protagonists who follow their sensations and their tragic consciousness regardless of the consequences.

With *The Late Mattia Pascal*, Pirandello's modernism reaches its novelistic maturity (Dombroski 2003: "The Foundations" 92) because it characterizes as a "broader crisis of representation" (Subialka 2015: 80).[9] As everywhere in Pirandello, this is a text rooted in the notion of identity and mask. Fiora Bassanese observes that "masks and, by extension, identities are constantly shifting, evincing one of Pirandello's defining concepts: the multiplicity and changeability of the human personality" (79). Mattia Pascal, a man burdened by unhappy circumstances, stages suicide and invents the identity of Adriano Meis in order to escape family obligations. Yet, he will discover in the end that the new personality is no freedom but death. Adriano does not legally exist, and has no official documents of any kind, many rights are denied to him. He cannot apply for employment; he cannot buy a house; he cannot be acknowledged as a hero when he defends a woman on the street for fear of being questioned by the authorities, nor can he make a complaint to the police when he is robbed. He cannot even own a dog, as a discreet partner, since he should buy a license first: "[a] great thing, this liberty of mine," he muttered as he walked off in drizzle, "but a bit of a tyrant, too, if it denies me the privilege even

[9] Scholarship on Pirandello's experimental forms and modernism is expansive. For insightful overviews see Subialka (2015) and Gradair (2001).

of buying a poor puppy out of its misery" (122). By becoming Adriano Meis, Mattia has reinvented the form, the mask, the physical appearance, but not the content, which consists not only of the construct of the self each person puts together throughout one's life, but also of the construct put together of that person by others. With reason, Nourit Melcer-Padon writes: "[l]iving as Adriano, Mattia feels he is less himself than he was before" (364) and that is because without social ties, beyond the protection and security of citizenship, one would necessarily find oneself outside of life.

At this stage, as he cannot exist as Adriano Meis, he has to kill Adriano Meis in order to regain, the old identity of Mattia Pascal. Yet, he cannot step back into his former self for that identity, as father and husband, no longer exists: "[m]y wife is Pomino's wife and I could not really say who I am now" (213). Pirandello has this conclusion explained with a visual image. After his eye surgery and after a haircut, the new hat that Mattia has bought on the way back home no longer fits: "I had to adjust it with the barber's help, by stuffing some paper into the lining" (193). The reason for both failures is that an identity must rely on a socially recognizable self. Life needs a mask and a mask needs a community to deliver meaning through recognition. In this case, neither Adriano nor Mattia have a community willing to sanction their existence, or someone to validate their identity. Back at the hometown, Mattia agrees to remain 'socially dead,' in order to safeguard his wife's new family, and he finds refuge in the dilapidated and deconsecrated church.

At this altitude, it seems to me that one of the narrative's aims is to reconsider the notion of freedom. To enjoy life in its nakedness and infinite freedom, outside of all forms and constructions into which society, history, and events of each particular existence have channeled its course, cannot be done (Tilgher 1923: 166). We are instead mediated by institutions. The message behind the text's dramatic finale is that no community, secular or religious, can function without some sort of regulation. Seemingly, Mattia has committed two mistakes: he transgressed social conventions and he succumbed to fantasies of irresponsible freedom. In between he fathered an illegitimate son, he disregarded the sanctity of marriage, he rendered his wife's second marriage void and her child illegitimate. Pirandello punishes Mattia according to the canons of a poetic justice. Mattia, who always disregarded moral and social regulation lives now in a Church, symbol of moral guidance. Mattia who was incapable of domesticating his life does now write down his life in a sort of written record, thus he is forcing his life into a solid, unchangeable form. And Mattia Pascal, who is fated to remain forgotten by the majority, comes alive only

when a reader comes across Pirandello's text, that is to say, Mattia lives only through the conventional mainstream. However, there is another conclusion to be observed. Mattia is transformed into a zombie-like figure, an outsider of society. He fled from what he considered to be a stifling life, he tore off the social mask that was given to him, his family, his job, his social obligations, and his moral responsibilities. The final image is that of an outcast**.** He lives now on the outskirts of society a lonely individual with no future prospects: "I should go on living, as I had lived, by and for myself! Not a fascinating prospect" (132). A life without a mask but also a body without a life.

