

The Late Mattia Pascal – Appendix 1921: A Pirandello's preface

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In Italiano – [Il fu Mattia Pascal](#)

En Español – [El difunto Matias Pascal](#)



The Late Mattia Pascal Appendix to the 1921 (The Mondadori) edition of "Il fu Mattia Pascal"

According to the morning papers of New York, January 25, 1921, Mr. Albert Heintz of Buffalo, having to choose between his love for his wife and his love for a second young lady, conceives the notion of inviting the two women to a conference with him that some decision may be arrived at in the matter.

The women meet with him, according to plan, and after a long discussion, an agreement is reached: all three decide to commit suicide.

Mrs. Heintz goes home and shoots herself.

Whereupon Mr. Heintz and the young lady discover that on the death of the wife all obstacles to their happiness have been removed. They conclude that it is wiser not to commit suicide, as they had arranged, but to get married instead.

The police think differently, however, and the couple is arrested.

A commonplace solution to an interesting situation!

Suppose now some unlucky author were to think of putting such a situation into a novel or a play. We may be sure that his first care would be to devise ways and means, even drastic ways and means, for correcting the absurdity of Mrs. Heintz's suicide, for making it seem natural and logical in some way or other.

But we may be equally sure that, however ingenious he might be, ninety-nine critics out of every hundred would still declare the suicide absurd and the work unconvincing.

The reason is that Life, despite its brazen absurdities, little and big, has the invaluable privilege of dispensing with that idiotic verisimilitude to which Art believes itself in duty bound to defer. The absurdities of Life need not look plausible for the simple reason that they are true, whereas the absurdities of Art, to seem true, must be careful to appear plausible; and plausible as they now become, they cease to be absurdities.

A situation in life may be absurd. A work of art, if it is really a work of art, may not.

It follows that to call a work of art absurd and improbable in terms of life is sheer nonsense. We may call it such in terms of art, but in terms of art only.

In the world of natural history there is a Kingdom reserved for zoology because it is inhabited by animals.

Among the animals which so inhabit it is man.

And the zoologist may talk of man and say, for example, that

man is not a quadruped but a biped, and that he does not have the tail that the monkey, the donkey, or the peacock has.

This "man" of which the zoologist speaks can never be so unfortunate as to lose, let us say, a leg and replace it with a wooden one; or to lose an eye and replace it with a glass one. The zoologist's man always has two legs, of which neither is of wood; and always two eyes, of which neither is of glass. And we cannot argue with this zoologist. For if we confront him with Mr. A. who has a wooden leg, or a glass eye, he answers that he does not know the gentleman, because Mr. A. is not "man" but "a man."

It is true that we, in our turn, can retort to the zoologist that the "man" he knows does not exist, but that individual men do exist, and may even have wooden legs and glass eyes.

We may ask at this point whether certain commentators regard themselves as zoologists or as literary critics when, in reviewing a novel, or a short-story, or a comedy, they condemn this or that character, this or that situation, this or that motive, not in terms of art, as would be proper, but in terms of a humanity which they seem to know to perfection, as though it really existed outside that infinite variety of individuals who are in a position to commit the above mentioned absurdities—absurdities which do not need to seem logical and natural because they are true.

In my own experience with such criticism I have observed one curious thing: that whereas the zoologist understands that man is distinguished from other animals by the fact, among others, that he can think while animals cannot, these critics regard thinking—the trait most distinctive of mankind, that is—not, if you please, as an excess, but rather as a downright lack of humanity in many of my not over-cheerful characters. "Humanity" would seem, in their view, to reside rather in feeling than in reasoning.

But—if I may be permitted a generality in my turn—is it not true that a man never thinks so hard (I don't say, so well) as when he is unhappy and in distress, precisely because he is determined to discover why he is unhappy, who is responsible

for his being so, and whether he deserves it all? Whereas, when he is happy, when everything is going well with him, he does not reason at all, accepting his good fortune as though it were his due.

It is the lot of the lower animals to suffer without thinking. But for these critics, a man who is unhappy and thinks (thinks—because he is unhappy) is not “human”; from which it would follow that a man cannot suffer unless he is a beast, and that only when he is a beast can he be “human.”

