

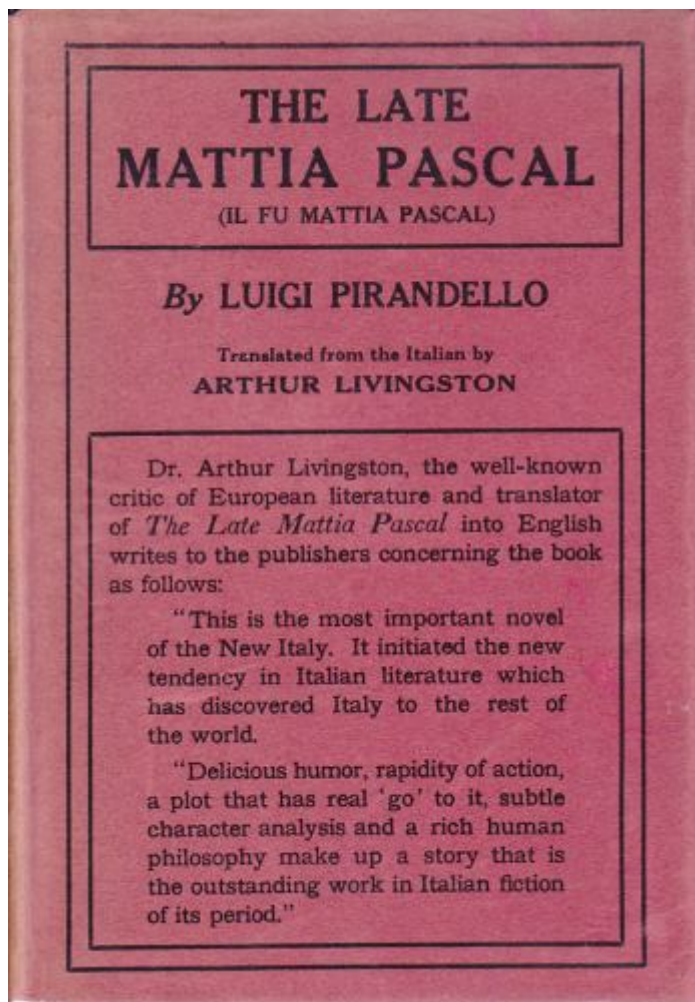
1904 – The Late Mattia Pascal

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What author will be able to say how and why a character was born in his fantasy? The mystery of artistic creation is the same as that of birth. A woman who loves may desire to become a mother; but the desire by itself, however intense, cannot suffice. One fine day she will find herself a mother without having any precise intimation when it began.

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

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



The late Mattia Pascal – Index

- [1904 – The Late Mattia Pascal](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Appendix 1921: A Pirandello's](#)

[preface](#)

- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 1 – “My name is Mattia Pascal”](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 2 – “Go to it,” says Don Eligio](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 3 – A mole saps our house](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 4 – Just as it was](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 5 – How I was ripened](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 6 – ... Click, click, click, click...](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 7 – I change cars](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 8 – Adriano Meis](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 9 – Cloudy weather](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 10 – A font and an ash-tray](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 11 – Night... and the river](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 12 – Papiano gets my eye](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 13 – The red lantern](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 14 – Max turns a tricks](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 15 – I and my shadow](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 16 – Minerva’s picture](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 17 – Reincarnation](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 18 – The late Mattia Pascal](#)

Introduction

Mattia Pascal is a young Italian man. After his father’s death, his family is ruined by the man who was supposed to help them, and Mattia finds himself in a miserable social condition. His wedding is not more happy : his mother-in-law, with whom he lives, hates him. After a strong row, Mattia leaves to MonteCarlo, where he wins a lot of money in a casino. On the train back, after 12 days, he learns on reading