Not to comply and to be mad

The impossibility of living without a mask is the impossibility of living without society. With *One, None and a Hundred Thousand,* Pirandello adds an additional twist. In the introductory note, he writes: "[t]his book not only depicts dramatically, but at the same time demonstrates by what might be termed a mathematical method, the impossibility of any human creature's being to others what he is to himself" (1). The final meaning is that of a duplicity in our being between what we believe we are and what others believe we are. To live is not to be able to see our own life, yet the others have this privilege. The narrator Vitangelo Moscarda, in this sense, is incomplete because he is not for himself what he is for the others and deeply paradoxical because he is condemned to feeling (sensing) himself live without ever seeing (knowing) himself live. The problem of expectations is wide open.

Modernist impulses converge here in the protagonist's desire to "give up his claim to stable identity in favor of a vitalistic, mystical embrace of the external world" (Subialka 2015: 89). Moscarda, is a proud but good-for-nothing twenty-eight-year-old, heir to a considerable fortune. He is the director of a bank inherited from his father but he knows very little about it. While others manage the bank, he enjoys a life of leisure. The novel, more a compendium of Pirandello's thoughts, begins with Moscarda's wife, Dida, observing an imperfection that he had never noticed: his nose tilts to the right. An innocent remark sets off a crisis of identity that brings Moscarda to deconstruct the mosaic of identities the others associate him with: "I made up my mind to find out who I was, at least to those closest to me, acquaintances so-called, and to amuse myself by maliciously decomposing the I that I was to them" (25). Hence, it is

that Moscarda becomes the height of Pirandello's fiction, a man whose non-conformism becomes an official pathology. Ultimately Moscarda's experiment ends with the complete psychological dissolution of character.

At stake, there is the defining issue of authenticity. How can we possibly be authentic if the image we have of ourselves does not match the one (s) others have of us? In Moscarda's words: "[i]f I was not for others what up to then I had believed myself to be to myself, what was I?" (15). Moscarda, nicknamed Genge, is one individual as long as the perception he has of himself is the same as that perceived by everyone else. However, when he discovers that the others see him differently from the way he regards himself, he is no longer 'one' but 'a hundred thousand.' Not surprisingly, in so long his identity depends on the perceptions of other individuals, he becomes a stranger to himself: "[h]ow could I endure this stranger within me? This stranger who was I myself to me?" (18). Thus, by being fractured into the plurality of others, he is no one. According to Goffman, the problem arises when "the performer may not be taken in at all by his own routine" (10), that is to say, that Moscarda no longer accepts his given, socially recognized identity. "When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical" (Goffman 1990: 10). Moscarda, more than Mattia Pascal, has understood that the self is a social construct: "our consciousness vanishes, since what we believe to be our most intimate possession, our consciousness, means simply *others in us,* and we in ourselves are unable to perceive it" (*One*: 109). Hence, in sociological terms, "[t]hrough the process of self-categorization or identification, an identity is formed" (Stets et al., 224), otherwise stated the self can name itself only in relation to other categories. Moscarda's problem is that he does not picture himself as member of any categories, and the "persons who differ from the self are categorized as the out-group" (Stets & Burke 2000: 225). Pirandello pushes the concept to the extreme transforming a cynical behavior into an act of madness. Accordingly, Moscarda decides to decompose all of his social masks, which others mistake for his identity and by which they think to spot his essence. In pursuit of his goal of self-decomposition, he gradually commits a set of social suicides such as evicting a long-standing tenant to later donate to the same tenant a more comfortable house, forcing the bank into liquidation, and donating all his possessions to charity. This is what Goffman terms "communication out of character" (108) which is the moment in which the performer engages with "information incompatible with the impression officially maintained during [previous] interaction" (108). By so doing, Moscarda denies the mechanism that shapes his life, the mask that

he symbolically wears and the category of profit that he represents. Properly, "[t]he gesture that Vitangelo Moscarda makes, with the sale of the its goods, has this subversive value: [...] the denial and rejection of the (bourgeois) life system that is embodied in that image" (Masiello 1994: 529).[10]

