

Theory, Praxis and Puppet Plays in Cervantes and Pirandello

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Abstract

Constantly throughout his literary career, the Italian writer Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) had always seen in Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547-1616) a precursory inspiration of his own poetics. This paper delves into the complex nature of this literary influence, and particularly into the nature of the theoretical premonitions which Cervantes' *Don Quixote* has pragmatically bequeathed to Pirandello's oeuvre. After a brief glance at various testimonies on Cervantes enunciated by Pirandello himself during his lifetime, this study tackles the meaning of two emblematic passages in Pirandello's long essay *L'umorismo*, in which he traces the development of his very own poetics by linking it to Cervantes' comic element in *Don Quixote*. Finally, the paper shall embark on a textual and thematic analysis of two emblematic puppet play episodes portrayed in *Don Quixote* and in Pirandello's novel *The Late Mattia Pascal*.

Keywords: *Luigi Pirandello, Miguel de Cervantes, Don Quixote, The Late Mattia Pascal.*

Introduction

In 20th century Italian literature, *Don Quixote's* presence has been as striking and as prominent as in other Western literatures. Constantly throughout his literary career, the Italian writer and Nobel laureate Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) had always seen in Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's (1547-1616) *Don Quixote* (vol.1 – 1605; vol.2 – 1615) an exemplary and precursory opus of his very own poetics of *umorismo* and *il sentimento del contrario*. Cervantes not only became a sort of mythical hero of modernity to Pirandello but, in a more specific meta-literary sense, he inspired reflections on the relations between literature and the modern condition. My paper shall highlight how Pirandello's reading of Cervantes strongly intertwines with the theoretical configuration and subsequently, with the pragmatic development of his very own poetics. I am particularly interested in seeing which thematic premonitions Cervantes' *Don Quixote* has bequeathed to Luigi Pirandello's 1904 novel, *The Late Mattia Pascal*. Through these novels, Cervantes and Pirandello

enact a transformation of the genre by imbuing it with a strong dose of modernity. They bring about the consciousness of the fragmented nature and the polyphonic perspectives of reality which, at the end of the day, reveal themselves to be quite partial and relative. Cervantes and Pirandello also bring about the demise of the author's authority and voice in the text, and they contrast various forms of truth. They have truly marked the distance of the genre of the novel, as well as the literary expression of modernity, from the classical epoch. Whilst classical works had demanded in literature and theatre a certain aura of solemnity, noble thoughts and an authoritative voice in the text, the relativism of Cervantes' and Pirandello's novels prefers the comical, the grotesque, parody, the demystification of authority. The classical and mono-logical hero, who expressed himself in one type of language and gave one version of reality, is now substituted by Cervantes' and Pirandello's anti-hero and inept figure, condemned to observe himself living while doubting his own self-identity. As Romano Luperini (2005) so aptly points out, in Cervantes and Pirandello, the once classical hero now becomes a character. And I shall show that it is a destroyed puppet theatre in *Don Quixote* (or else another one with a ruptured papier-mâché ceiling in *The Late Mattia Pascal*) that will cancel out every certainty in the character and reveal a vast array of multiple possibilities that were previously hidden by literary representation.

Pirandello's views on Cervantes

A comparative study looking into Cervantes and Pirandello would reveal that their cultural backgrounds were not as diverse as one might believe them to be. They were groomed amidst the traditional values of Catholicism, towards which they adhered in the early stages of their lives, but which they rejected as they matured as writers. Zangrilli (1996) highlights that both of them were imbued with that Mediterranean culture of their native villages that could be envisaged as an osmosis of various cultures: Greek, Sicilian, Latin, Arabic, Jewish, Norman, Hispanic; hence a cultural background full of myths and fables (especially those recounting Medieval knights' chivalry and heroic deeds) which were portrayed by theatre companies, puppet masters, as well as by traditional oral culture which was passed on from one generation to the other. Their intellectual formation was based on a classical and humanistic one, which is clearly demonstrated in their opus. Pirandello had constantly shown a fervid interest in *Don Quixote*, whose image was projected since his childhood through Sicilian popular culture, particularly in the puppet theatres (De Fusco, 2015). I shall be looking in this paper into the portrayal of puppet scenes in *Don Quixote* and in *The Late Mattia Pascal* since they offer a fertile common ground of affinities between Cervantes and Pirandello. However, before looking into these texts, we have to grasp the genesis of Pirandello's interest in Cervantes.

