

Literary Criticism as Quadratic Position-taking in Cultural Production: Symbolic and Pragmatic Implications

The Pirandello-Tilgher Case

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to elucidate the key characteristics of the critical text from both a symbolic and a pragmatic viewpoint. My perspective combines the Bourdieusian notion of literary field with a development of Genette's theories on the nature of paratext. On the one hand, critical texts should be considered, from a pragmatic viewpoint, as a quadratic position-taking: i.e., as a position-taking focused on another position-taking, which coincides with the literary text. On the other hand, critical texts can be regarded as part of the paratext, and, precisely, as a special *allo-graphic epitext* that cannot be reduced to the author's will. Hence, this material and interactional position-taking has crucial semantic consequences, being embodied in five hermeneutic devices, i.e.: selection, interpretative description, comparison, framing and explicit valorization. By providing a specific slant on the literary text, the critical text triggers assessment dynamics and sometimes paves the way to several forms of mutual interaction between authors and critics. To illustrate my point, I explore the relationship between the famous dramatist Luigi Pirandello and one of his most important critics, Adriano Tilgher, a philosopher and an intellectual under whose influence Pirandello reshaped his self-interpretation. First, I analyse their mutual exchange by taking into account their crossing trajectories within the complex and stratified field of cultural production of 1910-20s Italy. Then, I explore Tilgher's critical reviews and papers on Pirandello's works with a view to identifying his use of the five hermeneutical devices discussed above. In the conclusions, I highlight the importance of this double bind between author and critic, which had a huge impact on both the assessment dynamics and the creative outcomes of their careers.

Keywords: Adriano Tilgher; literary field; Luigi Pirandello; theory of criticism; theory of literature.

Criticism is mainly regarded as a reaction to literary works, located as it is at the very last stage of the literary production chain. Critics are specialized readers who aim to shape the literary canon by educating the tastes of various audiences. Through valorization and stigmatization, critical texts such as reviews or essays aspire to acknowledge and measure aesthetic value in order to orient readers' attention and trigger assessment dynamics. While valid in some respects, this conception of criticism is too narrow and does not take into account the literary world as a system of non-linear interacting strategies: to think of criticism as a mere reaction or response is no longer possible. Indeed, it is now more important than ever to give criticism pride of place among the practices of cultural production which collectively constitute the field of literature.

This approach is also warranted by conceptualizations of the literary work developed over the last fifty years or so. After the pragmatic turn in the humanities and in the field of literature as a whole, the heuristic gap between criticism and literary works has inevitably been reduced, or even closed, with literature being recognized as being subject to – or, in fact, triggering – mechanisms of cultural production which are also shared by criticism. These mechanisms concern primarily the pragmatics of cultural production. While the pragmatic status of criticism was more or less self-evident, albeit not fully theorized, that of literary works was for a long time denied or ignored. Within Italian studies, a key input towards the recognition of the pragmatic dimension in literary production was provided by Franco Brioschi. According to Brioschi (1983b and 2002), a literary work must meet two different kinds of conditions: on the one hand, symbolic conditions inspired to Nelson Goodman's *exemplificationality* (Goodman 1968); on the other hand, pragmatic conditions, which Brioschi links to the theory of literary reusable discourse (Lausberg 1969; Brioschi 2002, 24-26). In its works Brioschi clarifies that the two different types of conditions are deeply intertwined, and only together can they change a text into a literary work (or *opus*, using Brioschi's own word). Although Brioschi's theory was conceived in the last two decades of the 20th century to counter the more radical legacy of Italian structuralism and deconstructionism, it still retains its validity because of its ability to connect material contexts and semiotic mechanisms, and, also, of its

clear and sober modelling of the multi-layered and dense semantics which underpins literary texts.

Adopting Brioschi's theory as a framework, in this essay I aim to critically investigate the status of the critical text, or, rather, of the critical act as a key practice within the field of cultural production. In so doing, I intend to contribute to a conceptualization of criticism which both acknowledges its pragmatic status, and theorizes it as a cultural production practice which plays a crucial role in the very definition of literature, not only by giving literary artifacts social as well as literary recognition, but also by engaging directly with their production as well as with their conceptual and symbolic characterization. To illustrate my point, I will discuss a case of interaction between an author and a critic, taken from the Italian literature of the 20th century. I will explore the relationship between the famous dramatist Luigi Pirandello and one of his most important critics, Adriano Tilgher, a philosopher and an intellectual under whose influence Pirandello reshaped his self-interpretation.

1. SYMBOLIC AND PRAGMATIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE CRITICAL 'EPITEXT'

Criticism, like literature, results in the production of a text, and has therefore both symbolic and pragmatic implications. The symbolic conditions of the critical text are linked to its semiotic structure; if we assume that a literary work produces a world model (Goodman 2008), then a critical review or paper aims to describe, interpret and evaluate it. Therefore, critical texts must contain some descriptive and hermeneutic devices which, by taking apart and reassembling the literary text, provide the reader with an aesthetic judgment based on the critic's own interpretation.

On the one hand, what I have called 'symbolical conditions' of the critical text pertain to these devices, which range from selective procedures to intertextual or extratextual comparisons. Such devices bring about a privileged semantic link which binds together the two texts (the critical one and its target): in a way, the critical text can be considered as part of the paratext, in line with Genette's theory (1997). On the other hand, the pragmatic conditions of critical texts involve strategies of assessment and self-promotion which can be best described with reference to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the literary field (1995). According to Bourdieu, a literary work implies a position-taking in the literary field; therefore, a critical text can be considered as a quadratic position-taking, i.e. as a

position-taking focused on another position-taking. However, both symbolic and pragmatic conditions are always intertwined: any hermeneutic act is always a means for making an assessment, and, vice versa, there is no position-taking without a form of interpretation.

If we regard literary communication as a process or a chain, the critical text is located downstream. None the less, reviews or academic papers (especially when referred to recent works) exert a retroactive effect by positioning the target work in the literary field. The critical text tries to guide and constrain the aesthetic judgment of the audience, pursuing various aims, often linked to the critic's attitude and to the editorial line of the journal where it is published. These aims can range, for example, from mere symbolical assessment to an increase in sales. At any rate, it is important to underline that the critical text is not completely autonomous: its own textuality is incomplete, because it exists only in close connection with the literary text. If we focus on this key feature, the critical text comes across as very similar to Genette's paratext:

[...] the paratext in all its forms is a discourse that is fundamentally heteronomous, auxiliary, and dedicated to the service of something other than itself that constitutes its *raison d'être*. This something is the text. Whatever aesthetic or ideological investment the author makes in a paratextual element (a 'lovely title' or a preface-manifesto), whatever coquettishness or paradoxical reversal he puts into it, the paratextual element is always subordinate to 'its' text, and this functionality determines the essence of its appeal and its existence. (Genette 1997, 12)

There is another important similarity between the critical text and Genette's paratext: they both function as pragmatic devices deployed to regulate the reader's access to the text¹. However, unlike the relationship between text and paratext in Genette (where the paratext is peripheral to the text), the relationship between the critical text and the literary text is not one of subordination. In fact, the critical text claims its axiological superiority, since it aspires to evaluate, and consequently position, the literary text. Moreover, unlike Genette's paratext, the critical text is not an expression of the "author's purpose"², but of another's purpose, whose methods and

¹ "The *pragmatic* status of a paratextual element is defined by the characteristics of its situation of communication: the nature of the sender and addressee, the sender's degree of authority and responsibility, the illocutionary force of the sender's message, and undoubtedly some other characteristics I have overlooked" (Genette 1997, 8).

² "The most essential of the paratext's properties, as we have observed many times (but, in concluding, I still want to insist on it), is functionality. Whatever aesthetic intention

goals are, at least partially, different from the author's (when not in competition). On this ground, broadening the scope of application of Genette's theories, I propose to regard the critical text as a *public allographic epitext*, at the core of which lies the critic's purpose to interpret and assess literary works.

The critical epitext is endowed with a heteronomy which is specific to it. Concerning this property, pragmatic aims should not be separated from symbolic mechanisms. In other words, all the hermeneutic devices deployed in critical texts are always connected to position-taking strategies, but this connection is typically concealed under the mask of some 'moral imperatives' which pertain to deontological self-representations often adopted by critics. In the introduction to *Allegoria* nr. 55, entitled "Pierre Bourdieu e la sociologia della letteratura" ("Pierre Bourdieu and the Sociology of Literature"), Anna Baldini writes:

Anche quando enuncia il 'contenuto di verità' dell'opera d'arte, il suo significato 'per noi', il critico – a differenza del lettore 'ingenuo' – sottopone le proprie proposizioni a una verifica intersoggettiva. Neppure il piano del controllo, però, è un terreno neutro e disinteressato, perché anche il campo della critica è un mondo sociale autonomo, e dunque un terreno di lotta per il predominio, negato in quanto predominio e vissuto soggettivamente come ricerca dell'interpretazione più appropriata. Quando elaborano il senso dell'opera d'arte, il critico o lo studioso entrano in un agone, si battono per difendere la propria visione della realtà. (2007, 21)

Even when he or she states the 'truth content' of the work of art for the benefit of us readers, the critic – unlike the naïve reader – submits his/her proposition to intersubjective verification. This double-check on one's position, however, does not take place in a neutral field. The domain of criticism is an autonomous social world, and therefore a battlefield for dominance, which is denied as dominance, but subjectively experienced as a quest for the most adequate interpretation. When they devise the meaning of a work of art, the critic or the scholar enter a battlefield – they fight to defend their own vision of reality.³

Through their quest for the most adequate interpretation, critics join the intersubjective struggle fought in the sub-field they belong to. This pursuit

may come into play as well, the main issue for the paratext is not to 'look nice' around the text but rather to ensure for the text a destiny consistent with the author's purpose. [...] the correctness of the authorial (and secondarily, of the publisher's) point of view is the implicit creed and spontaneous ideology of the paratext" (Genette 1997, 407-408).