While Moscarda is rather euphoric, Pirandello is clearly pessimistic regarding his protagonist's success. There is no escape from the dismissal of the ego nor from this miserable condition of being. Paradoxically, the lucidity of Moscarda's action earned him the label of "madman." While attempting to prove that he could be someone different from the man he was believed to be, Moscarda is branded with a pathological condition of sorts. Needless to say, madness as a tool of destruction is a *topos* of much of XIX–XX century European literature and this is because insanity is potentially subversive. Rejection of current behaviors, opinions, and codified models of living mine the stability and credibility of a given community. Madness, therefore stands as an act of freedom that breaks the world order.

While with Mattia Pascal, Pirandello makes of his protagonist an outcast victim of that alienation pervasive in contemporary society, with Vitangelo Moscarda the action of removing the mask leads to a madness of sort. With his retreat to a hospice in the countryside, Moscarda has found his solution outside the actual social system. But can isolation ever be a solution? After Moscarda destroys his social masks, he is defined for what he no longer is (a money lander, Genge) but not for whatever new form he has assumed. Indeed, "the ego's identity emerged from the destruction of Vitangelo Moscarda's"logic of reality" can only be defined in negative terms" (Masiello 1994: 530). Pirandello seems willing to strike a positive tone with his bucolic finale:

> I am alive, and I reach no conclusion. Life knows no conclusion. Nor does it know anything of names. This tree, tremulous breathing of new leaves. I am this tree. Tree, cloud; tomorrow, book or breeze; the book I read, the breeze I drink in. Living wholly without, a vagabond. (106–107)

Moscarda rejects fixed, static, unchanging constructs. He chooses a life in the countryside free from imposed conditions, social obligations, historical significance. In truth, it is a negative utopia the one offered by Pirandello. The last solution is not a pastoral harmony with the universe but madness or fake

[10] Unless otherwise stated, translations from Italians are mine.

madness. Moscarda has placed himself outside human existence, society, and history. Far from being a solution, Pirandello wrote a tale of self-exclusion from the social world, rejection of social order with its values, thus destruction of those institutions that make identity possible. "Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in a correspondingly appropriate way" (Goffman 1990: 6). Yet, as much as for Mattia Pascal, after Moscarda has destroyed his social identities, he is no longer recognized and therefore he cannot be treated in any "appropriate way." The moving but expected conclusion is that the self can be only in a system of relations with the other, or it cannot be at all: "I was alone. […] To whom was I to say 'I'? Of what use to say 'I', if one were to be at once caught up into the horror of this infinite void, this infinite solitude?" (82). Without a mask, we are called to contemplate a nihilist dimension of void and solitude, a profound isolation that does not bring freedom but death.

Such a conclusion also reminds us that social relationships are likely to arise only when the individual performs the same part to the same audience. While Mattia Pascal and Vitangelo Moscarda did not, Gregor Samsa complied with the definition. And the result is monstrous.

Kafkaesque monsters

Kafka's characters are bitter to the extreme. Insignificant protagonists entangled in a world they cannot possibly comprehend. Indeed, Kafka's universe is a space between realism and surrealism where two entities are at odds: an incompressible bureaucracy and an isolated individual. Time moves forward but it seems always the same day. Hence, characters are entrapped within paradoxical events always reproducing an identical sequence. As the historical movement is denied, the endless repetition of daily routines adds vanity and meaninglessness to the process. The definition of space is altogether very complex and banal: a labyrinth of possibilities that contributes creating a feeling of anxiety and alienation that covers the entire narrative.