Without neither minimising the importance of Cervantes' texts and

commentaries about him present in Pirandello's libraries, nor by detracting anything from Pirandello's many references to Cervantes during his lifetime (in articles, letters, book reviews and conferences), the most eloquent testimony to Pirandello's relationship to Cervantes is to be found in his 1908 essay *L'umorismo*. In this essay, Pirandello traces and explains the development of his very own poetics by linking it to Cervantes' comic element in *Don Quixote*. If we are seriously attempting to understand the extent of how much the humoristic temperament of Cervantes has fascinated Pirandello, we have to read the essay *L'umorismo* just as Luperini (2005) recommends that we read it, i.e. as "la coscienza pirandelliana del moderno sul piano letterario" (i.e. by seeing Pirandello's essay as a roadmap of modernity, as expressed in the history of literature; Luperini 2005, p.49). The essay contains two sections. In the first, through a multitude of examples, Pirandello traces the development of his concept of *umorismo*, starting from the philological definitions and ending in its direct application in literary works. But then, surprisingly, in a long discussion about the various texts of humoristic writers and philosophers, Pirandello gives a highlighted emphasis on the relationship between Ludovico Ariosto and Cervantes. He states that Ariosto lacks those moral tensions that are necessary for a *scrittore umorista*, because he lacks humoristic contrast. On the other hand, in Cervantes, Pirandello discovers the main elements of his *umorismo*, and thus identifies him as the first writer of this poetics in Modern literature.

The second part of the essay, which goes by the title *Essenza, caratteri e materia dell'umorismo*, is decisive to understand Pirandello's theory on humour. To Pirandello, humour is *il sentimento del contrario* (the perception of a contradictory reality) and through this perception, he defines the threshold between the comical and the humoristic. Hence, through the perception of the absurd and the ridiculous, the subject may perceive "il lato serio e doloroso della realtà" (Pirandello 2006, p.913). Pirandello affirms that humour is the only authentic form of art and through it, thanks to reasoning, the writer highlights the contradictions of reality. To explain this concept, Pirandello turns to Cervantes once again: he defines him as the only true father of his concept of *il sentimento del contrario*. Further on, we see Pirandello depicting Cervantes in prison whilst having an interview with the character of Don Quixote, in a non-dissimilar way to what Pirandello himself used to enact with his very own characters: "Il Cervantes non può consolarsi in alcun modo perché, nella carcere della Mancha, con Don Quijote – come egli stesso dice – genera *qualcuno che gli somiglia*" (Pirandello, 2006, p.930). According to Zangrilli (1996), this proves that what Jorge Luis Borges had said about this relationship was correct: Pirandello creates a precursor of his own modernity in Cervantes. Don Quixote thus becomes an emblem, according to Pirandello's *umorismo*, of the permanent conflict between reality and speculative idealism, between reality and the projections of our imagination. In this essay, Pirandello portrays in essay form what he had already described in narrative in his previous opus, *The Late Mattia Pascal*, to whose protagonist he dedicates the first edition of the essay.