³ All translations from Italian are mine.

is embodied in a series of macrotextual devices, which activate links to the target text and trigger its interpretation-evaluation. Before discussing the status of these devices, it is worth recalling the importance of interpretation in 20th century culture and philosophy. As Francesco Erspamer (2009a and 2009b) points out, the humanistic culture arisen in the 18th century and its later developments are strongly grounded in hermeneutics (2009b, 44-54). After all, the role played by exegesis (religious and otherwise) within western premodern and modern culture is undisputed. Even though criticism belongs to the modern, secularized cultural industry, it often represents itself as an exegetic operation: in addition, we should not forget that aesthetics, at its early stage in the 19th century, was rather akin to religion⁴. As shall be seen with Adriano Tilgher, sometimes critics tend to think of themselves as a sort of priests who should guide the audience, or even the authors. But, beyond these self-representations, which are the semantic elements the critical text deploys in constructing the interpretation of the literary text? Once the 'black box' of interpretation has been opened⁵, its contents turn out to be more heterogeneous than it seemed at first glance.

2. CONSTRUCTING THE CRITICAL INTERPRETATION: PRAGMA-RHETORICAL DEVICES IN THE CRITICAL TEXT

I propose to classify the devices which contribute to constructing the critical interpretation into five different categories. This set of devices are often inextricably linked, and their balance depends on both the individual style

⁴ On the theological roots of aesthetics, see Bourdieu 1995: "It would be necessary to rewrite the history of pure aesthetics *from this perspective*, showing, for example, how professional philosophers have imported into the domain of art certain concepts originally developed in the *theological* tradition, especially a conception of the artist as a 'creator' endowed with an almost divine faculty called 'imagination' and capable of producing a 'second nature', a 'second world', *sui generis* and autonomous" (294; cf. Erspamer 2009b, 129-131).

⁵ "Analogamente alla scienza pronta per l'uso, la cultura istituzionalizzata è una conoscenza che si considera acquisita una volta per tutte e che viene avvertita e accettata come tale [...]. Questa cultura produce pertanto delle 'scatole nere' – in cibernetica, dispositivi utilizzati come unità non scomponibili, di cui cioè non serve conoscere il funzionamento interno ma solo l'effetto che produce –: per esempio i simboli, i riti, i codici di comportamento, i canoni letterari e artistici, imposti in quanto essenziali per il mantenimento di un'identità collettiva a sua volta definita come condivisione di quei canoni, codici, riti, simboli" (Erspamer 2009b, 33-34).

of the critic and contextual parameters, i.e. historical background, type of publication, etc.

First, a critical text often features *selective devices* which present to the audience a partial image of the text. This image is created by omitting some elements and overplaying others. This overlay is often achieved through simple mentioning: speaking about one aspect of a work (and not another) implicitly conveys its importance. The concept of selection can be applied to the very choice of the literary text which is selected as worthy of being the object of criticism: according to Dixon, Bortolussi and Sopčák – who deal with the evaluation of narrative texts – “the mere presence or absence of a review” (2015, 46) may be included in the set of extratextual information which orients the reader’s evaluation⁶. But besides and beyond the initial decision to mention a text, critical reviews and papers systematically choose to display some elements of the text chosen rather than others. While the scale changes, the logical operation remains the same: for example, the critical text may focus on the plot, on the themes, on the style, or on the background, depending on the methods adopted by the critic. The smaller the scale, the narrower the selection: in fact, the process of sampling – which plays a key role in critical discourse – enables critics to show specific facets of the literary text in line with their interpretative tenets and intentions. This process is unaffected by the way in which the sample is embedded in the critical text, which can be direct (via quotation) or indirect (via summary). By showing a selective (and biased) picture of the literary text, the critical text aims to strongly influence the readers, co-opting them into its assessment strategies. Selection plays a key-role in this *process-orienting* (Dixon, Bortolussi, and Sopčák 2015, 44) operation aimed at directing the reader’s attention to preferred aspects of the text:

[...] a critical review of a work may call attention to a particular scene, forms of language, or particular characters, and, by virtue of exposure to this information, readers’ processing of the text may be altered. We refer to this type of effect as ‘process orienting’. Via such an orienting mechanism, extratextual information may lead readers to focus on certain classes of information or certain aspects of the text, even if it does not directly bias the overall evaluation. (*ibid.*, 44-45)

⁶ “In this case, it seemed likely that the simple fact of being reviewed might affect subjects’ evaluations. For example, the presence of a review might signal that the story is important or popular enough to merit being reviewed; the lack of a review might signal that the story is unimportant or obscure” (Dixon, Bortolussi, and Sopčák 2015, 46).

The process orienting effect which influences reception is triggered by the selection strategies deployed. Due to space constraints, here it is impossible to analyse such strategies in detail; however, it may be expected that they jointly contribute to generating what can be described as a *holistic bias*: through selection, a part of the text is misleadingly presented as being representative of the whole, thereby providing a deceptive image of the work which nonetheless advocates to itself wholeness and relevance⁷.

The second hermeneutic device is closely intertwined with the first one, and can be defined as an *interpretative description*. When introducing a literary text, critics provide readers with the kind of information which they, as critics, consider relevant for an understanding/assessment of the literary text. Additionally, they provide – implicitly or explicitly – their own interpretation of the work. Of course, that any description is always an interpretation hardly needs demonstrating. Description and interpretation are distinct operations, but they are not always presented as separate in critical writing. Indeed, they can be seamlessly woven into each other, or, by contrast, clearly marked as separate in the text. Regardless of the persuasive effectiveness of the strategy chosen, the underlying mechanism is approximately the same: the critic purportedly succeeds in decoding the literary work, which is conceived of as a mysterious box whose secrets can be disclosed only by a legitimate professional. Even when critics do not believe in the “intrinsic polysemy of the work” – as do those who belong to the pure field⁸ – they are confident of their ability to access the essential and relevant meanings of the text. Hence, they regard themselves as legitimate holders of the right of interpretation, which is typical of the pure field. However, the more autonomous artistic fields become, the more extensively their actors need to implement self-reflection, in order to ground the legitimacy of their work. This need for self-reflection is independent of the changes in symbolical representations and struggles which characterize the

⁷ According to Bourdieu, Sartre used a ‘holistic’ argument to criticize his rivals, and to build himself up as a Total Intellectual: “The strategies of distinction made possible by criticism owe their particular effectiveness to the fact that they rely on a ‘total’ oeuvre which gives its author the right to import into each domain the totality of the technical and symbolic capital acquired in others, metaphysics into the novel or philosophy into the theatre, simultaneously defining rivals as partial intellectuals, or even truncated ones” (Bourdieu 1995, 210).

⁸ “Pure production produces and presupposes pure reading, and *ready-mades* are just a sort of limit case of all works produced for commentary and by commentary. To the extent that the field gains in autonomy, writers feel themselves increasingly authorized to write works destined to be *decoded*, hence subject to a *repeated reading necessary to explore, without exhausting it, the intrinsic polysemy* of the work” (Bourdieu 1995, 392).

literary field. In other words, *hermeneutic narcissism*, which Bourdieu links to “romantic representation” (1992, 303), is not only typical of an aesthetic frame which relies on empathy and re-creation; on the contrary, any exegete is likely to claim and consolidate their rights, both by virtue of their *habitus* and on account of the symbolic structure of the literary text. At any rate, description and interpretation are core components of the critical text. They are embodied in various textual devices, ranging from quotation to paraphrase, to contextualization, to decoding. Again, because of space constraints it is impossible to thoroughly describe and analyse these strategies: suffice it to say that all of them share the same macrotextual status of explanations, i.e. they are all constructed around intertextual links to a pre-existing text which is recalled, re-oriented and re-signified.

