

Pirandello, the Poetic Humorist
A Study of Fuori di Chiave

Pirandello first achieved international renown as a playwright with Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore (1921), Enrico IV (1922), and Questa sera si recita a soggetto (1929). While the dramatic mode of expression in the last two decades of his life presents a mature exposé of his philosophy, Pirandello's Weltanschauung can be seen in his narrative prose and even in the poetry of his early years. Here he subtly deploys the themes of necessary contradiction and the stagnancy of imposed order that were to become the basis of his theory of "umorismo." The present study will examine an early, poetical manifestation of Pirandello's "umoristico" ideology in Fuori di chiave (1912), and specifically in the opening poem of this collection, "Preludio orchestrale."

Most of Pirandello's early literary expression was poetic. The last poetic work at this time in his career was Fuori di chiave.¹ As such, this collection of poems is an important pivotal text in Pirandello's artistic development. Moreover, the similarity of themes in the author's poetry and theater (noted by several critics but never the subject of critical inquiry)² requires a comparison of his poetry and drama, the two modes of expression that represent the opposite ends of Pirandello's artistic corpus.

The title refers to Pirandello's view of the poet, endowed with humoristic reflection, or an impulsive and spontaneous ability to see everything in contraries; such a poet must live a double-natured life where he is ever "off-key." This musical term, which presupposes a fundamental "key" for pleasing melodic and harmonic sounds,

captures not only the notion of dissonance so important to Pirandello's concept of "umorismo," but also lays bare man's desire for order and the subsequent assumption that there is a natural order, some sort of "key."

Nella sua anormalita, non puo esser che amaramente comica la condizione d'un uomo che si trova ad esser sempre quasi fuori di chiave, ad essere a un tempo violino e contrabbasso; d'uomo a cui un pensiero non puo nascere, che subito non gliene nasca un altro opposto, contrario.

Pirandello gives a thorough treatment of his philosophy in the essay "L'Umorismo."⁴ He borrows the terms "violino" and "contrabbasso" from the opening poem of the Fuori collection, pointing to the importance of this text, first published one year before the essay. The concept of "umorismo" incorporates the ironic humor of Jean-Paul where two opposites co-exist. It also reflects Bergson's work on the Doppelganger, in which two contrary facets of a same entity search each other out and vie for the dominant position. The term "umorismo" itself underscores the irony of the concept. Although not yet formulated in coherent terms, the concept of opposites predates this essay. Already in the title of Pirandello's first publication, Mal giocondo (1889), he announces the importance of contradiction. Concerning this aspect of his early poetry, he writes:

Il mio primo libro fu una raccolta di versi, "Mal giocondo," pubblicata prima della mia partenza per la Germania. Lo noto, perche han voluto dire che il mio umorismo e provenuto dal mio soggiorno in Germania; e non e vero: in quella prima raccolta di versi piu della meta sono del

piu schietto umorismo, e allora io non sapevo neppure che cosa fosse l'umorismo.⁵

Fuori di chiave will present a more sophisticated and subtler form of "umorismo." The collection is in ten parts, most comprising from two to four poems, in various forms and meters. An envoi closes the collection. The first piece, "Preludio orchestrale," is a preface that includes all the major themes of the collection, themes that will come to be associated with Pirandello's universe: life and death, illusion and reality, and the empty hope of resolving the apparent conflict between love and self.⁶ The setting is a musical event: the performance or rehearsal of a "sonatina d'amor." Accordingly, a musical vocabulary leads the reader from one end of the orchestra to the other, from i violini to il contrabbasso, and from the beginning to the end of a piece of music:

Preludio orchestrale

Al violin trillante una sua brava
sonatina d'amor, con sentimento
il contrabbasso gia da tempo dava
non so che strano, rauco ammonimento.
5 Allora io non sapea, che ne la cava
pancia del mastodonico strumento
si fosse ascosa una mia certa dama
molto magra, senz'occhi, che si chiama. . .
come si chiama?

10 E invano imperioso, nella destra
la bacchetta ora stringo: quella mala
signora e del concerto la maestra.
Da quel suo novo nascondiglio esala
il suo frigido fiato nell'orchestra:
15 sale di tono ogni strumento o cala,

le corde si rilassano, gli ottoni
s'arrochiscono o mandan certi suoni. . .
Dio le perdoni!