The puppet theatres of Cervantes and Pirandello

Literary criticism has always seen elements of *pirandellismo* in writers that preceded Pirandello, from Antiquity right up to the Renaissance. Both cervantine as well as pirandellian criticism have noticed a whole series of thematic affinities between *Don Quixote* and Pirandello's oeuvre. Some of the most consistent ones are the following: Américo Castro's article '*Cervantes y Pirandello*' (1924); Leonardo Sciascia's chapter '*Con Cervantes*' in his monograph *Pirandello e la Sicilia* (1968); Wladimir Krysinki's concept "*la linea Cervantes-Pirandello*" in his monograph *Il paradigma inquieto* (1988), as well as other more recent studies by pirandellian scholars Franco Zangrilli (*Le sorprese dell'intertestualità: Cervantes e Pirandello*, 1996) and Carla De Fusco (*Il fascino di don Chisciotte: Unamuno e Pirandello*, 2015). The one which deserves mostly our attention is Carla De Fusco's analysis of the meta-fictional aspect of their puppet theatre scenes (De Fusco, 2015). De Fusco looks at Cervantes' and Pirandello's self-conscious and systematic use of the literary device of metafiction to draw attention to their work's status as an artefact of modernity. Cervantes' and Pirandello's metafiction poses questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, usually by using irony and self-reflection.

Like many writers who preceded him, Pirandello could not help seeing in *Don Quixote* an irreverent novel which parodies chivalric romance; in other words, a humoristic meta-novel. And when one comes to think of *The Late Mattia Pascal*, one understands the importance of Cervantes' lesson to Pirandello, especially in chapter 12, when we read about the discussion between Anselmo Paleari and Adriano Meis on the fundamental difference between classical and modern theatre. Anselmo Paleari, the landlord where Adriano Meis lives, announces that a puppet theatre company shall put up Sophocles' Greek tragedy *Electra*. However, in commenting upon this portrayal, Paleari indicates - in a comment marked by parody - that if Orestes could notice the perforation in the puppets' papier-mâché sky prop ("*lo strappo nel cielo di carta*"; Pirandello, 2005, p.467), he would transform himself into Shakespeare's Hamlet; hence, he will not remain an implacable instrument of vengeance anymore but he will become a modern character assailed by doubt:

Oreste sentirebbe ancora gl'impulsi della vendetta, vorrebbe seguirli con smaniosa passione, ma gli occhi, sul punto, gli andrebbero lì a quello strappo, donde ora ogni sorta di mali influssi penetrerebbero nella scena, e si sentirebbe cader le braccia. Oreste, insomma, diventerebbe Amleto. (Pirandello, 2005, p.467)

This reflection on the meta-theatrical nature of the automatons of *The Late Mattia Pascal* recalls one of the most complex episodes of Cervantes' novel: the encounter of Don Quixote with the puppet theatre. This episode is an icon of expired heroic fiction in which we find revealed the lustre of fiction as well as the twilight of its meaning. In this tavern scene, Don Quixote watches a puppet play managed by

Maese Pedro, who is actually the criminal Ginés de Pasamonte, currently engaged in impersonating a puppet master. The play narrates and parodies the plot taken from the Carolingian cycle of adventures pertaining to Don Galiferos, who rescued his wife Melisendra from an evil knight's captivity. When the play describes the enemy army chasing the unfortunate couple, Don Quixote springs up to defend them and destroys all the puppets and props with his sword. This episode, unlike other adventures circumscribed in one chapter, evolves in chapters 25, 26 and 27 of the second part of *Don Quixote*, which bears testimony to the relevance that Cervantes wanted to assign to it (De Fusco, 2015). In what seems like a genetic premonition to Pirandello's meta-theatre trilogy, Cervantes describes the audience that watches, comments and finally intervenes during the puppet play, climaxing with Don Quixote's unexpected invasion and destruction of the puppet theatre apparatus, as well as the final revelation of the puppet master's true identity. Cervantes gives a more ample and articulated treatment of the theme than Pirandello, in his puppet scene in *The Late Mattia Pascal*. In 1904, when Pirandello published this novel, he had still not matured as the 1921 mature meta-theatre playwright of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, and hence he assigns to it the brevity of a note, or of an aside reflection, during the dialogue between Paleari and Meis. However, notwithstanding this difference, both narrate the end of a literary tradition, the irrevocably compromised illusion of fiction and the exilic condition of the writer (De Fusco, 2015).