The third strategy that can be identified is *comparison*. Most critical discourse is grounded in differential operations. Hierarchies are established at any level of the critical analysis: between different parts of the analysed work, between different works by the same author or other authors, between literary movements, between the literary field and other fields, between humanities and the hard sciences, etc. The deployment of differential strategies makes it impossible to deny the component of struggle implicit in literary criticism: comparison involves inequality by definition, and conflict by implication, although they both may be dissembled in critical writing. By drawing comparisons, critics also strengthen their reputation and claim reliability: on the one hand, extrinsic comparisons provide evidence of the critic’s knowledge of the field; on the other hand, intrinsic ones – which refer back to the same work or author – certify to the refinement and sophistication of their taste. Indeed, a “complexity effect” has been identified in the literature whereby “balanced, multifaceted reviews have a greater impact than one-sided reviews, perhaps because such reviews suggest greater reviewer expertise” (Dixon, Bortolussi, and Sopčák 2015, 43). Comparisons are also linked to relevant argumentative strategies, which are often implicit. In many cases, what underlies comparisons is the adoption of a graduated model of the text, which should conform to an ideal archetype set by the critic. For instance, Bourdieu – relying on Austin – showed the implicit meaning carried by the use of the adjective ‘real’, frequently employed by critics as a way to validate their assumptions through an “essentialist thought” (1995, 298). Within expressions like ‘a real masterpiece’, or, ‘a real artist’,

the word ‘real’ implicitly contrasts the case under consideration with all cases in the same class which have also been given this predicate by other speakers

(although in a manner which is not ‘really’ justified), this predicate being symbolically very powerful, like any claim to the universal. (*ibidem*)

Even when critical discourse does not rely on an “essentialist thought”, the comparisons it draws exert a significant implicit power. They prove, amongst other things, the critic’s awareness of the dynamics of their field; by showing a balanced taste, critics can prevent charges of naïveté. More importantly still, differential assessment is essential to generate what has been called the “negativity effect” (Dixon, Bortolussi, and Sopčák 2015, 43): critics able to nuance their evaluations, and even to openly practice hostile criticism, are likely to gain stronger reputations with the audience.

The fourth hermeneutic strategy involves *framing*, which is strictly connected to intertextuality. Through framing, critics provide the target text with a context, which can be material or ideological. This strategy can be described through the category of intertextuality provided by linguistics, from Bachtin’s pioneering research to later developments within the text linguistics tradition. According to De Beaugrande and Dressler, intertextuality is one of the seven standards of textuality, and involves the interactions between “text-presented knowledge” and “stored world-knowledge” (1981, 235). The stored knowledge recalled by the critical text works as a frame which enables readers to understand the text, and implicitly promotes the critic as a good ‘causal thinker’. Regardless of its ultimate effectiveness in terms of assessment strategy, a text-context link is needed to avoid the risk of conceiving of the literary text as an island. If something can be linked to something else which is both different and more general, our epistemological standards are confirmed, the risk of the unknown gets exorcized and, eventually, we feel like we are experiencing something important which increases our knowledge. Even though the output of the intertextual linkages can be extremely varied (links can be provided to other texts, inner conventional rules of the literary field, historical background, specific literary or aesthetical theories), the effect is similar: texts are not presented as self-standing and isolated, but in connection to a specific conceptual and/or material environment. Framing results in a networking activity which is a fundamental stage in the critical act and discourse.

Lastly, the fifth strategy concerns *explicit valorization statement*. Papers and reviews often contain statements which have the purpose of assigning a certain value to the literary text. In accordance with common clichés, critics are able to read more carefully than average readers: their activity is depicted as an act of discovery and recognition. In criticism, results are thought to be proportional to the capability to see what others do not see.

As the Latin etymology of ‘intelligent’ (*intelligere*, to ‘read into’) suggests, refined critics know how to ‘read into’ the text, disclosing its value together with its hidden meaning. As hermeneutics is deeply intertwined with subjective evaluation, this disclosure may culminate in explicit statements which assign a positive or negative value to the literary text. Such statements, however, are more akin to performative utterances than to declarative ones. In other words, by saying that a given work is valuable, the critic effectively creates that value. Let us consider the following examples:

In questi versi, cruciali e decisivi, Milo De Angelis, restando fedele al suo timbro di voce, guarda a testa alta, nella nostra lingua, i grandi poeti contemporanei [...]. (Affinati 2008, XVIII)

In these crucially decisive lines Milo De Angelis, while remaining faithful to his own voice, looks proudly, in our language, at the great contemporary poets [...].

Le immagini sono irrimediabilmente chiuse in sé medesime e sterili e vane; non un ritmo che le sorregga e le avvicini, non una continuità, una linea fantastica o un mito o uno stato d’animo e neppure una struttura (o anche una sola eleganza) delle tante che offre la tradizione: ma solo quest’arida unità di stile inutile e assurdo. (Contessi 1951, 59)

The images are irredeemably self-centered, sterile and empty. They have no rhythm which can support them or make them feel closer, no continuity, no imaginative creativity, no myth, mood or structure (or even simple elegance) of the many offered by the tradition: they are only an arid unity of useless and pointless style.

It is interesting to notice that explicit evaluations – *cruciali e decisivi* (crucially decisive), *sterili e vane* (sterile and empty), *arida unità di stile inutile e assurdo* (arid unity of useless and pointless style) – are closely linked to other critical devices, like comparison or framing. However, these explicit remarks are not mere emphasizing strategies so much as performative utterances. At any rate, explicit valorization statements appear to play a significant role in critical discourse. Their effectiveness is dependent on several textual and extratextual factors, such as the critic’s reputation, the arguments deployed, and the overall potential of the critical text to influence an audience with a significant symbolical weight. The strength of an explicit valorization statement may derive from the effectiveness of the critic’s rhetoric. In this case, the persuasive power comes from various factors, such as stylistic attractiveness, scientific allure, subtlety of argumentation or refined and original analysis (this is the case of Gianfranco Contini, cf. Cardilli 2016).

3. FROM SYMBOLIC CONDITIONS TO PRAGMATIC EFFECTS:
THE ROLE OF CRITICISM IN THE MAKING OF LITERATURE

The five textual strategies described above have significant implications for the practice of literary criticism and can, in fact, be regarded as its symbolic conditions. Equally important are the pragmatic and material consequences of literary criticism on literary production. In this respect, the mutual relationship between critics and authors could represent an interesting case study to explore the relational and biunivocal nature of literary assessment. As Bourdieu suggests, authors' need for recognition can be satisfied by the cooperation with a 'legitimate reader', who can transfer its capital/prestige to the author.

A genetic sociology should also include in its model the action of producers themselves, their claim to the right to be the sole judges of pictorial production, to make their own criteria for the perception and appreciation of their products. It should take into account the effect exercised on them and on the image they have of themselves and their production (and thereby, the effect exercised on their actual production) by the images of painters and their production which comes back to them from other agents engaged in the field – other artists but also critics, clients, patrons, collectors, etc. [...] The history of the specific institutions which are indispensable to artistic production should be backed up with a history of the institutions which are indispensable to consumption, and hence to the production of consumers and in particular, *of taste*, as disposition and as competence. (Bourdieu 1995, 292-293)

None the less, the direction of this prestige transfer can be inverted: in some cases, it is the author that lifts their critic up on the career “sandpile” (Giuffre 1999, 815; de Nooy 2002, 149). Katherine Giuffre choses the sandpile metaphor⁹ instead of the more traditional ladder: “The career ladder is not so much a ladder as it is a sandpile, in which each actor’s attempts to reach the top change the shape of the climb” (Giuffre 1999, 815). Since “everybody wants to reach the top [...], toiling up the sandpile, a climber depresses the sand beneath his feet, so untrodden regions rise relatively” (de Nooy 2002, 149). In 2002 Wouter de Nooy tried to develop Giuffre’s model, making it more dynamic through “social network analysis and [...] a structural concept of prestige” (*ibid.*, 150):

⁹ “The organizations make up the sandpile, with the most prestigious organizations on top. The artists are people who climb the mountain” (de Nooy 2002, 149).

[...] prestige, prominence, status, or power is linked to asymmetric relations
[...] nominations by prestigious persons add more to the prestige of a person than nominations by people with low status. (de Nooy 1999, 150)

However, the author/critic relation involves more than simple nomination. In fact, the stakes are both prestige and symbolic representations. As is clear from the hermeneutic strategies mentioned above, value assessment cannot take place without displaying a particular image of the work. For instance, the relationship between Eugenio Montale and Gianfranco Contini started as a sort of rebranding operation: Montale saw in the interpretation of the young critic an opportunity to emancipate himself from the line given by the more prestigious Alfredo Gargiulo, who prefaced the second edition of *Ossi di seppia* (*Cuttlefish Bones*, 1928) without taking into account the more recent artistic achievements of the poet¹⁰. In this crucial one-to-one relationship, Montale was not directly interested in prestige so much as in Contini's potential support to his new writing style. Overall, trying to climb the career sandpile, critics change its shape, but in a way which goes beyond the one described by Giuffrè. As critics interpret literary (and art) works, they change the shape of the field by publicly giving them a new position. Since this re-positioning action always involves a personal interpretation, the conceptualization of change as a top-down phenomenon should be integrated with the addition of a consideration of inputs – and impacts – on the horizontal level. From this viewpoint, the dune is made of mud: critics and readers leave their footprints everywhere; the closer to the top a critic is, the more visible and consequence-rich their footprint will be. To sum up, the critical act modifies the literary field by affecting prestige fluctuations, capital transactions, the actors' trajectories, and the meaning-images of the works involved.

