An oversize unfinished stone slab marks Luigi Pirandello’s grave, settled uneasily beneath the shady umbrella of luxurious pine, and cypress elegance, not far from the sea. “I am a son of Caos,” wrote the man who asked to be returned here, naked, his body wrapped in a white sheet. No one could bear to throw his ashes to the wind, as he had wanted, so they are buried here, too. His characteristic play on words was an exercise in double entendre, “Caos” being both the name of the place in Agrigento where he was born, grew up and brought his bride, and which in the end would mark his death, and that of a god who gave his name to the troubled state of the universe.

Chaos it is said was first called Janus, the name of the solar god who presided over daybreak, and guarded passageways. He was the two-faced god who could see from any perspective. He could in effect be his own audience; one side of his face reflected and inverted the image of the other, so that the self could watch itself in the act of seeing. Janus, who presided over the coming to light and the act of going inside, and Chaos, in sum his other face, his double identity—light and darkness—unite in mythological coincidence to define the Pirandellian character, a myth for our time.

It would have been difficult for anyone living near the Valley of the Temples that dominate Agrigento not to feel the presence of the gods and their
mythologies. Since the sixth century B.C. the temples the Greeks built on a hilltop stage in homage to them have faded into honey-colored ruin before their Sicilian audience. Yes, it would have been difficult to ignore these giants of the mountain who manipulated the fate of the poor puppet mortals who lived on the shaky earth below. The gods are particularly quarrelsome in this part of the world, earthquake country, always coming apart. A landscape unpredictably capable of falling away beneath one's feet, it bears a natural, free relationship to dramatic action.

Agrigento: its Latin roots (ager, ground; gens, people) define it as a place where people have a special attachment to the land. Perhaps to words as well. But even that is not enough to explain why Pirandello chose the name “Marranca” for a character in one of his early plays. By what act of fate am I an unrealized character in a drama I did not choose to make? Fated, in quintessential Pirandellian style, to live both the past and present of my character. Alas, Marranca—he had only a last name—was merely a judge’s functionary: even dramatic names can signify class distinctions. (Perhaps that is why the Marrancas came to America.)

Here I sit, Pirandello at my side, dreaming in his plays that so timelessly color the landscape of drama, so many ruins to wander through, in search of the future. Will the servant act the master, and I now play the judge?

Here I am, writing about Pirandello who wrote about Marranca. He knew what a “Marranca” was because he found a name for it. The fictional character lived in his world, and in his imagination. Now Pirandello lives in my world. A fiction in the play of my imagining. I shall have my Pirandello, as he had his Marranca.

PIRANDELLO, A WRITER

Pirandello has become a forgotten author in American theatre even as his theories on role-playing are so spectacularly realized today in American culture. Lacking a strong tradition of critical discourse on dramatic writing, American criticism tends to link the history of theatre to the history of production rather than dramatic literature. Not surprisingly, Pirandello has been remembered more for his vision as a man of the theatre than as a writer. Yet, he is one of the most original writers the world of letters has ever produced, and perhaps it is only looking backwards from the perspective of contemporary literary ideas that it becomes apparent how he had anticipated, debated, and dramatized the most radical of them half a century ago. Pirandello was always a deconstructionist, not even stopping first to go through a semiotic phase. He could not waste his time being caught up in a closed scientific system of codes. He rejected the tyranny of the sign as an illusion of those who wished to construct the world. He wanted to break it apart. He was interested in the way the world was perceived by
others, not in the way it saw itself. Pirandello only created structures for the paradoxical purpose of destroying them. In superb logic he used reason to show how reason itself couldn’t be trusted in the comprehension of reality. Indeed there was no reality, that is, no fixed form one could call Reality, only an elaboration of texts of possible realities: reality as endless fiction. Pirandello’s obsessive creation of the open text of the world was simply a mask of his own obsession with death, the last word in the life one writes in the world. Pirandello, who did not love life, loved death less. It was the ultimate lifeless form. His constant reference to art (that is, writing) as birth was another way for him to feel he was resisting death.

Who has thought more complexly about writing, the interaction of fiction and the real, the conventions of theatre, its public, its critics, the act of interpretation, the burden of celebrity? (Before long those literary revisionists, the postmodernists, will be claiming him as an exemplary writer, but he will frame them in a prism of Pirandellian irony by showing up the incestuous crossbreeding of modernism and postmodernism.)