20 M'arrabio, grido, spezzo la bacchetta,
balzo in piedi, m'ajuto con la mano.
La sonata e patetica: dian retta
i violini: piano, piano, piano. . .
Ma che piano! Di la, la maledetta,
sforza il tempo, rovescia l'uragano!
25 Da otto nove a due quarti, a otto sei. . .
Vi prego di pigliarvela con Lei,
signori miei.⁷

While both the main title and that of this introductory poem refer to the musical nature of the collection, only "Fuori di chiave" evokes dissonance. The breakdown in musical order is nonetheless of central importance in this first piece. Note that it is musical production that suffers chaos and not a musical composition. It is the living quality of music, and thus of poetry, that demands attention. Music, like theater, is a performing art that relies on the reanimation of a preexisting but static text.

The thematic opposition between mutable and static, or between life and death, adopts a metaphorical form here. The most obvious conflict in the poem is between a musical order and a frenetic deviation from the established order. "Una [...] certa dama" plays opposite the conductor: the latter tries to maintain order, representing static form, while the former attacks order, inducing change by any means. She goes against conventional structure bringing not only chaos but also the need to question order. Thus this thematic opposition is also metapoetical in that it begs the question of poetic order and the meaning of "order" in a literary text. Could this be a

reason why Pirandello abandoned poetry for other genres until near the end of his life? The query is too hypothetical, but the meaning of the criticism of order is precise in the context of this poem.

The "mala signora"'s target is intonation, a central organizing element of any musical group. Cold breath not only underscores the evil and supernatural quality of the infamous heroine, but it also evokes the musician's fear of cold air, which causes pitch to drop and endangers the instrument. The hidden lady also attacks time, a factor on which the order of all music and indeed all life is regulated. Time, in both a musical and a metaphysical sense, holds an important place in this poem. Besides the movement from the beginning of a musical piece to the climax, lines 24 and 25 refer directly to the musical sense and to the need for time. "Sforza il tempo," and the intensity of the situation increases both musically and emotionally. Instead of the more usual time signatures 9/8 and 6/8, these instances bespeak the havoc the evil lady wreaks by appearing upside-down: 8/9 and 8/6. Only 2/4 remains faithful to Western music, offering less a notion of balance than a pivot through which order easily swings to disorder.

There are several other places where time dominates; in the exposition, it is important to point out that the double bass has been sending warning messages to the violins for a long while ("gia da tempo," l. 3), and that at that time ("allora," l. 5), the conductor did not yet know about the hidden lady. The second stanza represents the beginning of the action, the narrative present of the poem. At this moment the conductor, aware of his precarious control over the orchestra, extends his baton to attempt to maintain order ("ora...,"

l. 11). This is not the first time this has happened, since the hidden lady is denounced as being in her new hiding place ("suo novo nascondiglio," l. 13).

The order of the entire poem now comes under scrutiny. The first two lines introduce the scene, a concert/rehearsal where all seems in order: the violins are playing their "sonatina d'amor [. . .] con sentimento." The second couplet gives the first hints of disturbance, which culminates at the end of the stanza in a distasteful portrait of the main character and the unanswered question of identity. The conductor, trying to maintain control over his orchestra, must relinquish the podium to the "mala signora," who becomes the "maestra." Once she is in control, her cold breath destroys intonation.

Correct intonation assures that everyone is functioning on the same level or using the same register of language; playing the same music but out of tune, two or more instrumentalists fail to communicate. Losing intonation means losing communication, or exposing the weakness of language in communicating. Moreover, Pirandello's perception of the humorist as "sempre quasi fuori di chiave" begs the question: is a condition of bad intonation not actually a heightened state wherein one must persevere to communicate outside of traditional means?

Finally, in the third stanza, disorder breaks loose: the conductor loses all control, not only of the orchestra, but of himself. He loses his temper and breaks the baton, the analogue of the poet's pen, symbolizing his reluctant yet inevitable acceptance of the loss of control. He is rendered impotent. The rhyme between piano and uragano further points to the destruction of order

as it emphasizes the conductor's sense of loss; he no longer knows what he wants and abandons all control. In the end it is music itself that must be heard, sometimes beyond the conductor's control, just as poetry sometimes reaches beyond the poet's plan.

The poetic meter seconds the decline of stability. While the first four lines maintain a constant meter with stresses falling on the fourth and tenth syllables, the regular rhythm soon begins to falter and the following lines are less stable. By the third stanza, the line is no longer the smooth, poetic arabesque with which the poet began; a choppy rhythm has now taken over to support the idea of the pulsing of the music, ever faster, less reasoned, and demonstrates the loss of control on the conductor's part. Thus music and poetry wrench themselves from the binding control of the conductor/poet; art must break free from the domination of reason and order so as to become something more than just form. The more stable meter returns in the last two lines exhorting the return of reason and logic, reestablishing the illusion of order under the guise of a gentleman's agreement. The mysterious lady appears only once more, as an imprecation in the mouth of the conductor; her anarchistic overthrow of power has given her only short-lived control.