4. THE PIRANDELLO-TILGHER CASE

4.1. *Mutual influences and interferences*

As a case in point, this section discusses one of the most illustrious relationships between a critic and an author ever recorded in Italian literary

¹⁰ Alfredo Gargiulo wrote the preface without having read the new poems added by Montale to the second edition. These poems – crucial in Montale's poetic career – are closer to the style of the second collection, *Le occasioni* (*The Occasions*, 1939), rather than the first.

and critical history. The writer and dramatist Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) started to devote himself to dramaturgy at the beginning of the 1910s. According to Luperini ([1992] 2008, 90), the true starting point of Pirandello's career as a dramatist can be considered the 1916 play *All'uscita* (*At the Exit*); the other key-date is 1921, when *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*) was first staged, paving the way to a brilliant career which culminated in the Nobel Prize (1934).

Adriano Tilgher (1887-1941) was both a philosopher and a drama critic, who openly opposed the hegemony of the aesthetics of Benedetto Croce, who at the time dominated the Italian critical scene. In Tilgher's critical approach, drama was endowed with a significant philosophical value: Tilgher strongly felt the need to connect his criticism with the more recent trends in European thought, reacting against the average provincialism of the Italian scene¹¹. Tilgher had a penchant for German thinkers such as Fichte, Georg Simmel, Oswald Spengler and Albert Einstein (Ciliberto 2015, 10), whose works he could read in the original versions, and he was familiar with Bergson's theories, to the point that he discussed with Benedetto Croce the idea to publish a monograph about them (Rota 2008, 148). Initially Croce, positively impressed by Tilgher's talent, considered him as a pupil. In 1916, while working as a drama critic for prominent Italian newspapers and journals such as *La Stampa* and *Il Tempo*, Adriano Tilgher reviewed one of Pirandello's plays for the first time. The day after having attended the premiere of *Pensaci, Giacomino!* (*Think it Over, Gacomino!*), Tilgher lambasted it (Barbina 1992, 225), claiming that "Pirandello's art" lacked any "profound content" and "morality" (Tilgher 1916, 70). Even though Tilgher's opinion about Pirandello's works gradually softened in the following years, reviews were substantially negative until 1920, when Tilgher started to "reconsider" (Barbina 1992, 233) Pirandello's work. In that year Tilgher published an article based on a previous interview Pirandello had granted to *Corriere della Sera*, a major Italian newspaper: now the critic was positively stimulated to contextualize Pirandello's most recent plays, linking them to several trends of German philosophy. Moreover, the critic showed "an inclination to systematize Pirandello's world in a conceptually defined formula" (Barbina 1992, 226; my translation). The following year Tilgher reviewed *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*: even though his judgement was multi-faceted and not entirely

¹¹ "Tilgher concepì il teatro come specchio del problema gnoseologico del suo tempo: quel teatro che, ai suoi occhi, aveva un ruolo fondamentale, se non addirittura egemonico, nell'arte e nella letteratura contemporanee" (Antonucci 1992, 216).

positive, the critic celebrated Pirandello as an original, cutting-edge and experienced author: “tra i più operosi creatori di un nuovo ambiente spirituale, tra i più meritori precursori del genio di domani, se questo ci sarà” (“one of the most active creators of a new spiritual environment, of the most deserving pioneers of the geniality of the future, if it ever comes to be”, Tilgher 1921, 95). In 1922 Tilgher wrote *Il teatro di Pirandello* (*Pirandello's Drama*) – his longest and most focused writing on Pirandello's works, and published it in a miscellaneous volume – *Studi sul teatro contemporaneo* (*Studies on Contemporary Drama*). The essay drew heavily on previous reviews, which Tilgher rearranged, placing them within a robust and highly articulated theoretical frame. This work impressed Pirandello so much that he openly praised Tilgher in a private letter, in which he also showed a serious interest for a possible translation of the essay into French. In spite of this brief idyll, in the following years their relationship was difficult and fluctuating¹². In fact, Pirandello's political choice to side with the regime after Matteotti's assassination in 1924 drew the two apart, even though Tilgher declared Pirandello's art should be kept separated from his political beliefs. The aspects highlighted by Tilgher were so crucial for Pirandello's poetics that each of them ended up claiming their ownership. Amongst many ups and downs, it is worth mentioning Tilgher's harshest writing about Pirandello, which was published, anonymously, in 1927 on *Humour*, and sounded as a personal, unfair attack. Over the following decades, starting at least from Leonardo Sciascia's *Pirandello e il pirandellismo* (1953), the inner dynamics of the relationship between Pirandello and Tilgher were the object of much critical attention. Which came first? Pirandello's imagination or Tilgher's formulas? Was the influence of the critic positive or negative?

With reference to the topic of this essay, the Pirandello-Tilgher relationship is a typical case of two-way relationship based on mutual exchange: according to Illiano (1968), it can be considered as the “most singular case of ‘complicity’ between a writer and a critic within modern literature” (141; my translation). On the one hand, Tilgher codified some key principles which are deeply embedded in Pirandello's body of works. It was in fact Tilgher – as he himself explicitly claimed in 1940 – that

¹² As the private letters they exchanged testify. These letters – whose tone, however, is always cordial – can be read in Sciascia 1953 and (1961) 2010. By 1927, the relationship between the two has become troubled: in a letter to Silvio D'Amico, dated 29/11/1927, Pirandello distances himself from Tilgher, claiming the originality of his creations and success, and his independence from Tilgher and “drama criticism” (Barbina 1992, 227-228).

invented the famous dialectical formula 'Life *versus* Form', which has come to represent Pirandello's art. He did so taking inspiration from several Pirandellian novels, such as *La trappola* (*The Trap*) and *La carriola* (*The Wheelbarrow*; Tilgher 1940, 92). Hence, Pirandello's personal view of the world influenced not only Tilgher's critical reading of Pirandello's drama, but also, more in general his aesthetic beliefs. This can be seen in the first chapter of *Studi sul teatro contemporaneo*, which is devoted to the exposition of Tilgher's own conception of art and criticism. In this study, called *L'arte come originalità e i problemi dell'arte* (*Art as Originality and the Problems of Art*; 1922c), Tilgher envisages a number of problems, such as the relationship between artworks and historical background, or the role of criticism; the dialectic Life *vs.* Form – also inspired by Georg Simmel's thought (Faraone 2005b, 185-187; Giannangeli 2008, 92-109) – becomes the key-concept starting from which Tilgher's personal version of historicism is developed. Therefore, it can be said that Pirandello's art contributed to shaping Tilgher's own aesthetic theories, as will be shown in greater detail later in this essay.

Moreover, Pirandello's influence on Tilgher is not confined to aesthetics: in *Critica dello storicismo* (*A Critique of Historicism*) – a philosophical pamphlet published in 1935 – Tilgher clearly employed a Pirandellian pattern, combined with Gaultier's bovarism, to criticize the historicist theories of his former master, Benedetto Croce:

Chi ha scoperto il segreto del gioco, non gioca più, guarda giocare, assiste alla storia del mondo come uno spettacolo in cui tutti hanno ragione, eroi e delinquenti, carnefici e martiri, perché tutti hanno la loro parte, e per farla debbono credere all'assolutezza delle ragioni per cui si combattono, assolutezza che per chi ha scoperto il gioco è una pura illusione, la quale non ha altro scopo che di mandare avanti la macabra farsa del mondo. (Tilgher 1935, 37)

Those who have mastered the secret rules of the game stop playing: they watch the history of the world as a show in which everybody wins – heroes and villains, murderers and martyrs – because everybody is playing a role, and to do so they must believe in the absolute validity of the reasons why they are fighting. Those who have mastered the secret rules of the game realize that this absolute validity is a delusion whose only purpose is to perpetuate the macabre farce of the world.

The title of a famous novel by Pirandello, *Quando si è capito il gioco* (*Once You've Understood the Rules of the Game*), echoes in these lines, together with the famous distinction between 'living' and 'watching oneself live', which was first drawn in his essay *L'umorismo* (*Humor*, 1908). Typical

Pirandellian dramatic and theoretical *topoi* are employed by Tilgher to carry out an attack within the philosophical field, denouncing Crocean historicism as a form of “relativistic quietism” or “spectacular idealism” (Rota 2008, 158).

At the same time, Tilgher heavily influenced Pirandello’s writing at least in two ways: firstly, some of Pirandello’s later works, such as *Diana e la Tuda* (*Diana and the Tuda*), were mechanical applications of Live vs. Form dialectic (as Tilgher himself recognized, cf. 1927b); moreover, as Sciascia argued in the 1960s, the 1927 harsh attack of Tilgher on Pirandello mentioned above was a true source of inspiration for *Quando si è qualcuno* (*When You Are Someone*), a play firstly represented in 1933 (Sciascia [1961] 2010, 119-123). Secondly, Tilgher’s hermeneutics paved the way for a long-lasting critical myth, which it has been impossible to reject or debunk to this day. The Pirandello-Tilgher relationship was so crucial because the two actors involved were both equally inclined to take stock of the other party’s opinion: Pirandello always paid attention to critics who reviewed his plays, and his writings tended to repeat, albeit with variation, recurring philosophical patterns. Tilgher conceived of criticism as a sort of demiurgic activity: in his view, the critic “poses or proposes to the artist questions to be solved” (Tilgher 1922c, 66); through interpretations and judgments, criticism may clarify questions which already exist in the artist’s mind, though only at an embryonic and confused state. As a result, it is quite evident that Tilgher’s critical practice was very active – if not intruding – and aimed to be deeply involved in the creative process of the author. Such a view is a perfect embodiment of critics’ ambitions and positions in the literary field: since their prestige is linked to their ability to steer readers’ opinions and, ultimately, to shape the canon, participation in the author’s creative process is a highly desirable goal to attain.