In the Spanish novel, the puppet master Maese Pedro is not only the expert manipulator of stage illusion but also the owner of a monkey of miraculous skills: for two crowns, the monkey reveals the past and the present, in such a way that all travellers surround it and pose questions about their future. The monkey in fact springs onto her master's shoulders and whispers into his ears the reply, which Pedro then reveals to his stupefied audience. Even Sancho, initially reluctant to believe the soothsaying qualities of the monkey, was amazed to learn about his wife Theresa who was working with a glass of wine close-by to lighten her difficult task. All the clients of the tavern admire the soothsaying qualities of the monkey and this preparation of the audience will now allow the puppet master to commence the puppet play, with a baton in hand, which he uses to indicate and identify the puppet characters on stage in such a way as to create an epiphanic effect during the play. The play which is being put up requires indeed all the care and attention of the puppet master since it is a piece from the popular tradition of the Spanish Carolingian cycle of epic tales (De Fusco, 2015). However, the courageous puppet knights will not conclude their glorious epic because Don Quixote invades the theatrical space to defend the Christian heroes. Maese Pedro uselessly tries to quell Don Quixote's fury by telling him that the Moors are just papier-mâché puppets on a string; Quixote thinks that this is a trick since in the Land of the Giants, fiction is reality, and reality is an illusion. Hence, Don Quixote continues destroying the puppet theatre props. All the theatrical props which had created the stage illusion of reality are now destroyed; and the shattered puppets, now lying on the floor, are

deprived of that magic of chivalric fiction, just as Pirandello's sky prop is ruptured for the automaton of Orestes to stare at, in awe, because now his heroic qualities as a character are vain (De Fusco, 2015).

When Don Quixote and all the other spectators see the destroyed puppets of Charlemagne, of his knights, of Melisendra, lying on the floor, they are all astonished, and their arms drop down just like those of Pirandello's automaton of Orestes. Since to Cervantes and Pirandello, the stage fractures itself as soon as reality collides with it, theatrical illusion has now been terminated, and the fable can no longer be told or portrayed (De Fusco, 2015). This is the unavoidable fate for Cervantes' and Pirandello's characters that had stepped onto the threshold of modernity; they are perceived as incapable of contemplating chivalric virtues; they are unable to understand the ancient legends of heroes; they are capable only of covering up deceit, a role for which Pirandello designates the character of Papiano who is described as "pago del cielo di cartapesta, basso basso, che gli sta sopra" (Pirandello, 2005, p.468). This is also a role which Cervantes assigns to Maese Pedro, who praises not the heroic quality of his characters but solely their monetary and market value, since he wants Don Quixote to pay up for the damages he caused (De Fusco 2015).

Another affinity in these puppet scene episodes concerns the element of parody and meta-textuality. In Cervantes' case, the meta-text is the episode of Melisendra which was taken from the solemn epical source of the Carolingian cycle; it is parodied without even Don Quixote realizing it as he is so engrossed by the task of destroying the puppets that threaten Melisendra. In a similar way, even in *The Late Mattia Pascal*, the parody of the sublime models of Sophocles and Shakespeare is not noticed by the characters of Paleari and Adriano Meis; both are immersed in their thoughts on the philosophical implications of modernity (De Fusco, 2015).

