

# Wit and Wisdom in Pirandello

Italy's Winner of the Nobel Prize for 1934 Considered as Novelist, Playwright and Philosopher

By PERCY HUTCHISON

LUIGI PIRANDELLO, to whom the Nobel Prize for Literature for 1934 was awarded earlier this month, became known to American playgoers and readers something more than a decade ago.

In the Autumn of 1922 a daring Broadway producer—and it required daring, such was the startling innovation of the piece—brought out Pirandello's "Six Characters in Search of an Author." This play, with two others, "Henry IV" and "Right You Are! If You Think You Are," appeared in book form at about the same time. These two additional plays, the first under the title "The Living Mask," were seen on Broadway within the next two years. Not until 1931, however, did another drama from this playwright appear in New York, when "As You Desire Me" was produced. Up to the present twelve volumes of Pirandello, comprising plays, both long and short, novels and short stories, have been published in this country by E. P. Dutton & Co. The latest of these, called "The Naked Truth," an arresting, frequently startling selection from the author's innumerable novelle of Sicilian life, was reviewed in The New York Times Book Review of Sept. 9.

Born in 1867 at Girgenti, Sicily, Luigi Pirandello began to write at the age of 18. But although his bibliography speedily became a lengthy one, the author appears to have attracted little attention if we are to judge from the fate of his novel "Il Fu Mattia Pascal." Published in 1904, in the next eighteen years the book sold but 2,000 copies. Then came the New York success of "Six Characters." Translated by Arthur Livingston, who also had made the English version of the plays, the novel was then brought out here under the title "The Late Mattia Pascal" and attained immediate popularity. In Italian and in English 100,000 copies of the book were sold within the next several months. Luigi Pirandello was no longer an obscure Italian author; he was writer to the world!

So much, however, has been printed about Pirandello the philosopher, that, despite his popularity, there are doubtless many who still avoid him for fear he will prove abstruse. Actually he is not abstruse. Moreover, he has himself furnished so many keys to his philosophy that its essentials are easily come at. Pirandello is a natural dramatist and a born raconteur; and he flashes a wit which perhaps only Bernard Shaw among his contemporaries can match, and he not always. Hence, philosopher or no, the reader or the playgoer can be assured of an evening of rare entertainment in company with one who, although the most intellectual of men, always writes with a gusto that kindles enthusiasm.

The master-key to Pirandello for those who wish to follow him in his more esoteric flights will be found in "Pascal." One grandly hilarious progress from cover to cover, this novel nevertheless contains the gist of all of Pirandello's thought.

Mattia Pascal, inhabitant of a small Italian city, ruled over by a domineering wife and mother-in-law, decides to set out for places which shall to them remain unknown. He goes to Monte Carlo, where he wins a large sum of money. Learning by chance that a body has been found in the river near his house and identified as his, he changes his name, decides to be a new person. And there comes the hitch which was the whole purpose of Pirandello in fabricating his extravaganza. If people believe that Mattia Pascal no longer exists, "Adriano Meis" speedily finds that he cannot come into existence at all! There are al-

ways questions, generally not ill-meant, which he cannot answer. Pirandello climaxes the farce by having his unfortunate hero fall in love. But as, very naturally, "Adriano" cannot foist his imposture on a doting woman, he is obliged to go away, just as Mattia Pascal had done.

Pirandello used his irrepressible wit to conceal his real purpose. The philosopher has put on motley to conceal the fact that he is a philosopher; the same motley that was worn by Aristophanes, Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift. He might have asked his question straight out: What is personality? What is reality? But he preferred to keep it hidden, to crack a joke about it instead.

And that question as to the reality of personality is the ultimate concern, in one guise or another, of practically all of Pirandello's writings. True, he cannot solve his conundrum, any more than could jesting Pilate answer his own question about truth. But Pirandello is no shirker. He does not even allow himself the comforting assurance the befuddled old lady was able to get when she insisted that if she were she (as she believed herself to be) then her little dog would know her.

But to say that Pirandello has no answer to the problem which he propounds under so many guises would be to leave him in a negative position from which not even his supreme wit could rescue him. At the risk of being academic, the writer must here introduce the names of two philosophers, Emanuel Kant and Einstein. Kant, because his name is synonymous with Idealism, the doctrine that the appearance which anything has for us is, ipso facto, its reality. And Einstein for his popularization of the term Relativity. One can see now the importance of the qualification in Pirandello's title, "Right You Are! If You Think You Are." One speech from this play will clear up the whole matter. One of the characters, Laudisi, is in conversation with Signora Sirelli:

Now you have touched me, have you not? And you see me? And

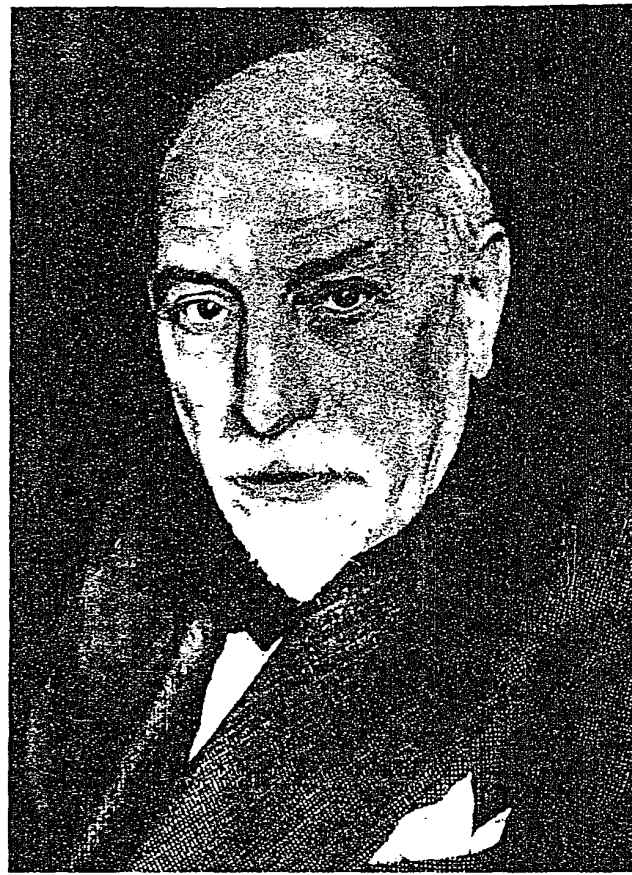
you are absolutely sure about me, are you not? Well now, madam, I beg of you: do not tell your husband, nor my sister, nor my niece, nor Signora Cini here, what you think of me; because if you were to do that, they would all tell you that you are completely wrong. But, you see, you are completely right; because I am what you take me to be; though, my dear madam, that does not prevent me from also being really what your husband, my sister, my niece and Signora Cini, take me to be—because they are absolutely right!

Does this, although indicative of great progress in Pirandello's art, differ essentially from what we had in "Pascal"?

There are critics who insist that Pirandello is fundamentally cold. It is true that logic and wit, however merry the wit may be, are in the last analysis cold. Moreover, Pirandello's wit appears at times to be little short of satanic, as in "Henry IV" and "As You Desire Me." But when Pirandello is seen deeply, when he is viewed four-square, are we not forced to a different conclusion?

In the first of these dramas (the title suggests an Elizabethan chronicle play, but in point of fact it is far from that objective and complacent genre,) a wealthy nobleman, rendered insane by an injury, believes himself to be Henry IV, the twelfth-century Emperor of Germany. Under the sway of his obsession the young man brings everybody about him to play to him in that character and to believe his own hallucination to be the truth. After several years, suddenly restored to sanity, the poor man discovers he must assume the rôle of madman, be always "Henry IV," since no one will believe anything else.

In "As You Desire Me" the query takes this turn: Is Cia, the dancer, or the Demented Lady from the asylum the "real" Lucia whom Bruno had married ten years earlier and who had been abducted by the Germans during the war? When both are brought before him the poor husband cannot decide, for neither



Luigi Pirandello.  
(Associated Press Photo.)

corresponds to his conception of his wife formed in bygone days.

Yes, viewed superficially, the wit in these two plays is satanic, the dialectic as cold as an Arctic berg. How, then, are we to make out any case for Pirandello as other than a devilishly cunning mountebank, with ever a new box for his jack to pop out of?

Pirandello, and no one could claim it for him, has not indeed the gentle tolerance, the embracing pity, of Cervantes, though he never becomes completely savage as Swift does. His barbed shafts have, however, completely abolished all smug conceptions of reality, of personality. To go outside Pirandello for an illustration, take

a murderer, righteously convicted and led to execution. Does not Pirandello's cold logic, his cold wit, applied to such a career, prove that the man has other "realities" than that of murderer? And that being so, and we maintain that it is, then the coldness of both Pirandello's wit and logic yield to the warmth of meaning with which all human relationships become endowed. One who has never preached, he preaches the great sermon of charity!

Since Luigi Pirandello several years back abandoned all other writing to devote himself to the theatre, one is now forced, in spite of the élan of the novels, in spite

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of the brilliancy of the short stories, to conclude on that note.

The plays of Pirandello are unlike anything ever before seen on the stage. Instead of dramatizing conflicts of will, as the theatre has done from the days of the Greeks down; instead of dramatizing historical fact or social relationships, this extraordinary genius has turned to the dramatization of man's mind. In "Six Characters" a diversified sextet swarms up on a stage and demands the opportunity to work out the drama seething within their several minds. Could there be a more astounding innovation? Fresh, indeed, and strange. In technique, Pirandello's plays are spasmodic, not to say jerky. They have their dull moments. But in spite of all seeming eccentricities, because the playwright is so fundamentally a master-dramatist, he gets across the footlights. And because in his veins flows the blood of Shakespeare and of Ibsen, neither of whom dared, except by indirection, to attempt the dramatization of the human mind. This is Luigi Pirandello's unparalleled achievement.

Other works by Pirandello than those mentioned above available in English are: "Each in His Own Way" and two other plays, ("The Pleasure of Honesty" and "Naked"); "Horse in the Moon and Other Short Stories"; the

novels, "The Old and the Young," "The Outcast," "One, None and a Hundred Thousand", and "Shoot," and "Tonight We Improve," a three-act play.