4.2. *Crossing paths: Tilgher’s trajectory and his critical approach to Pirandello*

The mutual relationship between Tilgher and Pirandello cannot be fully understood without taking into account the trajectories they followed within the cultural field. In particular, Tilgher’s critical position-taking on Pirandellian works is inextricably linked to his trajectory as a leading figure of the so-called minority culture which spread in Italy between the two world wars. Moreover, Tilgher must be regarded as a dominated in multiple states and subunits of the field, even though he succeeded in gaining a significant prestige as a polemist in the press, which enabled him to

heavily orient the audience's taste. By contrast, Pirandello's career was more linear: after his debut in the literary field as a poet in 1889, in 1903 the flood of a sulphur mine ruined the finances of his family, jeopardizing his future. Therefore, from that year on he was forced to earn a living out of his literary ambitions, increasing the number of collaborations with newspapers and publishing houses. Pirandello was a learned middle-class man, who had received an academic education both domestic and international: he had studied in Palermo, in Rome, ending up graduating in Bonn. In the wake of his successful novel *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (*The Late Mattia Pascal*, 1904), he dedicated himself to narrative writing, publishing a lot of short stories, which soon became the repertoire out of which he crafted his numerous plays. His body of works, indeed, is similar to a "system of communicating vessels" (Lugnani 1994, VIII), in which narrative materials move through different genres. It was only in the second half of the 1910s that his career as a dramatist really took off the ground, paving the way to the great international fame achieved from 1921 onwards. Because of his unquestionable symbolical and economic prestige, in the last part of his trajectory Pirandello was a real dominant, also thanks to his choice to embrace Fascism in 1924, during the heated debate which arose after the assassination of the socialist parliamentarian Giacomo Matteotti. Even though his later works were less successful, Pirandello's prestige was definitively sanctioned by the Nobel Prize in 1934: after all, the deconstruction of the self which underpins his works was so cutting-edge that he had a huge impact on the international audience, which favoured more or less 'modernist' tastes.

As stated above, Tilgher's trajectory was not as ascending as Pirandello's. He was born in a lower-middle class family, in the outskirts of Naples, from a German glazier and a French woman from Valle d'Aosta. They had six children, and they underwent a period of financial straits. This notwithstanding, Tilgher was able to attend high school, and later university, graduating in law in 1909. The starting point of his trajectory coincides with his meeting Benedetto Croce, who regarded the precocious and talented student as worthy of being included in his broad and ambitious cultural project. Thanks to this influent master, between 1908 and 1911 Tilgher was able to publish philosophical papers in prestigious journals, and to translate works of important philosophers such as Fichte and Descartes. Croce's patronage was crucial when Tilgher successfully applied for a position in a Turin library in 1909, and, again, when he later relocated to a Rome library in 1911. Beside providing this practical help, Croce heavily influenced Tilgher's theoretical attitude: initially, the young

philosopher embraced the neo-idealism promoted by Croce and Gentile, especially in respect of the historicist grounding of philosophy and the adoption of a systematic style of thought. At this early stage, Tilgher's career looked promising, as he was moving his first steps into the pure field of philosophy by means of the fastest track available at the time: the backing of Benedetto Croce, who was probably the most influential Italian intellectual in the first half of the 20th century. None the less, by 1912 the relationship between the 'pupil' and his 'master' had already deteriorated: Tilgher was too heterodox to abide by the line established by Croce and, moreover, he was too erratic to meet the deadlines Croce set in order to encourage and discipline his disciple's work. Indeed, from a generational viewpoint, Tilgher belonged to a group of young upcoming youngsters who distanced themselves from dominant intellectuals (like Croce) resorting to irrational and voluntaristic philosophies. For example, the majority of the intellectuals gathering around *La Cultura*, the Roman journal Tilgher started to work for in 1912, shared the same trajectory: a distancing from Crocean idealism which soon changed into open and polemic opposition (Faraone 2005a, 64). Despite Tilgher's distancing from Croce, he can be considered a neo-idealist thinker, albeit a heterodox one, until the First World War. The war brought about a dramatic overturn in Tilgher's beliefs, especially concerning his conception of history. He no longer saw history as a rational and progressive development; it was, rather, a sort of arena in which obscure and often unpredictable vital drives clash. Together with the idea of historical progress, Tilgher discarded the systematic attitude of idealism (Faraone 2005a, 109). This move away from systematicity also involved a preference for the newspaper article as the main means of his theoretical activity. Tilgher devoted most of his efforts to scrutinizing European and Italian culture, with the intent to identify the traits of the culture of crisis which characterized the early 20th century, both before and after the war: in doing so, he dealt with a broad range of topics, from politics to customs to drama criticism. This non-systematic and non-professional *habitus*¹³ seems to have been not so much an exception as a distinctive trait of Italian philosophers, who have often had a propensity for the "non-philosophical", i.e. "on the one hand, the experience of the common people, and, on the other, the public sphere" (Esposito 2010, 47; my translation). Anyway, at that time Tilgher's eclectic attitude was stigmatized by professional and academic philosophers, whose speculation aimed at conceptual abstraction (Faraone 2005a, 115). Though

¹³ Cf. Lami 1990, 43.

Tilgher was no longer a new entrant, he was clearly occupying a dominated position in the pure field of professional philosophy. Mussolini's ascent to power complicated Tilgher's underdog position: in the first half of the 1920s he openly opposed the rising regime, losing many collaborations due to the increasing censorship. Only in 1927 did Tilgher eventually write a letter to Mussolini, which enabled him to emerge from the isolation of the previous years, and to restart his journalistic career¹⁴. Tilgher had to pay a price for his rehabilitation: his position towards the regime shifted from opposition to connivance, mainly based on the struggle against a common enemy, Benedetto Croce, who was considered the leader of the liberal opposition to the regime. Indeed, in 1928 Tilgher carried out a fierce attack against his former master (Faraone 2005a, 161), denouncing his doctrine as an undue "deification of history" (229). None the less, Tilgher remained an outsider, a lone wolf who suffered from an at least double domination. On the one hand, sacrificing his former anti-fascism for his rehabilitation, he ended up being confined to pure philosophy, as the official Fascist cultural line could not accept his unorthodox profile; his former critical verve had therefore to be shut off. On the other hand, this later polemics against Croce showed how deep Tilgher remained within the orbit of the neo-idealism of Croce and Gentile. Like other figures of the so-called minority philosophy, Tilgher was dominated by neo-idealistic thought since the inception of his career. This is the reason why history was always at the core of his thinking, even when he turned to vitalistic and irrational currents of thought. This adherence to the "key tenet of historicism" (*ibid.*, 209) explains the habit of *framing*, which can be regarded as the basic rhetorical strategy of his criticism, whose importance Tilgher explicitly underscored in his metacritical writings (see § 4.3.3).

This brief reconstruction of Tilgher's trajectory can be linked to his intellectual *habitus*, which displayed a fervid inclination to polemics. According to Lami (1990, 46), polemics was a constant in Tilgher's intellectual behaviour. This agonistic disposition had both practical and theoretical consequences; indeed, Tilgher was involved in many harsh controversies, sometimes showing a remarkable lack of self-control; moreover, his aggressiveness¹⁵ also reflected on his theoretical patterns, as testified by some Fichtean and Gentilian influences (Faraone 2005a, 74-91) or

¹⁴ On the complex relationship between the late Tilgher and Fascist ideology, see Faraone 2005a, 220-237.

¹⁵ Because of his aggressive temperament, Tilgher was dubbed "the Mussolini of criticism" (Lami 1990, 39).

by the dialectic structure of his philosophy of Life. Other features connected to his dominated position are his solitary conduct, his revulsion for the academic and official culture, his engagement with popularization. As I have shown in the previous section, Pirandello and Tilgher's paths crossed in complex and multi-faceted ways. Pirandello was probably lured by the symbolic capital possessed by Tilgher as a drama critic capable of understanding his philosophical contents and to contextualize his poetics within a European or even a worldwide framework. Indeed, Pirandello's acknowledgment by Italian criticism was never "broad and unanimous" at least until the 1950s (Luperini [1992] 2008, 174-176). In between the two world wars, the negative judgment passed by Croce acted as stigma on Pirandello's reputation (*ibid.*, 175). Therefore, even though Tilgher and Pirandello were divided in the field of politics, they found themselves being allied within the symbolical struggle against Crocean hegemony. After all, the relationship between the two cannot be fully understood without considering the interplay of several fields: most notably, the field of politics, the field of pure philosophy, the field of drama and the field of *critica militante* (engaged criticism), to which much of Tilgher's unorthodox thinking belonged.