a newspaper that, in his villages, everybody thinks he is dead : a body unrecognizable has been found in his well. He then decides to start a new life under the name of Adriano Meis. After having travelled through the North of Italy and the South of Germany, he finally settles in Rome in a family pension. He falls in love with the daughter of the owner. But he still feels here the weight of man's loneliness and of social conventions. Furthermore, without a real civil status, he can neither marry nor work, nor even having real friendship for fear he might betray his secret. He is condemned to a social non-existence. He goes back to his village, after several years. There, he finds his wife married to one of his friends, with a little daughter. There again, even if his identity is recognized, he is doomed to stay the late Mattia Pascal, officially dead. He recognizes it himself when he goes and put flowers on his own tomb. In this book, published in 1904, there are all the themes of what is called pirandellism : the search for an identity (which is, most of the time, only a mask that one must wear), the social pressure lived as suffocating and ordinary loneliness of men who cannot communicate. The style, as often with Pirandello, mixes drama and humour, and is voluntarily quite easy to read in order to make the novel accessible to everybody and not only to a well-educated elite.

What author will be able to say how and why a character was born in his fantasy? The mystery of artistic creation is the same as that of birth. A woman who loves may desire to become a mother; but the desire by itself, however intense, cannot suffice. One fine day she will find herself a mother without having any precise intimation when it began. In the same way an artist imbibes very many germs of life and can never say how and why, at a certain moment, one of these vital germs inserts itself into his fantasy, there to become a living creature on a plane of life superior to the changeable existence of every day.

Translator's note

Shall we say that the theatre of Pirandello is a higher and more perfect expression of his peculiar art than his tales or his novels? That has been said. And a certain body of fact is there to support such a contention. It is Pirandello's drama that has won him world-wide recognition, whereas his prose work, though for thirty years it has held him in a high position in Italian letters, remained national in circulation and even in Italy was the delight of an elect few. Many of his comedies, besides, are reworkings of his short stories; as though he himself regarded the latter as incomplete expressions of the vision they contained.

In the third place, one might say that since the novelty of Pirandello's art consists rather in his method of dissecting life than in his judgment of life, his geometrical, symmetrical, theorematic situations are more vivid in the clashing dialogue of people on a stage than in the less animated form of prose narrative. These considerations do not all apply, however, to "The Late Mattia Pascal."

That we have a first class drama in this novel is evident from the fact that Pirandello himself used the amusing situation in the first part of the story as the theme of one of his Sicilian comedies: "Liolà"; and in a more important sense the book as a whole is to be counted among the sources that have inspired the "new" theatre in Italy.

Chiarelli's "The Mask and the Face" was a play that "made a school"; and that school, the "grotesque," may be thought of as an offspring of "The Late Mattia Pascal." The novel, also, falls naturally into a special place in the repertory of Pirandello's more characteristic themes. It is a variation of the situation in "Henry IV"—where the mask, the fiction, is first offered by circumstances, then deliberately assumed, to be violently torn off in the case of Mattia Pascal, to be retained and utilized in the case of "Henry IV."

But "The Late Mattia Pascal" has this advantage over the Pirandello play: that whereas the latter, from the conditions of stage production, must show a situation cut out from life and given an almost artificial independence of its own, the novel presents the whole picture. It has leisure to demonstrate how the fiction grows out of life, how, if it be deliberately assumed, any one would, naturally and logically, have so assumed it. And it shows, besides, some of the effects of the fiction on character: if Adriano Meis cannot escape wholly from Mattia Pascal, neither can Mattia Pascal escape wholly from Adriano Meis. The novel, in a word, possesses intrinsically that humanity, that humanness, which the Pirandello play more often suggests than contains. It is curious to note, however, that if "The Late Mattia Pascal," despite the fact that it was written twenty years ago, has entered into the patrimony of the "new" (the post-war) literature of Italy, that rejuvenation (rejuvenation rather than revival) has been due not to Pirandello's dramatic successes but to other influences. When we say "D'Annunzianism," the term conveys a note of disparagement to D'Annunzio that is not intended. The disparagement is aimed at the imitators of an art, which, in its own time, was new and which in its own domain was original. Nevertheless religions are rarely destroyed without some attacks upon the idols that symbolize them, and without the erection of new idols in the places of the old. Pirandello (along with Verga who did not live to enjoy it, along with Oriani, along with Manzoni—real revivals, these last two) has profited by the reaction against the literature of "bravura"; and of his works the one that has gained most is "The Late Mattia Pascal."