What is the *Metamorphosis* about? Since its publication *Metamorphosis* has been subjected to definition attempts: an "extended metaphor," the "inverted fairy tale," or "parable of human irrationality" (Sokel 1956: 203). Douglas Angus considers it a story of "loneliness and exclusion, of physical inferiority, and of

an ingrained hypochondria" (70). Elias Canetti's judgment is plain: "[i]n *The Metamorphosis* Kafka reached the height of his mastery: he wrote something which he could never surpass, because there is nothing which The Metamorphosis could be surpassed by-one of the few great, perfect poetic works of this century" (22–23). Students of Marxism, literature, religion, philosophy, psychoanalysis (dominant record), political and social criticism have analyzed it. Freudians consider the metamorphosis as retribution for an Oedipal rebellion; psychoanalysis stresses Gregor's desire to punish, by means of his incapacity to work, the family that had enslaved him. Neo-historicists see in the text Kafka's empirical personality, his conflictual relationship with his father and women. Social and Marxist criticism consider Gregor as the deformed products of an alienating process of production while political analysis explains Gregor's death as "his proletarianization and his political impotence within a pseudopatriarchal structure" (Corngold 1988: 84). Those are all plausible standpoints, yet no single reading invalidates or finally provides the story's significance.

In the *Metamorphosis,* Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman, wakes one morning to find himself transformed into a giant insect, a cockroach, a monster as it goes.[11] The narrative climax is reached with the first sentence: "[w]hen Gregor Samsa1 woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin" (3). The first issue at stake is to decide whether Gregor, who has assumed the body of an insect, is still a person or not. While his taste for food changes, he prefers leftovers and rotten vegetables (23), he maintains self-awareness. In fact, he keeps worrying about his family's financial issues. A person is someone that has "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection" (Locke 448). Let us assume that Locke's definition is valid. In that case, because the insect retains the ability to feel and think as a human being, the insect is surely Gregor Samsa. Thus, we must wonder whether we truly have a metamorphosis or not. This vacuum of significance is the essence of Kafka.

The *Metamorphosis* is essentially a story of invalidation: " 'Metamorphosis' is about invalidation, our self-invalidations and our invalidations of others; and it does nothing-offers us nothing morally-but this vision of how we do it" (Straus 1989: 652). If this reading is correct, then at first the narration is about Gregor invalidating his father. The father–son conflict is essentially a struggle for

[11] The image of the beetle had already appeared in "Wedding Preparations in the Country" (1907) an unfinished novel whose protagonist splits his self. His authentic self stays at home in bed in the form of a gigantic beetle, and his clothed body (his façade) walks the world.

power in the Oedipal tradition.[12] The son becomes stronger than the father the moment he becomes the family breadwinner. Meanwhile, the father is defeated by his very same condition: out of work "he was an old man who had not worked for the past five years" (27) and out of shape, "he had gained a lot of weight and as a result has become fairly sluggish" (27). However, in a second moment, it is the father to invalidate Gregor by transforming Gregor's victory over the clerk for example, into a ruinous defeat. After the chief clerk left, the father "[w]ith a hostile expression […] clenched his fist" (14), stamped his feet, "seized in his right hand the manager's cane […] picked up in his left hand a heavy newspaper" and "started brandishing the cane and the newspaper" (18) as if to drive Gregor back into his room. The merciless attack of the father upon the son, epitomized by the mortal wound inflicted on Gregor with the apple scene, results for Gregor in a solitary confinement which eventually will lead to his death. Under this Oedipal perspective, the metamorphosis is not an external event but a symbolical internal change, a self-punishment for his earlier strive against the father. Critics, such as Nina Pelikan Straus observes the fact that the narrative not only is about Gregor but also Grete's metamorphosis from being only Gregor's sister to being essentially Grete: "it is mainly Grete, woman, daughter, sister, on whom the social and psychoanalytic resonances of the text depend" (652). Grete developing into an independent and responsible woman *nolens volens* invalidates her brother who, on the contrary, becomes dependent on her. When at the end she utters the extreme solution, "[m]y dear parents […] we have to try to get rid of it" (37), the pronoun "it" epitomizes the extent of his process of invalidation.

However, it would be to belittle Kafka's significance to see this text as nothing more than a metaphor. I will, therefore, read *Metamorphosis* from a Pirandellian perspective, that is to say, as a tale of self and sacrifice.