But recently I have found a critic to whom I am very grateful. In connection with the “unhuman” and it would seem incurable “cerebrality”—in connection with the paradoxical “implausibility”—of my plots and my characters, he has asked such critics how they arrive at their criteria for so judging the world of my art.

“From ‘normal life,’ so-called?” he asks. “But what is normal life but a system of relationships which we select from the chaos of daily happenings and arbitrarily call ‘normal’?” And he concludes that “the world of an artist can be judged only by criteria derived from that world itself.”

To remove any suspicion that I am praising this critic because he praises me, I hasten to add that in spite of this view of his, in fact because of this view of his, he is inclined to judge my work unfavorably; for he thinks that I fail to give a universally human value and a universally human significance to my plots and my people; so much so, that he is not sure whether I have not deliberately confined myself to the portrayal of certain curious individualities, certain psychological situations of a very special, a very particular, scope.

But supposing it should prove that the universally human value and significance of some of my plots and of some of my people, in the conflict, as he puts it, between reality and illusion, between the individual aspect and the social reflection of

this aspect, resides, in the first instance, in the significance and value we must assign to that primal conflict—which, through the irony of Life, is always and inevitably found to have been an insubstantial one? (For—necessarily, alas!—every reality of today is bound to prove an illusion tomorrow, a necessary illusion, indeed, since outside of it there is no reality for us.) Supposing, again, that the same universally human import should prove to reside in this fact: that a man or a woman, placed by themselves or by forces outside themselves, in a painful situation which is socially abnormal and as absurd as you care to make it, remain in that situation, endure it, “act” it out before others, only so long as they fail, whether through blindness or incredible good faith, to recognize it? (Because the moment they do so recognize it, as in a mirror placed before their eyes, they refuse to endure it any longer; they realize all the horror there is in it; and they rectify it, or, failing in the attempt to do so, succumb to it.) Supposing, finally, it should reside in this further fact: that a socially abnormal situation may be accepted, even though it be thus revealed in a mirror (which in this case would be presenting our illusion itself to our eyes), and then we continue to “act” it, submitting to all the horror it involves, so long as we can do so behind the breath-stifling mask which we (or other people or cruel circumstances) have placed upon our faces—until, that is, under this mask, some feeling of ours is so deeply hurt that we at last rebel, tear off the mask, hurl it aside, and trample it under foot?

“Then suddenly,” says my critic, “a flood of humanity engulfs these characters: these marionettes become creatures of flesh and blood, and words that burn the soul and wrench the heart pour from their lips!”

Yes, assuredly!—Because these characters have now discovered their own particular individual faces hitherto concealed under the masks they have been wearing, masks which made these people marionettes in the hands of themselves or of other people, rendering them hard, wooden, angular, without finish,

without delicacy, complicated, out of plumb, as everything must be when, not freely but of violent necessity, it is forced into an abnormal, an improbable, a paradoxical situation,—a situation, in their case, so abnormal, so improbable, so paradoxical that at last they have been able to endure it no longer, and have smashed their way out of it back to “normality.”

The mix-up, if mix-up there be, is accordingly deliberate; the mechanism, if mechanism there be, is accordingly deliberate; but it is so willed not by me, but by the story, by the characters themselves. And there is no attempt to conceal it, either. Often the cogs are fitted together—deliberately fitted together—in plain view, so that we can see how the machine is made: it is a mask for the playing of a part. It is an interplay of roles; what we would like to be (or what we ought to be); what other people think us to be; while what we really are we do not, up to a certain point, know even ourselves. It is an awkward, hesitant, uncertain metaphor of our real personality.. It. is a fiction (often childishly artificial) which we build up about our real life, or which others build up about us. At any rate, it is a real mechanism in which each, deliberately I repeat, makes a marionette of himself; until at last, in disgust, he sends the whole thing flying with_ a kick!

I believe I need now go no farther than to congratulate my own inventiveness, if, with all its scruples, it has revealed as real defects the defects which it has deliberately created—defects of that factitious illusion which the characters themselves have set up about their own lives, or which others have built up about them; the defects, in short, that the mask has until it is torn off.

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