4.3. *Tilgher's critical text: symbolic and pragmatic strategies*

Scholars have frequently investigated the Pirandello-Tilgher relationship, quoting the passages in which they referred to one another¹⁶; however, for the purposes of this essay a better way to approach the topic of their reciprocal influence is to focus on Tilgher's main critical operations on Pirandello's works.

4.3.1. Selection

Firstly, Tilgher critical discourse on Pirandello is strongly based on selection. Regardless of whether Tilgher is extolling or criticizing Pirandello's work, his argumentation always aims to disclose the real nucleus of Pirandello's art, to identify its "central problem". With reference to his 1922 essay, eighteen years later Tilgher wrote:

¹⁶ In particular, Tilgher 1940 sheds light on the critic's awareness of having directly influenced Pirandello, cf. Sciascia 1953 and (1961) 2010; Illiano 1968; Barbina 1992.

[...] io mostravo che tutto il mondo pirandelliano faceva centro intorno a una visione della Vita come forza travagliata da un'intera antinomia per la quale la Vita è, insieme, necessitata a darsi forma e, per eguale necessità, non può consistere in nessuna forma, ma deve passare di forma in forma. È la famosa, o famigerata, antitesi di Vita e Forma, *problema centrale dell'arte pirandelliana*. (Tilgher 1940, 91)

[...] I showed that Pirandello's whole world revolved around a vision of Life as a force torn from within by a complete contradiction whereby Life is, at the same time, compelled to take a form, but, equally compellingly, cannot be identified in any single form, but is forced to change form constantly and endlessly. It is the famous – or rather infamous – Life vs Form contradiction, which is *the central problem of Pirandello's art*.

A brief scrutiny proves that this selective device is systematically involved in Tilgher's Pirandellian writings. His strategy is to overlay some core elements – such as, from 1922 on, the Life-Form formula –, underplaying those which do not conform to them. There follows a series of samples, chronologically ordered:

- Tilgher 1916: Questa commedia [...] di Luigi Pirandello è il prodotto dell'esacerbazione dell'esasperazione caricaturale degli elementi fondamentali dell'arte pirandelliana. (68)

This comedy [...] by Luigi Pirandello is the result of the exacerbation, or the aggravation to the point of caricature of the key features of Pirandello's art.

- Tilgher 1920: *Il Teatro dello Specchio* sembra a me lo *sviluppo* no, ma l'*esasperazione*, certo, degli elementi costitutivi dell'arte pirandelliana, che in esso appaiono in tutta la loro essenziale nudità [...]. (25-26)

The *Theatre of the Mirror* seems to me to be maybe not the *development*, but certainly an *exacerbation* of the constitutive features of Pirandello's art, which feature in it in all their essential nakedness [...].

- Tilgher 1921: Ma questo, che dovrebbe essere il motivo principale della commedia pirandelliana [...]. (92)

But this, which should be the central motive of Pirandello's comedy [...].

- Tilgher 1922d: Dualismo di Vita e Forma [...]: ecco il nucleo germinale della visione drammatica pirandelliana [...]. (101)

Life-Form dualism [...] – this is the nucleus from which Pirandello's dramatic vision germinates [...].

- Tilgher 1922b: *Umorismo e cerebralità*: tutta l'arte di Pirandello è racchiusa in queste parole. (139)

Humor and braininess: Pirandello's entire art is summed in these two words.

- Tilgher 1922b: Necessità per la Vita di calarsi in una forma ed impossibilità di esaurirvisi: ecco il motivo fondamentale che sottostà a tutta l'opera di Pirandello e le dà una ferrea unità e organicità di visione. (140)

Life needs to take a form, and yet cannot exhaust itself in it: this is the underlying motif of Pirandello's art, giving it a steel-like unity and consistency of vision.

- Tilgher 1922a: La chiave dell'arte pirandelliana è tutta qui. (33)

Here lies the key to Pirandello's art.

- Tilgher 1928a: Non perciò il dramma esorbita dai motivi centrali dell'arte pirandelliana quali furono fermati nel saggio precedente [...]. (256)

This notwithstanding, the play does not overstep the central motifs of Pirandello's art as stated in the previous essay [...].

The formal structure of those utterances is always similar, no matter the focus of the single occurrences. The critical discourse reflects a highly polarized image of Pirandello's works. The critical act reduces the text to its prime factor: claiming the very existence of a center, a nucleus, is a rhetorical strategy which aims at simultaneously defining a positive value and highlighting the cleverness of the critic who has devised the definition. After all, to this day it is still inevitable to deal with the Life-Form formula when studying Pirandello's plays or other writings: Tilgher's knack for formulas¹⁷ gave birth to a true founding myth of Pirandello's art, at the same time contributing to shaping the author's artistic outlook.

4.3.2. Comparison

Closely linked to selection is Tilgher's use of comparisons in his critical writing. Beside the comparative strategies involved in the selection patterns quoted above, Tilgher often tends to contrast different aspects within the same work, giving completely different assessments of various elements

¹⁷ "L'uso sfrenato e incontrollato' di taluni concetti chiave è una caratteristica di Tilgher" (Rota 2008, 155). Cf. Cesa 2002.

or components¹⁸. None of the Tilgher reviews I examined is completely positive or negative, except for the hatchet jobs about *Pensaci, Giacomino!* (1916) and *Diana e la Tuda* (1927b) and the eulogy of *Vestire gli ignudi* (*Clothing the Naked*; 1922e). Even when Tilgher states that he appreciated the play, he always finds a flaw somewhere, which he often highlights through a direct comparison with the most noticeable and worthy elements. Let us consider a few examples:

- Tilgher 1919: V'è in questo ammirabile primo atto una umanità e verità profonde. [...] Ma gli altri due atti sono lunghi dall'essere all'altezza del primo, e specialmente il secondo atto. (76)

The first act is replenished with a deep humanity and truth. [...] But the other two acts are far from paralleling the first, especially the second one.

- Tilgher 1921: Non tutti questi personaggi sono ugualmente realizzati: due, i più importanti, il Padre e la Figliastro, son vicinissimi alla perfetta e compiuta realizzazione artistica, qualche altro, invece, è poco più che natura bruta, impressione di vita quasi per nulla artisticamente realizzata [...]. (91)

Ma questo, che dovrebbe essere il motivo principale della commedia pirandelliana, e che, effettivamente, la domina per tutto il prim'atto, non trova sviluppo adeguato nel secondo e nel terzo. (92)

Not all the characters are equally well rounded. Two – the key ones, the Father and the Stepdaughter, are close to perfection; others, however, are little more than raw matter, an impression of life far from being fully realized in artistic form [...].

But this, which is the key motif of Pirandello's comedy and which, in actual fact, does dominate the first act, is not adequately developed in the second and third acts.

- Tilgher 1981: Il vero difetto del lavoro, soprattutto negli ultimi due atti [...]. (257)

The real shortcoming, especially in the last two acts [...].

The next samples exemplify Tilgher's strategy of contrasting different works by Pirandello:

¹⁸ Comparisons can be drawn on a broader scale: while discussing foreign dramatists in his *La scena e la vita* (*The Stage and Life*; 1925b), Tilgher used Pirandello's works as a yardstick to carry out his descriptions and evaluations (Giannangeli 2008, 48, 56).

- Tilgher 1922e: Nelle precedenti commedie piccolo-borghesi di Pirandello era evidente lo squilibrio tra la vastità metafisica delle conclusioni. [...] in questa commedia, invece [...]. (108)

[...] l'ambiente non è antipatico come in altre commedie pirandelliane. Tutto è qui insomma più semplice più ovvio più naturale. (108)

In Pirandello's previous comedies centering on the lower middle class the unbalance with the metaphysical vastness of the conclusions was evident. [...] in this comedy, instead [...].

[...] the environment is not as unpleasant as in Pirandello's other comedies. Everything here is easier, more obvious, more natural.

- Tilgher 1925a: Il lavoro si libra incerto tra la farsa e il dramma, non abbastanza dramma, tipo *Sei personaggi* ed *Enrico IV*, non ancora farsa, tipo *Così è (se vi pare)*. (251)

The work hovers uncertainly between farce and drama – not enough drama as in *Six Characters* or *Henry the Fourth*, not yet farce, as in *Right You Are (If You Think You Are)*.

- Tilgher 1927b: Se uno vuol conoscere la filosofia di Pirandello la cercherà mai in *Diana e la Tuda*, e piuttosto riaprirà i capolavori: l'*Enrico IV* e i *Sei personaggi*. (253)

If you want to learn about Pirandello's philosophy, don't look for it in *Diana and the Tuda*, but rather go back to his masterpieces: *Henry the Fourth* and *Six Characters*.

The latter examples clearly show that drawing comparisons carries out a strong evaluating function. In other words, Tilgher's criticism relies on building prototypes, which work as a litmus test for the less effective parts of a single piece or Pirandello's work as a whole. Even though Tilgher can in a way be considered Pirandello's 'official' critic (or at least so he was in 1921-22), his judgements were nearly always multi-faceted and highly nuanced. Tilgher's *habitus* of the role of critics includes independence of judgment and distancing from the author. Such an approach was meant as a means of strengthening his position by claiming autonomy, and also as a way to establish a symbolic distinction for the niche of criticism in the field of artistic production.