The identity of the lady remains a problem. This matter has caused disagreement among most of the critics of Pirandello's poetry. She has been called Reason by some and Death by others.⁹ While Pirandello's perception of reason could certainly be capable of wreaking much havoc, his mistrust of reason makes it very unlikely that it should be pitied at the end of the poem. Death offers a more plausible explanation. The physical portrait of the lady recalls that of a skeleton: "molto

magra, senz' occhi." Another poem later in the collection supports this interpretation, "L'Occhio per la morte." In this poem, the narrator describes the yet-open glass eye of his dead friend: "Orrendo, nella faccia / spenta, quel guardo fiso, di minaccia. . . ." Esposito concludes that this symbolizes the eternal joke of death and life, that we can never know which eye is "l'occhio per la morte."⁹ Yet, as an echo of the archetypal blind sage, it remains open and seems to say: "Io ci vedo!"

Death does offer an alternative to "la pena di vivere." In "Il Pianeta" Pirandello tells us that we must have patience: "Pazienza! / Dovrem pure un di morire. / La ragion dell'esistenza / la sapremo, forse, dopo." During life, we are never sure where to look for the answers; and once we think we have found the right path, we are afraid to take it:

--"Ah, tu pur, tu pur d'entrare
nella vita hai voglia? Sciocco!
Che t'aspetti? dimmi un po'. . .
Non hai dunque altro da fare?"---
Sto a guardar come un allocco
e rispondo:--"Ma. . . non so. . .
non so nulla. . . proprio. . ."--
("Ingresso")

Pirandello's view is not totally fatalistic; even though the search for understanding often seems fruitless, often leading to death, he still advocates the struggle:

Mettiti a comminare,
va' dove il pie ti porta,
piglia la via piu corta
e piu non dimandare.

Andar dove che sia,

nel dubbio della sorte,
andar verso la morte
per un'ignota via:

ecco il destino. E dunque
fa' quel che far si deve.
Procura che sia breve.
Tanto, e la stesso ovunque.
(*"La Meta"*)

This attitude, which fluctuates between carpe diem and existentialism, does offer some hope. However neither Reason nor Death, nor even a morbid search for Love, as Bonanni suggests, explains this mysterious lady.¹⁰ She is, in fact, an avatar of unbridled Art. The conductor accepts this incarnation of "uncontrol" as part of himself, as part of his partistic soul when he first identifies her as "una mia certa dama" (l. 7). She is a necessary part of his artistic expression just as she forms an ambiguous part of the orchestra. Uncontrolled Art responds to the stirrings of a free artist, one who breaks free from the shackles of convention by a force that seems to come from without.

Pirandello suggests in "Preludio orchestrale" a breakdown in the writing system, whether musical or poetic. Music or poetry can "live" only if they are free to evolve as their own emotional constitutions dictate. The ellipses in each stanza evince an attempt to break loose of the confines of meter and verse. The first instance of ellipsis seems to be a simple lapse of memory; the second case, however, shows the poet's escape into an undefined reverie which he closes with a banal invocation ("Dio le perdoni!"), showing his resigned inability to explain the lady. In the third stanza, the ellipses clearly mark a loss of control; both conductor and poet spin away from

the constraints of a rigid structure into the realm of unstable yet ecstatic artistic expression.

Thus the poet's freest moment is one devoid of control, or reason. In Pirandello's essay on "umorismo," he explains that logic is a defense that man uses to impose a meaning and a coherence on his life and on the world. The humorist's task is to strip away these illusions or masks in order to unveil the naturally confused state of man. While a traditional poet composes a hero consistent in soul, the humorist separates him into his various souls. Fuori di chiave recalls the poetic pinnacle to which the humorist aspires, the moment at which he is "umoristico", that is, the moment when he is most off-key.

The off-key playwright/director, too, tries to destroy the illusion of conventions. The theater, that stalwart of illusion, provided Pirandello with a rich setting for destroying, or at least for redefining, the norms. The living aspect of a dramatic production generated his favorite form, that of a play within a play. In three well-known works, the actors are allowed, according to Pirandello, to present their own play as they wish. In Sei personaggi, the characters arrive in the theater with a play to put on and to finish; however, when they set to it, they find that it must go just as it happened the first time. The play finishes itself, for Art must lead its own life. In Questa sera Pirandello attempts to innovate by introducing the actors by their real names at the beginning; then the "play" starts. Of course, this preliminary exercise is a part of the play as text; there is no true improvising. Ciascuno a suo modo (1924) does allow for a bit of improvising. There are two groups of actors, one to perform the play on stage, for which there is a

script, the other to enact a few unscripted scenes in the foyer and in the theater hall. While there is a sort of play within a play, it is not spontaneous since Pirandello has prescribed the actions and reactions of all the actors and characters.