Letters written to his biographer Max Brod reveal the astonishing similarity between Kafka's and Samsa's life at the time Kafka wrote *Metamorphosis:*

> I was thinking only of how my mother whimpers to me almost every evening that I really should look in on the factory […] I [realize] with perfect clarity now only two possibilities remain open to me, either to jump out of the window […] or in the next two weeks to go daily to the factory. (*Diaries*: 89)

[12] Kafka's *Diaries* reveal his familiarity with Freud's work. Whether Kafka had Freud in mind when he wrote *Metamorphosis* cannot be said.

Kafka's writing was affected by his work in the insurance company and by his duties in his father's factory. Resentment ran deep in him to the point that Kafka contemplated suicide. On the other hand, the strong link he felt for his family[13] and his equally strong sense of responsibility made it impossible for him to rebel:

> Having as a rule depended on others, I have an infinite longing for independence, self-reliance, freedom in all directions; I would rather wear blinkers and go my own way to the bitter end, than have my vision distorted by being in the midst of frenzied family life. (*Letters to Felice*: 722)

Then, of course, there is his fear of his father, the key figure behind Kafka's transcendence and silence. Everyone who read *Letter to my Father* (1919) feels that Kafka, when writing, is dealing with his own personal life, specifically his conflict with his father, an imposing presence who became a haunting ghost:

> [a]ll I have written has been about you. I only poured it out in it what I could not pour out on your breast. It was a deliberately prolonged farewell to you, a farewell imposed by you, though I determined its course. (*Letter to my Father*: 25)

The pitiless judges in *The Trial* (1925) and the inaccessible authority in *The Castle* (1926) are expressionist representations of his father, but while in *The Castle* Kafka tries to penetrate the incomprehensible and arbitrary mastermind of his life, in *The Trail* he is worn out by it. The same is seen in *Metamorphosis* where the hardworking son is reduced to an insect. Given that, *Metamorphosis* is not so much a fiction as an indiscretion into the secret life of a family, asking: "[i]s it perhaps delicate and discreet to talk about the bugs in one's own family?" (Janouch, *Conversations*: 42). Therefore, Samsa is a traveling salesman and the salesman becomes a cockroach. But Samsa is also equal to Kafka by which we infer that Kafka thinks of himself as a cockroach. The metaphor can easily be translated as "I am like an insect." Under this frame, the *Metamorphosis* assumes the symbolism of Kafka's miserable domestic condition, a victim to his family contingent upon Samsa's progressive loss of independence. But why has Kafka turned a man, or himself, into an insect?

[13] In a letter to his sister Elli dated autumn 1921, Kafka defines his bond to his family as a "intellectual incest" (*Letters to Friends*: 362).

To comply and to be monsters

A common view is that the insect is a symbol of escape: "[u]ndeniably the story suggests a grotesque escape (through the change of Gregor's male body into a subhuman form) from Gregor's burdensome patriarchal obligations (an insect cannot be expected to pay off debts), but it is also about Gregor's exchange of roles within his family" (Straus 1989: 655). Under this view, the metamorphosis is the intervening moment that made change possible. Gregor is not sick, indeed he has a voracious appetite "he was even hungrier than he had been in the morning" (20). Becoming an insect is Gregor's act of rebellion for it sets him free. At the same it absolves him from having to make a choice between his yearning to be free "I'm going to make the big break" and his responsibility to his parents: "once I've gotten the money together to pay off my parents' debt" (4).[14] In Sokel's words: "the metamorphosis enables Gregor to become free and stay"innocent," a mere victim of uncontrollable calamity" (206). In the introduction to *Metamorphosis,* Stanley Corngold suggests that the 'creature' is "a sign of the unnatural being in Kafka – the writer" (xix). Hence, the vermin would be the allegory of those who 'are different.' Kafka was indeed different for he was a writer in a family of merchants. Accordingly, Corngold argues that the loss of human shape is the defining factor that produces Gregor's rejection from the social community: "the mere loss of language would not result in isolation and insignificance" (*The Metamorphosis*: 59). Yet, this reading does not seem correct. Gregor was first rejected by the greater society and then became a vermin. I side with Douglas Angus who considers the *Metamorphosis* as the pessimistic parody of *The Beauty and the Beast* type of fairy tale. While in the original tale, a monster is transformed back into a person by love, Kafka's text seems to say, "I am not loved because I am repulsive" (71). Love, in other words, is tested by disgust, and in *Metamorphosis,* love is found lacking. "In Kafka's world love fails to overcome horror and the"beauty" (Gregor's sister) condemns the "beast" (Gregor) to die instead of re-transforming him with her kiss" (Sokel 1956: 204). Lack of love can possibly turn people into monsters, but lack of self-fulfillment also does. Ergo, I suggest a different approach. Kafka has