4.3.3. Framing

Thirdly, an essential aspect of Tilgher's argumentative style is framing. Being fundamentally a historicist, Tilgher clearly advocated the need for a

cutting-edge and new-oriented art. Even though Tilgher was influenced by several irrational or vitalistic thinkers – like Nietzsche, Spengler and Bergson – he drew his sense of history from Hegelian idealism as reinterpreted by Benedetto Croce. Even though his own aesthetics was crafted in opposition to Crocean theories, it still relied on a form of historicism derived from them¹⁹. Tilgher’s skeptical philosophy did not prevent him from rooting his thought in the present, which appeared to him as a Pandora’s box, full of challenges which urgently needed addressing. His “historicist scepticism”²⁰ reflected on his critical beliefs and methods. In *L’arte come originalità e i problemi dell’arte*, before discussing the demiurgic role of the critic, Tilgher argues the identity between originality and up-to-dateness, which he summed up in this ‘categorical imperative’: “Give artistic shape to the Life of your age, to your present; live as present-in-action, and express this artistically; live Life as present, as shapeless, as a problem, and find a solution to it. Live and solve the problems of your age”²¹ (1922c, 50-51). Tilgher’s historicism made him attack Pirandello in a public debate over drama criticism which took place in some Roman newspapers. While Pirandello claimed that “The problems of the age do not exist for those who create”²² (Pirandello 1923, 8), because artistic creation attains a sort of aesthetic universality, Tilgher clearly restates, in response, the unavoidable relation between the artist and his historical time (Tilgher 1923). The very Life *vs.* Form formula comes from his personal conception of history as a continuous “passage from a form that is no more to one which is not yet”²³ (Tilgher 1922c, 49), *id est* as an endless dialectic contrast between the assumption of a given ‘form’ and Life’s striving to move past it. As a result, both artists and critics should be able to “free themselves from the old forms, which they regard as unsuitable, to conquer new ones”²⁴ (*ibid.*, 50). This aesthetic conception justifies the overplay of works of art which seem to the critic to be especially innovative.

¹⁹ For the Crocean patterns which underlie Tilgher’s philosophical thought, see Rota 2008, 163. Even his contemporaries understood that Tilgher was deeply influenced by his former master, still after he had rejected him.

²⁰ Cf. Faraone 2005a, 139-158; Rota 2008, 156.

²¹ “Dà forma artistica alla Vita del tuo tempo, al tuo presente; vivi come presente in atto ed esprimilo artisticamente; sperimenta la Vita come presente, come informe, come problema e trovanne la soluzione; vivi e risolvi i problemi del tuo tempo”.

²² “I problemi del tempo non esistono [...] per chi crea”.

²³ “transito dalla forma che non è più a quella che non è ancora”.

²⁴ “affrancarsi da vecchie forme sentite come insufficienti e conquistarne delle nuove”.

The second main frame used by Tilgher to contextualize Pirandello's works draws on contemporary philosophy: Pirandellian texts are not generically modern as much as deeply imbued with the most cutting-edge European philosophical trends, which, in Tilgher's opinion, coincided with Irrationalism and Relativism. There follows a brief list of samples of this framing strategy:

- Tilgher 1920: Questo fulmineo trapasso dalla vita inconscia e cieca alla consapevolezza della vita, dall'essere alla coscienza dell'essere, e, per parlare in linguaggio fichtiano-hegeliano, dall'essere *in sé* all'essere *per sé* [...].

This sudden passage from a blind and unconscious life to an awareness of life, from mere being to an awareness of being, and, to use a Hegelian-Fichtean language – from *being-in-itself* to *being-for-itself* [...].

- Tilgher 1922b: Ciò basta da solo a far comprendere di quanta freschissima attualità sia l'opera di questo nostro scrittore. (140)

L'arte di Pirandello, contemporanea non solo cronologicamente ma anche idealmente della grande rivoluzione spiritualistica e idealistica avvenuta in Italia e in Europa ai primi del secolo, trasporta nell'arte quell'antiintellettualismo, quell'antirazionalismo, quell'antilogicismo che riempie di sé tutta la filosofia contemporanea e che oggi culmina nel Relativismo. (180)

This in itself is a sign of how fresh and new the work of our writer is.

Pirandello's art is contemporary not only chronologically, but also ideally, as it draws on the great spiritual and idealistic revolution which took place in Italy and Europe at the start of the century, and shifts art into the realm of the anti-intellectualism, irrationalism, anti-logicism which fill contemporary philosophy and which culminate, these days, in Relativism.

- Tilgher 1922a: Pirandello è *relativista*, nega che esista una realtà e verità fuori di noi [...]. Nel tormento dei suoi personaggi, che, posti d'improvviso dinanzi all'immagine della loro vita, ne avvertono tutta la meschinità e l'angustia [...] noi sentiamo fremere e piangere il nostro stesso più profondo tormento. L'arte di Pirandello preannuncia così il nuovo e più grande romanticismo, che sarà l'anima dell'arte di domani. (34-35)

[È possibile parlare di religiosità in Pirandello] se alla parola religiosità si dia, come si deve dare, il senso che le dà Otto nel celebre libro *Das Heilige* [...]. (36)

Gli è che quella cosiddetta *inumanità* lo introduce in un mondo di sentimenti antipatico, ingrato, odioso quanto si vuole, ma nuovo, originale, modernissimo [...]. (41)

Pirandello is a *relativist*; he denies that reality and truth exist outside of [...]. In the agony of his characters, who, suddenly faced with the image of

their life, understand its pettiness and constraints [...], we can feel our own deepest agony. Pirandello's art is a forerunner of a new and greater romanticism which will be the soul of tomorrow's art.

[It is possible to talk about religious feeling in Pirandello] if we give the phrase "religious feeling" the meaning it is given by Otto in his famous book *Das Heilige* [...].

His so-called *inhumanity* leads one into a world of feeling which, as unpleasant, ungrateful, hateful as it may be, is new, original, of the utmost modernity [...].

- Tilgher 1923: O che forse Pirandello è vissuto finora se non nel mondo della luna, almeno nell'isola di Pasqua prima che il maremoto se la portasse via? Tutti sappiamo che egli da giovane fu in Germania e che gli piacque sempre assai più leggere libri di filosofia che di letteratura. (87)

[...] ma questo sentimento era lo stesso che si andava maturando contemporaneamente nella cultura europea, e, poiché egli non viveva in un altro pianeta, ma su questo duro mondo sublunare, è difficile negare che un qualche influsso o suggestione, sia pure incosciente, gli sia venuto dal di fuori. (87)

Has Pirandello been living so far on the moon, or maybe on Easter Island before it was swept away by a tidal wave? We all know that as a young man he spent time in Germany, and that he always preferred philosophy to literature.

[...] such feeling was at the time taking hold as a general trend in European culture, and since he did not live on another planet, but on Earth, it is hardly possible to deny that some influence or suggestion, however unconsciously, should have come to him from the outside.

After all, Giannangeli (2008, 28) noticed that a key procedure of Tilgher's drama criticism is "the contextualization of the author of a text born for the stage [...] in broader cultural currents" (see also Faraone 2005b, 190, on the historicist roots of this methodological practice).

4.3.4. Interpretative description and explicit valorization

Concerning the two remaining strategies, interpretative description and direct valorization, Tilgher was influenced by the genre he typically chose to write about Pirandello. Tilgher wrote largely reviews, and even his longest Pirandellian writing is partly the result of a patchwork of previously published reviews. In his critical writing, therefore, he often includes a summary of the plot of the plays he is evaluating in order to fill in the audi-

ence with the information needed to understand the review. If we take a chronological approach to Tilgher's reviews, it becomes immediately apparent that the way in which interpretation is mixed with description changes significantly over the years. Initially, Tilgher places the summary at the beginning of the review, and critical interpretation follows: this is the case of the reviews of *Pensaci, Giacomino!* (*Think it Over, Giacomino!*, 1916) and *L'innesto* (*The Grafting*, 1919), even though in the 1916 lambast the negative judgment is anticipated in the first lines. After 1921-22, Tilgher tends to mix description and interpretation, especially when he applies his key formula to the various stages of the plot: the narrative structure is subsumed into the Life-Form polarization, as it happens in the reviews of *Enrico IV* (*Henry the Fourth*), *Vestire gli ignudi* (*Clothing the Naked*), *La vita che ti diedi* (*The Life I Gave You*) and *La nuova colonia* (*The New Colony*). For instance, while summarizing *Enrico IV*, Tilgher outlines the plot of the first two parts of the play, which he calls "ideal moments of the tragedy"; before moving to the third one, he inserts the following commentary:

- Tilgher 1922d: Primo momento ideale della tragedia: la *forma* che la Vita si propone di assumere per una sera sola la intrappola per dodici anni. Secondo momento: potendo liberarsi della sua prigioniera, la Vita vi si trattiene volontariamente, coscientemente, essendo ormai troppo tardi per vivere davvero. (99)

First ideal moment of the tragedy: the *form* that Life intends to assume for one night only turns into a twelve-year prison. Second moment: even when it can free itself from its prison, Life consciously chooses to remain locked in it, as it is now too late to start living.