The representation of the illogical and the unreasonable through freedom in form has fascinated Pirandello from an early date. We have seen it in "Preludio orchestrale," and it continues to be a prominent theme throughout Fuori di chiave. A desire to approach spontaneity as much as possible led Pirandello to the theater, where, despite the problem of the written text, he was able to step over traditional genre boundaries and establish a new concept of theater that greatly contributed to the absurdist movement.

Over a period of some twenty years, Pirandello battled against the stifling aspects of structure, which, according to him, represented man's false sense of security. He maintained that man's natural state is madness, masked by the logic and reason we impose on ourselves to create the illusion of order. Once the mask is let down in the poem under study, the conductor is able to enjoy the freedom of music; but, immediately afterwards, the mask comes up again. Enrico, to cite another example, is mad and thinks himself Henry IV, but he is happy; his tragedy begins when he regains sanity/memory, that is to say, when he redons the mask. He sees that he is now cast in a role he cannot shrug off. His mask is double.

Madness, under many different forms and interpretations, is present in most of Pirandello's works. The same theme can also help to define the function of the lady in the poem under study here: could she not also be Madness, that undefinable state somewhere between mortality and immortality,

scorned or feared by Reason? Thus uncontrolled art is madness.

We have seen "Preludio orchestrale" as a herald for many of the themes in Fuori di chiave and for many of the themes of Pirandello's theater. The complicated network combining love, death, life, happiness, social convention, madness, "truth," all that is Pirandello's thematic groundwork, is first enunciated in his poetry. His theater develops and re-presents these themes in a form more accessible to the public and with more insistence on the notion of spontaneity. His poetry, abandoned in his youth, reveals the beginnings of his philosophy and is thus important for understanding the development of Pirandello's thought throughout his lifetime. In his own words, from the "Comiato" to Fuori di chiave:

Io che mi sono senza cuor ridotto,
d'ora innanzi, ti giuro, staro muto;
questo, ti giuro, e l'ultimo saluto.

David A. Powell
Hofstra University

NOTES

¹ Some of these poems appeared in an anthology published by A. F. Formiggini in Poeti italiani del XX secolo (1912), but "Preludio orchestrale" actually first appeared in the Riviera Ligure in May 1907, one year before the publication of the famous essay on "umorismo." At the end of his life, Pirandello wrote his only other work in verse, the play cycle I giganti della montagna, finished in 1934. This cycle will not be examined within the limits of this study.

² Most prominent Pirandello critics devote at most only a few lines to his poetry: F. Bonanni, "Alcuni motivi della poesia di Pirandello: Atti del congresso internazionale di studi pirandelliani" (Venice: Pubblicazioni dell'istituto di studi pirandelliani, 1961), 539-551, and G. Giudici, Pirandello: A Biography, trans. A. Hamilton (London: Oxford University Press, 1975); V. Esposto, in Pirandello: Poeta lirico (Brescia: Magalini, 1968), points out a few correspondences between poetry and theater, but with very little investigation; Claudio Vicentini, L'Estetica di Pirandello (Milan: Mursia, 1970), gives a detailed interpretation of "umorismo", but with limited references to Pirandello's poetry. Two other works deserve some mention: G. Andersson, Arte e teoria: Studi sulla poetica del giovane Luigi Pirandello (Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensia 2, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksells [Uppsala], 1966), and V. Zambon, "Pirandello poeta in versi," Atti del congresso internazionale di studi pirandelliani (Venice: Pubblicazioni dell'istituto di studi pirandelliani, 1969). 623-634.

³ Pirandello, "L'Umorismo," in Opere di Luigi Pirandello: Saggi, poesie, scritti varii, vol. 6 (Verona: Mondadori, 1960), p. 15-160; italics mine.

⁴ Pirandello, "L'Umoreismo" (Laciano: R. Carabba), 1908.

⁵ Pirandello, in V. Esposito, Pirandello, 12.

⁶ Graziella Corsinovi, in her thorough article "La poesia controcorrente di Fuori di chiave," in Pirandello Poeta, ed. Paola Daniela Giovanelli (Atti del convegno internazionale di studi pirandelliani di Agrigento, Florence: Vallecchi, 1981, 152-79), discusses the value of this work in terms of Pirandello's philosophy, especially in the introductory poem: "una sorta di orchestrazione dei temi e delle problematiche pirandelliane... ", 154.

⁷ Pirandello, Opere, vol. 6, 619.

⁸ See Esposito, 75; also V. Zambon, 631.

⁹ Esposito, 78.

¹⁰ Bonanni, "Alcuni motivi," 543.