[14] On the theme, Walter Soken notes that this yearning for freedom was, of course, Kafka's own. In a letter to his fiancée Felice Bauer, Kafka wrote: "I, who for the most part have been a dependent creature, have an infinite yearning for independence and freedom in all things" (166–167).

transformed an average man into a monster as a warning for those who allow the self to be manipulated into something different than one's own aspirations.

Gregor Samsa is fundamentally a defeated man. His life is empty of meaningful work, friendship, love, any form of relationship. He has experienced an outer failure in terms of inter-personal relationships and an inner failure in terms of self-realization. He acknowledges it when in a moment of self-awareness he sees through his routine: "constantly seeing new faces, no relationships that last or get more intimate" (4). In this case implicit is the conclusion that a man without significant relations, self-consciously estranged from the social context, is like a solitary insect. Fragile and insignificant.

Yet, there is more to it than that. We should understand the insect as a monster. In fact, the sight of him is frightening (22) "repulsive" (29), and repelling (42). Gregor is another type of outcast, a homeless man for his own self is alien to him. He has been increasingly dissatisfied with his job: "I've got the torture of traveling, worrying about changing trains, eating miserable food at all hours, […] To the devil with it all!" (4). The chief clerk is a tyrant who addresses the employees only in terms of business performance and he does it as if he were seated on a throne: "he sits on the desk and talks down from the heights to the employees" (4). Gregor feels diminished, "he was a tool of the boss" (5), and consequently, he nurtures resentment. The office manager comes to the apartment to accuse Gregor of negligence, "[y]our performance of late has been very unsatisfactory" (11), and threatens him with dismissal: "such a thing cannot be tolerated" (11). While the managers' tone simplifies the impersonality and inhumanity of the world Samsa-Kafka deplores, it might be correct to say that Gregor suffers from depersonalization, that is "seeing the self as an embodiment of the in-group prototype rather than as a unique individual" (Stets et al., 231). The self is considered in terms of the social role it embodies and because his social role is mediocre so is his self. He fantasizes about telling his boss off, "I would have […] spoken my piece from the bottom of my heart" (4), but he cannot.[15] Gregor has to inhibit his rebellious spirit for he has to pay back a debt that his father contracted after the family business collapsed. Not only he has to keep working for the system he despises, but this is also a choice that requires sacrifice: "[i]f I didn't hold back for my parents' sake, I would have

[15] Gregor Samsa fantasizing about taking a revenge on his boss closely reminds Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, with the Underground Man, who after having been offended by an officer in a tavern, (being the offense 'lack of notice' from the officer), plotting his revenge in many ways without ever bringing himself to execute his plan.

quit long ago" (4). Gregor is expected to fulfill a duty to his family and some more to the work unit, "I'm under so many obligations" (15), and therefore he must repress his true self. "Each participant is expected to suppress his immediate heartfelt feelings, […] The maintenance of this surface of agreement, this veneer of consensus, is facilitated by each participant concealing his own wants" (Goffman 4). This is what Moscarda cannot do and Samsa does. Unlike Mattia Pascal, Gregor does not escape family obligations. But because he fulfils them, he becomes a monster.

As in an expressionist painting, Kafka has designed an expressionist failure. Gregor's speech deterioration recalls the modernist language failure. The patterns of communication have been severed. Grete tries to maintain regular contact with Gregor, but she fails. "If Gregor," the narrator says, "had only been able to speak to his sister" (22), hinting at the possibility of a new harmony. Thus, "for want of communication and a reciprocity of relations, Gregor's position in the family disintegrates and his sense of self erodes" (Sweeney 30). Gregor is cut off from humanity, isolated, confined in his bedroom, his bedroom being locked as it were (symbolically) the invincible climax of modern alienation. Kafka might be insinuating here that lack of communication generates loss of significance. The loss of the body, that is the loss of a human form, is the metaphorical image he uses to formulate despair.