The formula is now so ingrained in his critical operations that he exploits it several times, to comment on and explain different stages of the plot. As a result, the description of the literary text and its interpretation become intimately intertwined.

Lastly, Tilgher's valorization statements are deeply linked to the other critical devices I have just discussed. Thus, in many cases, his judgments derive directly from selection, subsumption or comparative strategies. Nevertheless, two interesting features characterize the rhetorical strategies used by Tilgher to express explicit judgements: on the one hand, he nearly always adopts an assertive and peremptory tone. See, for instance, the following samples:

- Tilgher 1916: Tutti i personaggi sono falsi e antipatici [...]. La commedia perde qualunque interesse vitale [...]. Manca qualunque necessità dei sentimenti e delle azioni. Siamo al di qua dell'arte. (71-72)

All characters are false and unpleasant [...]. The comedy misses out on any possible vital interest [...]. Feelings and actions are totally unmotivated. This falls well short of art.

- Tilgher 1920: La vera debolezza di queste curiose commedie, secondo me, consiste in questo: Pirandello non ha saputo dare valore e senso universalmente umano al contrasto tra realtà e illusione [...]. (26)

In my opinion the true weakness of these strange comedies is this: Pirandello has failed to give value and a universal human meaning to the contrast between reality and delusion [...].

- Tilgher 1921: Qui ci basti mettere nel giusto rilievo, oltre la indiscutibile genialità dell'intuizione e la potente realizzazione scenica che essa ha trovato per tutto il primo atto, la strabiliante scienza tecnica, la consumata esperienza teatrale [...]. Pirandello è certamente tra i più operosi creatori di un nuovo ambiente spirituale, tra i più meritori precursori del genio di domani, se questo ci sarà. (95)

Suffice it to highlight, besides the unquestionable genius of the intuition and the power of the staging throughout the first act, the outstanding technical competence, and the accomplished theatrical expertise [...]. Pirandello is undoubtedly one of the most active creators of a new spiritual environment, of the most deserving pioneers of the geniality of the future, if it ever comes to be.

- Tilgher 1922b: È una farsa filosofica: e, nel genere, un autentico capolavoro. (153)

It is a philosophical farce; and a true masterpiece of its kind.

In spite of the slight epistemological caution exercised in the second example (a subjectivation of the judgement: *secondo me, in my opinion*), Tilgher's writing displays a strong assertive tendency, which is connected to the professional *habitus* of the critic: in fact, he regarded the intellectual as an impetuous and bellicose critic of the entire culture, ready to take sides and to judge history and his products²⁵. On the other hand, Tilgher's valorization statements often rely on explicit or implicit comparisons, drawn between the literary work being assessed and an ideal, positive prototype. Sometimes he also uses concessive patterns to underline the gap between a

²⁵ One of Tilgher's main criticisms of Crocean idealism concerned the nature of the value judgments in history. According to Croce, they had to be considered a "logical monstrosity", and should therefore be banned from history and philosophy. Tilgher regarded this position as a sign of moral weakness, a way to abdicate any attempt to be actively involved in the events, cf. Rota 2008, 155.

negative possible prototype, whose actualization is avoided by the author's skill or the worthiness of the result.

- Tilgher 1919: L'azione si svolge senza deviazioni e inutili distrazioni: le scene si incalzano rapide, violente, affannose, ma, insieme, obbedendo ad una profonda necessità, ad una intima spontaneità. La situazione è terribilmente scabrosa e difficile, ma l'autore la tratta con delicatezza e tatto squisitamente fini e direi quasi femminili pur proiettandovi sopra una luce cruda e violenta, senza ombre. (75-76)

The action takes place with no deviations or useless distractions: scenes chase one another quickly, violently, frantically, obeying a profound necessity, and an intimate spontaneity. The situation is terribly thorny and complicated, but the author treats it tactfully and delicately, in a manner which is almost feminine, even though he casts upon it a crude, violent light.

- Tilgher 1920: In queste commedie c'è l'urto, non il *dramma*, non lo sviluppo. (29)

In these comedies one finds a *clash* – not *drama*, nor its development.

- Tilgher 1922b: I progressi fatti finora ci sono promessa sicura del capolavoro che non può mancare, in cui l'intuizione pirandelliana della vita conquisterà ed esprimerà pienamente tutta se stessa. (192-193)

The progress made so far is a certain promise of a masterpiece which cannot be far away, in which Pirandello's intuition of life will conquer and fully express itself.

- Tilgher 1922e: I personaggi, benché, al solito, tutti [...] lucidamente frenetici, non hanno nulla di esagerato di stecchito di legnoso: tutto è in essi normale verosimile credibile. (108)

Despite being, as customary, lucidly frantic [...], the characters do not have anything stiff or rigid: everything in them is normal plausible credible.

In the second last example above it is easy to notice Tilgher's demiurgic attitude: the critic's assertive auspice for a forthcoming masterpiece propels itself into the future, tries to influence the artist's career by establishing its goals and saying that they will be eventually and definitively reached.

4.4. *Conclusions: an intriguing complicity*

In way of conclusion, I will now briefly focus on the pragmatic and sociological implications of the Pirandello-Tilgher relationship. As Rossella Faraone

claims, Tilgher used to anticipate his theoretical positions in his aesthetical speculations (2005b, 187-188); therefore, Tilgher's critical representation of Pirandello's works should be considered "something more than an interpretation" (181). In fact, Tilgher's aesthetic (and later, theoretical) thought was shaped in constant dialogue with Pirandello's body of work. Even though it does not mention Pirandello, the general essay *L'arte come originalità e i problemi dell'arte* is openly grounded in the Life vs. Form formula (Faraone 2005b, 180). As a result, it is possible to hypothesize the existence of a heuristic collusion between a critical method and its object, as was also the case with Gianfranco Contini and Eugenio Montale (Cardilli 2016) and Andrea Zanzotto and Stefano Agosti (Cardilli 2017). The aesthetic system which underpins Tilgher's critical method is akin to the object to which it is applied; probably, aesthetics, methods and object are co-generated, or at least in a relation of multiple circular causality. While interpreting and reviewing Pirandello's plays, Tilgher was not working as a drama critic as much as he was trying to elaborate and to ground his aesthetic-philosophical system. As highlighted in § 4.2, Tilgher was a stubborn outsider (Rota 2008), both in the immediate post-war period and in the Fascist era. Even though he occupied prestigious positions within journalism and philosophical popularization, in the pure pole of philosophy he acted as an almost chronic underdog which was hopelessly trying to emancipate himself from the likes of Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile. Since he refused to adhere to the Fascist regime, his marginalization increased: the regime let him free to express himself because they did not feel threatened by his polemical position, which they considered deflated and therefore harmless (*ibid.*, 151). In fact, Tilgher's aggressive attitude towards Croce was appreciated by the regime (Rota 2008, 149-151). As a result, his nonconformism remained confined to the cultural fields, without any significant political development. Tilgher's marginal and dominated position explains his knack for polemics, of which the harsh claim to the Life vs. Form formula (Tilgher 1940) is an example.

With regard to my claim that Tilgher's criticism can be considered as a quadratic position-taking, it should be remembered that in 1922 Pirandello had already become famous, and his prestige could transfer to his 'most acute' reader. Nevertheless, Tilgher exploited his Pirandellian interpretation not only to consolidate his aesthetic thought, but also to promote and popularize the works of an author which he felt to be really close to his theoretical outlook. While Tilgher was trying to ascend through his critical reading of Pirandellian works, we cannot forget about "the extraordinary spiritual consonance between the critic and [Pirandello's] body of works" (Faraone 2005b, 184; my translation). This consonance was the enabling

condition for the mutual exchange which characterizes their relationship. To go back to the “sandpile” metaphor mentioned above, Tilgher did leave his footprint in his ascension attempt. His interpretation soon became renowned and even notorious, as the 1924 debate on Pirandello’s adherence to Fascism proved (Sciascia 1953 and [1961] 2010): some intellectuals ironically argued that Tilgher was the ‘inventor’ or the ‘author’ of Pirandello and his fame (Sciascia [1961] 2010, 104-106). Not only did Tilgher’s attitude for selection and subsumption directly influence the reception of Pirandello’s work, but it also restrained the author’s creative repertoire, pushing him to adopt the Life vs. Form formula as a key pattern for his later works. From this viewpoint, the Pirandello-Tilgher complicity can be rightfully deemed ‘fatal’ (Polacco 2011, 99). Nevertheless, neither of the two can be considered without the other: their mutual influence was so strong that their trajectories were deeply influenced, perhaps even diverted from what might have been their paths had they not crossed. Tilgher saw in Pirandello a way to ground and apply his aesthetic beliefs; Pirandello found himself perfectly understood, even though later this understanding changed into a cage. If compared to the average relationship between authors and critics, the one between Pirandello and Tilgher appears as an extreme case. However, it highlights pragmatic and symbolic dynamics which generally operate in the literary field, although with lower intensity. While trying to ascend to prestige via assessment, critics contribute to shaping the image of both literary works and their authors, and sometimes end up influencing the latter’s creative work. This kind of conflictual double bind is an important, albeit often underestimated, engine in modern cultural production.

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