Cervantes and Pirandello are thus narrating the crisis of narrative forms that had portrayed the values of Renaissance Humanism and those of late 19th century Naturalism, respectively. The crisis they write about also concerns the literary conventions that had regulated writing itself, i.e. the relationship between author and opus (De Fusco, 2015). Hence, in chapter 27 of *Don Quixote*, which concludes the puppet theatre trilogy, it is revealed who Maese Pedro actually was, and what sort of trick he had contrived with his monkey. In reality Maese Pedro was Gines de Pasamonte and the monkey obviously does not speak; it is only trained to leap onto the shoulder of her trainer whilst he pretends to listen to its whispers, thus faking a prophecy which in reality was only based on rumours which he had heard beforehand whilst journeying from town to town with his puppet theatre in La Mancha. The theatre thus becomes a metaphor of reality which is controlled by the devices of theatrical fiction, and characterized by the cases of mistaken/reinvented identities, just like the case of Mattia Pascal and Adriano Meis. Apart from this, Cervantes and Pirandello are not even the 'real' authors of the narration. Cervantes states that he is simply transcribing faithfully the translation of the manuscript of Cide Hamete,

a Moor who however swears as a Christian catholic that whatsoever he narrates is truthful. The ambiguity of having an Arab chronicler and the improbable justification of the translator make Cervantes, the 'Author', unreliable (De Fusco 2015). In a similar way, Pirandello is not the real author of *The Late Mattia Pascal* since he declares to have transcribed it from a manuscript belonging to Mattia Pascal himself, whose identity is suspended between the past and the present.

In this dissolution of traditional narrative forms, Cervantes and Pirandello have denounced both the crisis of an entire cultural system as well as the useless role of the intellectual who, first and foremost, cannot even claim the authenticity of his own writing. The destruction of the puppet theatre will always remain an interpretative paradigm of *Don Quixote* for pirandellian scholars, as well as an archetype of the later implosion of the space on-stage, in late 19th century bourgeois theatre, which Pirandello himself has denounced in his meta-theatre trilogy. In this sense, Pirandello reveals himself to be a very careful and precocious reader of Cervantes and of his meta-fictional pragmatics. Pirandello's poetics was lured by that uncanny image of the broken puppet theatre, relegated to uselessness and incapable of representing any contemporary poetical imagination.

Conclusion

In both writers, the decadence of literature and its system of representing reality not only compromises the identity of the author but provokes simultaneously the absence of a mature audience capable of understanding the legends of their heroes (De Fusco, 2015). This issue brings into view the sense of the 'unpresentable', as J.F. Lyotard might have intended it (Lyotard, 1992) and the incommunicable poetics of the writer who finds it difficult to reach his audience. The audience of the puppet master Maese Pedro was in fact known as the people from the braying town, and was quite popular in the neighbourhood for being very capable in imitating the braying of a donkey, and hence incapable, through their metaphoric coarseness, to understand the legends of past chivalry. They remain silent and static whilst they disappear into the narration amidst Don Quixote's destructive fury, because they have lost ages ago that sensitivity to chivalric virtues and fables; in fact, they limit themselves to being careful observers of a puppet market very ably organized by Maese Pedro himself (De Fusco, 2015). Pirandello himself, in the *Premessa* of the *The Late Mattia Pascal* describes the public library of Miragno, totally neglected by his townfolk, as a 'braying' society in the cervantine sense, a society insensitive to the lustre of culture and literature. This dismal end of literary civilisation has caused, in Pirandello's view, the crisis of identity at a subjective and an objective level, and in the *Premessa seconda (filosofica) a mo' di scusa*, Mattia Pascal, reminiscent of Giacomo Leopardi's poetics, gives to the character of Don Eligio Pellegrinotto his explanation that absolves modern Man from responsibility for this crisis (De Fusco, 2015). The blame lies with Copernicus who had ended the anthropocentrism of

the Ptolemaic system of the universe, and with it, the reassuring certainty that God had created the universe solely for mankind, who now wanders listlessly in a world completely unknown to him. In a method, typical to Pirandello's literary pragmatics, tradition is contemplated in all its complexity and then reinterpreted: hence, in the character of Mattia Pascal, one can perceive Pirandello's juxtaposition of Cervantes' and Leopardi's poetics in all their estranging and displacing suggestiveness (De Fusco, 2015).

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Bio-note

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