The terrible truth behind his repression is that no one suspects what Gregor truly thinks: "[h]is parents did not understand this too well; in the course of the years they had formed the conviction that Gregor was set for life in this firm" (16). They had never understood that there was something amiss in Gregor long before the metamorphosis, namely that his life was a sacrifice to him. With Gregor becoming a vermin, his spiritual distortion assumes visible features, that is an animal beyond human comprehension that can never be understood. When his sister refers to him as "it" the destruction of self is complete. In this sense, metamorphosis is not an escape but an unconscious punishment. Gregor remains a humiliated moral personality. In the end, his incapacity is extended to his body: "he could no longer move at all" (51). Thus, he "thought back on his family with deep emotion and love" (51), but this memory of salvation is met by death. His death at night is the death of the self. Incapable of becoming an identity-per-se, confronting the rejecting of those who were in charge to give him an identity, he emotionally and socially starves to death. Gregor's body is demolished and humiliated as the cleaning woman "pushed Gregor's corpse with her broom good distance sideways" (52). As some sort of poetic justice, Gregor who was not able to lead his life and impose his

identity upon the identity imposed on him, is now addressed with a gender-neutral pronoun: "[c]ome and have a look," the cleaning woman announces, "it's croaked; it's lying there, dead as a doornail!" (52). In his *Diaries,* Kafka himself expressed displeasure at the novella's "unreadable ending" (12): "[m]y little story is finished, but today's ending does not please me at all; it really could have been done better, there is no doubt about this" (91). Seemingly, the blossomed and good-looking Grete, "it would soon be time, too, to find her a good husband" (42) introduces a false sense of closure in the face of Gregor's and the family's catastrophe.

And yet, if we read *Metamorphosis* from the Pirandellian self-perspective, not only the ending makes sense, but it is also the only possible ending. Kafka seems to conclude that Gregor has been punished because immersion in the will of the family to the detriment of one's self invariably means individual extinction. His repressed hostility toward his family, his job, his unfulfilled universe of expectations has destroyed first his soul and then his body. The monstrous figure is nothing more than the climax of a secret story of violations, repression, and guilt. The message, although more figurative, is the same as in Pirandello: identity is distorted by not becoming what one wants to be. Which also means that if Gregor had been able to express his anger, deal with his desires, antagonize his parents, all in all, if he had been capable of rebelling without repressing, destroying the given mask rather than endorsing it, then the metamorphosis would not have happened. Becoming 'a monster,' the degree of which only circumstances can tell, is, therefore, the fate of all those who have chosen 'Bad Faith' over authenticity and the tragedy of all those who are defeated by the tyranny of social roles. In this sense, the tone of falseness and banality of the ending does not destroy the philosophical tensions of the text but confirms its essence. It was indeed, the banality of Gregor's choice and the falseness of his environment to kill him.

Concluding remarks: what has to be done?

As it is in the best modernist tradition, by making disintegration the focus of their art, Pirandello and Kafka proclaim the dissolution of the individual psyche. Narrative follows the modernist course enclosed between the extreme ends of an artificial optimism and a nihilistic pessimism. Yet, we should consider their work as unfinished. Indeed, it stretches into contemporaneity. A great tragic al-

legory of the process of homogenization, alienation and depersonalization that marks, with the force of necessity, the human condition in the historical time of mass society, cultural industry and video games as mass media. In truth, the dissolution of the self among countless dimensions, points of view, possibilities and cultural paradigms, is the artistic and sociological affair throughout the century. With Pirandello's and Kafka's narrative, we obtain the closest affinity to the postmodern shipwreck. Fully aware of meaningless, without significant relations, cut off from society, contemporary man shrinks into the nothingness of the virtual.

