

Relativity, Tragic Farce and Language On Trial: A Post-Modern Perspective on Luigi Pirandello's *It Is So (If You Think So)*

It is difficult to read the drama of Luigi Pirandello without the great elbow of postmodernism jutting into the ribs with insistent suggestions. The great Sicilian writer's themes as well as his dramatic style and deep pessimism resonate with postwar generations for whom reality and truth are virtual and relative. So does his assertion that "Reality is a continuously illusory construction" (Nienhuis). The subjectivity of reality, the doubt cast on reason, the relativity of truth, the necessity of illusion, the constantly changing nature of the self, and the loss of faith in the ability of language itself to signify reality; these are themes now associated with both a modern as well as a postmodern mentality. Moreover, as Teri R. Nienhuis comments, they all point to what can certainly be a staple of postmodern thought - uncertainty.

If modernism and postmodernism share many elements, where is the distinction? For Mary Klages in her essay "Postmodernism," it is in the *attitude* towards these trends. Whereas modernism presents fragmentism, for example, as something tragic and to be mourned as a loss, postmodernism doesn't lament this but rather celebrates it. Moreover, postmodernism rejects the grand narrative and all its certainties and favors elements characteristic of the mini-narrative such as the situational, provisional, contingent, and temporary, making no claim to universality, truth, reason, or stability." Finally, a key element of postmodernism is its challenge to language itself. Up until the twentieth century, language is seen as rational in that it is transparent; that is, it functions only to represent the real and perceivable world which the rational mind observes. Language is the signifier pointing to the signified, wherein reality lies. Postmodernism loses all faith in language thus leaving only signifiers. In place of signifieds there are only surfaces, without depth (Klages).

The underlying commonality in all of this is the concept of relativity, that grand unifying theory of our postmodern age, and *It Is So (If You Think So)* with its blatantly relativistic title lends itself well to a postmodernist critique. This play in which madness, sanity, individual identity and, most importantly, truth are all relative and open to interpretation poses questions and dilemmas still being presented in theater and film today in works like *Being John Malkovich*, *The Madness of King George* and *I Heart Huckabees*, movies which make us laugh and deplore the enigmatic human condition at the same time. As Pirandello's biographer Walter Starkie observes, in *It Is So* "we find the most conflicting notions expressed with perfect logic" (142) and while Harold Bloom, for one, considers *Henri IV and Six Characters In Search Of An Author* Pirandello's only masterpieces (Bloom 252), *It Is So (If You Think So)*, with its skillful presentation of philosophical concepts and its psychologically insightful characterizations should not be underestimated.

Starkie considers *It Is So* one of Pirandello's "most attractive plays" and he traces the "richness of type" to be found in his characters to the ancient *Commedia dell'Arte* (142). Other influences on his work include the Grotesque movement of the late nineteenth century and the Futurist movement of the early 1900s (Starkie 8-9) both of which were a reaction against the romanticism and sentimentality of the writers of the nineteenth century and "the old-fashioned, bourgeois, well made play...and voluptuous drama (Starkie vii). Out went passion and in its place came the absurd. Bloom argues that

in the twentieth century “tragedy, as a pure form, is no longer possible” but that tragic farce is, and he recognizes Pirandello as “the authentic master of tragic farce in the earlier twentieth century” (252). Certainly the construction of *It Is So* with its “center of suffering” and periphery of comic busybodies (Bentley xviii) contains elements of both tragedy and comedy and Pirandello’s ability to balance the pathos of Signor Ponza and Signora Frola with the absurdity of the townspeople mark him as a master of the genre. Moreover, the way he combines his humor with commentary on the cutting edge intellectual developments of his day makes Pirandello a sort of thinking man’s Oscar Wild.

The thin plot of *It Is So* centers around the curiosity that results when the recently-arrived Signor Ponza, his wife, and his mother-in-law Signora Frola fail to observe the conventions of the town, thus calling attention to their unusual living arrangements. These three play out their own secondary play within a play as Ponza and Signora Frola struggle to maintain the illusion each has laboriously constructed, that is, that the other is mad. Each appeals to the leading citizens and their wives for their complicity in perpetuating the fantasy and therein lies the conflict. Such is the rapacious curiosity of these bored and aimless people that they cannot rest until they uncover the “truth” of the matter. “We are two pilgrims athirst for the truth!” ironically proclaims one of these, the aggressive gossip Signora Sirelli (67). The play moves through humor to tragedy and back again as Pirandello satirizes “the fiercely gross, idle curiosity” of these smug and shallow officials (Starkie 142) while managing to maintain a deep compassion for the plight of Signor Ponza and his family. What is interesting here is the way Pirandello has the secondary story, in which the characters accept that a fantasy is being maintained, parallel the main story in which, from the author’s point of view, the characters are just as deeply involved in illusion but do not know it.