These young Italians are doing many interesting things in many fields! They are asking their rulers to govern, their priests to pray, their teachers to teach, their workmen to work, and their writers—to say something. The new vogue of "The Late Mattia Pascal" rests on the fact that it says something, and says something in such a way that the novel remains

interesting because of what it says, and not only because of the way it says it. "The Late Mattia Pascal" is a compact, carefully developed novel, with two good stretches of storytelling, each equipped with a psychological preparation worked out to the last detail. It has a big idea, exemplified in characters skilfully chosen and consistently evolved on the background of their particular environment. It is a work accordingly universal in its bearing, but specific in the milieu it describes. One or two things in this milieu may seem exotic to an American. The self-expressiveness, on occasion, of Marianna Dondi-Pescatore might appear overdrawn to some of us—though it is not. We have to remember, again, that there is no divorce in Italy; that therefore Mattia Pascal cannot be free of Romilda Pescatore; that, therefore, Adriano Meis cannot marry Adriana Paleari.

We have to remember, finally, that life in over-populated Europe is based on the defensive principle; that a man is guilty until proved innocent; that unless his papers are in order, unless he can tell who he is, where he came from, and why he came from there, he cannot find employment, transact business, or establish social connections of any important kind. Some critics may not agree with Pirandello in his attitude toward the episode—that trick, for which he is sometimes accused, of laughing at his audiences—arousing interest in situations out of which nothing comes. The criticism of such devices, if criticism there be, is, however, that they show excess, rather than lack, of technique. How many producers, for example, have not suggested an "ending" to "Right You Are" ("Cosi e se vi pare")—only an afterthought revealing that no ending is the most powerful ending of them all!

The reserve and simplicity of Pirandello's language—a language "de-regionalized" and slightly colored with a flat and unpretentious classicism—are of no great consolation to a translator. Pirandello ought to be clever when he isn't; and

the fact that he isn't gives a tartness, a sharpness, a chuckle to the mood of his sentence before which, I confess, I throw up my hands. This man, Pascal, is always smiling at himself, however benevolently he smiles at other people. Adriano Meis, perhaps, is more plain and matter of fact. I note the detail simply to point out that there is a slight differentiation in manner in the two parts of the book—the career of Adriano Meis being enclosed, as it were, by the jest of Mattia Pascal and the outcome of that jest.

I have suppressed a few paragraphs—details of Mattia Pascal's education in poetry; characterizations, at Monte Carlo, of people not otherwise figuring in the story; the analysis of the style of Lodoletta's obituary. I have adapted one or two scenes where a pun compelled a detour; I have given, for special reasons, a new ending to the episode of the wedding ring. Otherwise the rendering should be fairly exact, though not by any means literal. I have taken over with some liberty the unsyntactical "free" sentence—so characteristically Italian, since the syntax is supplied by the "acting"—by gesture and facial expression. This free sentence is, however, a native property of our own language, though I don't know how many generations of grammarians have tried to rob us of it.

Arthur Livingston

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

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[««« Pirandello in English](#)

The late Mattia Pascal – Index

- [1904 – The Late Mattia Pascal](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Appendix 1921: A Pirandello's preface](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 1 – "My name is Mattia Pascal"](#)

- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 2 – “Go to it,” says Don Eligio](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 3 – A mole saps our house](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 4 – Just as it was](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 5 – How I was ripened](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 6 – ... Click, click, click, click...](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 7 – I change cars](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 8 – Adriano Meis](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 9 – Cloudy weather](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 10 – A font and an ash-tray](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 11 – Night... and the river](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 12 – Papiano gets my eye](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 13 – The red lantern](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 14 – Max turns a tricks](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 15 – I and my shadow](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 16 – Minerva’s picture](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 17 – Reincarnation](#)
- [The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 18 – The late Mattia Pascal](#)

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