With Pirandello rules the idea that the self is a social construct given by the Other, ergo everyone has multiple personalities. To an existence lived as representation, appearance, mask, Pirandello offers two alternatives. Estrangement, self-exclusion from the social order, or madness. There is also the possibility to go back to the original mask in order to be recognized. In each case, life becomes a segment of dejection and loneliness. "The Pirandellian spectator is visited by a vague, irritated malaise. I would say that it is almost impossible to love Pirandello." And this is because "Pirandello intends to deny his characters (martyred by others and by themselves, by madness, by illness, by jealousy, and by the very impossibility of understanding, […] any liberation" (Macchia 2000: 35). As it happens, liberation through artificial insanity, as for Vitangelo Moscarda, or by embracing life in its extreme representations, as for Mattia Pascal, does not last too long. Hence, characters are bounced back into the game of broken mirrors, trapped in their own chamber of torture. None of those characters can live according to their will and neither can they die on the stage as a Shakespearian name. They are fated to remain suspended in a room, on a stage without conclusion, a definitive salvation, always in between their true being and the matching representation.

Without a way out, Pirandello is stuck in a paradox. He has perceived that the individual ceases to be such when instincts are suppressed. On the other hand, his narrative is a warning of what will happen to anyone who succumbs to fantasies of irresponsible freedom. Choosing oneself over social conventions and the relative masks is to choose a social death. On the contrary, Kafka with Gregor Samsa has chosen the Other. Kafka is aware that there are overwhelming and mysterious forces at work, that life is a riddle, a mystery, more like an assumption than a theory. His work intends to penetrate the enigmatic relations of this world, human beings and their fragile relation to the environment around them, by mixing surrealism and realism. By way of example, K.'s arrival at the *Castel* and his struggle with invisible authorities, the inexplicable arrest

of Joseph K. in *The Trial,* or Gregor's waking into a vermin. Thus, the question arises: what is the meaning of life for those who are incapable of finding a connection with reality? Kafka did not have an answer, his heroes struggle before surrendering,[16] while the reader senses that the meaning lingers on what is left unsaid. Otherwise, as Camus has noticed, "[t]he whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to reread. His endings, or his absence of endings, suggest explanations which, however, are not revealed in clear language but, before they seem justified, require that the story be reread from another point of view" (78). Gregor Samsa has sacrificed his will for the sake of someone else's desire. Turning into a monster is less a matter of choice than it is a vicious circle of expectations.

That of Pirandello and Kafka is a cruel narrative. They trap their characters in a chamber of torture with no way out. Clumsy at times in facing a reality they acknowledge as absurd, they are prone to irrationalism and yet gifted with a sharp, magnificent reason that enables them to challenge the relativity of human construction. There seems to be no salvation. The encounter with the Other generates either madness or death. In sum, life, to Pirandello and Kafka, is a tragedy to the one who feels.

In the attempt to strike a positive cord, I feel to say that if interactions are to persist, then we have to maintain the precarious state of affairs in which the self must appear as what it is not. If we believe with Goffman that "[a] certain bureaucratization of the spirit is expected so that we can be relied upon" (37), then the mask not necessarily is an evil spirit that 'steals' the soul. Mead confirms Goffman's opinion with a sharp remark: "[w]e must be others if we are to be ourselves" (27). At the basis of both Goffman's and Mead's conclusion there is the idea that if people have a common object, social conduct can be better controlled. While Herbert Marcuse was horrified by this perspective,[17] yet the perspective is less dramatic if we accept the fact that what we 'are' and what we 'seem to be' are both constituted in society. "I would not say that substance exists for the sake of appearance, or faces for the sake of masks, […]

[16] Accordingly, in *The Trial*, the court bureaucracy asks Josef K. consent to kill him. As he denies it, a suicide becomes a state homicide to which he has no force to oppose. Yet his denial is his struggle.

[17] In *One Dimensional Man* (1964) Marcuse's theory is that advanced industrial societies have produced a repressive state of conformity in which the production of needs and aspirations by the entertainment industry is meant to reduce the individual into passivity and integrate one into the standard societies.

Nothing arises in nature for the sake of anything else; all these phases and products are involved equally in the round of existence" (Santayana 132). In sum, the mask's function is to allow a compromise. To give a homogeneous performance at the appointed time is a good compromise considering that as we live on we do confront new situations, and thus we are forced to create, endlessly, a new self.

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