These secondary characters – the officious provincials and their meddling ladies – give voice to the kind of muddled reasoning that Pirandello obviously disdains. Each suggestion they present for getting at the truth of Signor Ponza’s situation is incisively defeated by the dapper and cynical Laudisi, a character Bentley calls the “spectator-character” (xix). Starkie refers to Laudisi as the “mouthpiece” (46), a stand-in for the author and as such he makes his position clear early in Act I when he informs the ladies that their “curiosity is unbearable only because it is quite useless” (68). As the play progresses Laudisi pokes holes in every thin argument and exposes the vanities and petty vices of the “good” people of the town. He also functions to deliver Pirandello’s more serious contentions as in Act II in which we find him before the mirror in a scene reminiscent of a Shakespeare soliloquy. “I can see myself with my eyes and touch myself with my fingers. But what are you for other people?” he asks his own image. “An image my dear sir, just an image in the glass” (102). Sober through the philosophy is Pirandello never allows the dialogue to interrupt the farcical tone of the play; the speech is immediately interrupted by the entrance of the butler, a break that allows Pirandello to underscore the theme of the relativity of the self. When the butler informs Laudisi that he has told visitors that Laudisi is in, Laudisi responds, “Why not at all! I’m miles and miles away! Perhaps that fellow they call Laudisi is here” (102). This scene adds to the humor as it casts Laudisi, the only rational character by Pirandello’s definition, in the role of a raging madman addressing his own image as seen through the eyes of the butler.

The character of Laudisi also serves a stylistic purpose; as the one voice of reason (ironically, since Pirandello's contention is that reason itself is suspect), he anchors the play and he is the first character to speak as well as the last in each act. His gleeful and derisive exclamations that bring down the curtain on each act – “And so ladies and gentlemen, we learn the truth!” (115) - drive home the message that truth is shifting, illusory and completely relative to the situation and the parties involved. That Pirandello gives him the last word is the author's way of underscoring his contemptuous attitude towards those who would take perceived reality at face value.

If the truth is impossible to get at because it is subject to personal interpretation, this latter element itself suspect because the self, too, is elusive, a mere “phantom,” the difficulties are exacerbated by the loss of faith in language itself as a reliable expression of reality. Pirandello has great fun debunking the idea that the spoken word has any universally accepted value or that the written word can authenticate any account of events. The first challenge to language is presented through the characters of the Sirellis; pillars of the community and members of the coterie involved in discovering the truth, they are themselves devoid of any credibility: “The moment I tell her something she is convinced that it is not *quite* as I say” Signor Sirelli objects, referring to his wife. When Laudisi tries to reason with him that it is impossible for another to be satisfied with things as they are explained from another's point of view, the couple descends into an absurd argument over who is right and who is wrong. There is madcap verbal play here that tears down the flimsy edifices of reason and though the characters in the play fail to grasp Laudisi's meaning, the audience receives his message clearly: There is no right or wrong because not only do we all perceive differently based on our own constructed realities, but we are each someone different to every person we encounter. “How do you expect your wife to be satisfied with things as you explain them to her” Laudisi asks Signor Sirelli, “if you, as is natural, represent them as they seem to you?” (69) Sentiments like this seem to place Pirandello on the threshold of postmodernism. While it is debatable that there is a clear line separating modernism and postmodernism, Pirandello is saying that not only is there a conflict between the superficial appearance of a person and that person's perceived reality, but that there is also a conflict between the meaning one person gives to words and the meaning another derives from them.

Postmodern criticism is also concerned with the text and while Pirandello's work does not go to the extremes of “deconstruction,” he is still concerned with meaning imputed by the reader as opposed to meaning invested in a document by the author. For Pirandello, the reader's interpretation would certainly take precedence. When Sirelli, for example, suggests that “some document or other” could provide conclusive proof that either Ponza or his mother-in-love was indeed mad, Laudisi replies, “I don't give a rap for the documents; for the truth in my eyes is not in them but in the mind. And into their minds I can penetrate only through what they say to me of themselves” (97). Later, when Signora Cini, an “old and wizened” lump “of concentrated curiosity” (Starkie 142) expresses incredulity at the idea that a “public document can be a fraud,” Laudisi reasons that “it has just the value that each of you chooses to give it” (105). As he shows here, any document would be of no avail since the information contained in it has been annulled in the minds of the parties involved. What Pirandello is again getting at here is the relativity of truth as expressed in language whether spoken or written.

For Laudisi, there is no absolute truth and he makes no distinction between “a truth” and “the truth” as when he suggests to the police commissioner that he fabricate something “precise and clear” to satisfy the townspeople. What people really want he asserts is “Something specific; something concrete! They don’t care what it is. All they want is something categorical, something that speaks plainly!” (117) To the one-dimensional official, stuck as he is in a world governed by the Enlightenment values of rationality and reason, one where truth can still prevail and where order can be created out of chaos, this is akin to heresy. He cannot understand Laudisi’s assertion that the only truth that matters is in the minds of each individual.

The rejection of the idea of “the” truth is perhaps modernism’s greatest legacy to postmodernism, that and the uncomfortable feeling that even when disaster hits, life is somehow one big joke. The genius of Pirandello in this play, and one that marks him as a forerunner of “pomo” sensibilities, is that the joke is not only on the townspeople but on the audience as well. The way the play is structured with layer after layer of information being supplied by the town gossips builds curiosity to the point that we too want to know who is really mad. While we can comfortably laugh at the foibles of the ridiculous provincials, Pirandello makes us hold that mirror up to ourselves, as Laudisi does, and confront our own assumptions. Pirandello once said that “life is a very sad piece of buffoonery” (Whitfield) and in *It Is So*, he forces the audience to accept that if his characters are for the large part buffoons, so are we. This is the sad and cynical but funny “truth” that makes the drama of Pirandello still resonant today.