Who has been a more self-conscious, self-critical writer than Pirandello whose plays, essays, stories and novels question, contradict, and intrude upon one another? He rewrote his stories in dramatic form, and parts of his essays he put in the mouths of dramatic characters. It was inevitable that this writer who throughout his life theorized on the subject of form and its promise of fluidity, would turn eventually to drama because only this form, among all the strategies of writing, finds new life every time it is transferred from the pages of a book to the bodies of live actors in a theatre. Moreover, he highlighted the difference between the text and the production by creating at times elaborate stage directions meant only to be read. No two actors would ever say, “We bring you a drama, sir” in quite the same way, and so the dramatic text would forever embody the possibilities of transformation. Pirandello forced the very subjects of drama and theatre—representation, dialogue, acting, presence, and audience—to make a philosophical account of themselves, even creating an entire trilogy to explore the reality of representing fiction on a stage. Years before the concept of the “intertext” was popularized by literary critics he was putting fragments of one text into another, and even more splendidly, in the plays he constructed both real and fictional versions of himself that would first generate the myth of Pirandellism, then turn around and demythologize it.

Play/Writing

1. What usually happens in theatre is that characters act out a story that moves from a beginning to an end. Pirandello’s characters, however, tell a story about an event that happened prior to the play,
while at the same time acting out the event of the play, which is
another story. Frequently, a character is haunted or manipulated
by a scenario from his past which is just as much a part of the con-
ception of the character as the present. The past (his own or so-
meone else’s) the character is forced to confront is always only a
fragment: either the text is never completed, or there are so many
characters offering so many conflicting texts or points of view that
what actually happened can never by authenticated (the question
of authenticity is linked to the accretion of fictions, not lies). This
collision of texts is the catalyst for the dramatic action. (Right You
Are)

2. The text inside the text creates a situation in which there are two
stories, and two sets of characters, evolving simultaneously, and in
relation to each other. The texts interrogate each other. (Each in
His Own Way, Tonight We Improvise)

3. The collective creation: a group of characters agree to believe in
and act out a fiction which is socially convenient for them, the
rules of the game the characters follow determined by group con-
sent. Other characters, sometimes those who even helped to
create it, try to break through this fiction to uncover the “truth,” or
to erase the “fiction” that has been transformed into “reality.”
(Henry IV, The Pleasure of Honesty, Cap and Bells)

4. A character/writer attempts to construct a fiction from a real life
situation, in a special synthesis of fact, fiction, and imagination.
The writer then becomes trapped in the separate levels of the story
he is attempting to write. (To Clothe the Naked)

5. Some characters have no “reality.” Their lives consist of the search
for a fiction to live (As You Desire Me). A character may also have
too strong an identity which he tries to shed and take a fictional
one instead. (When Someone is Somebody, The Late Mattia Pascal)

6. One group of characters brings a text to another group for the pur-
pose of producing it before them. (Six Characters in Search of an
Author, The Giants of the Mountain)

7. Characters are always trapped in a text—not a Freudian,
psychological text of the unconscious, but one that evolves (or
doesn’t) in social life—that is, publicly, not privately. There is no
unconscious world in Pirandello’s characters, only material ex-
istence. His characters, with the exception of the raisonneurs and
those aware of the game aspect of role-playing, have no inner life,
only an external, social one.

8. Pirandello had his characters act out his own obsessions with
writing: they were given the problem of creating a text in almost all of the plays. He even devised a model of the relationship between the writer and his critics: the author or authors of a text come into conflict with a character or group of characters who criticize and evaluate the probabilities of the text.

9. Pirandello the novelist and Pirandello the dramatist found a radical synthesis in the dramatic form: a text that could exist in two realms, one narrative, the other dramatic. This tension of genres allows for the possibility of experiencing the plays from the perspectives of both fictional time (the past of the text being composed) and real time (the dramatization of how these two texts come together in the theatre).

10. The plays embrace the ideal of the open, unfinished text, an ideal clearly demonstrated in the theatre trilogy, and manifested more poetically in the final, generous irony that Pirandello left his last play, The Giants of the Mountain, unfinished at the time of his death. Whatever is known of his plans for it comes from his son Stefano's account. ("He said to me, smiling: 'There is a large Saracen olive tree in the middle of the stage; with this tree I have solved everything.'") What can Pirandello's return to Sicily for an image tell us about the relationship of the geography of a writer's spirit to his creation of myth? The opening he left in this text is an extraordinary invitation to a director or writer bold enough to extend the original text into a new rhetorical setting that might suggest new myths about the theatrical experience to add to Pirandello's own which stopped with the mysterious words, "I'm afraid! I'm afraid!" It is important to start from that moment of fear, and not to hide the dialogue of the two texts (even to add a third, the reconstruction of the final act by Pirandello's son), but to celebrate the event as subject of a new play of interpretation.

THE MIRROR

Pirandello's characters live their lives in the continuous play of reflecting mirrors: in the eyes that reflect one character's image of another, in the eyes that illuminate public opinion, in the public eye that creates celebrity and defines the rules of social conduct. When characters look each other in the eyes it is for the purpose of watching themselves watch the others who watch them, in the same light that outlines the interplay of public imagery. Analyzed from another perspective, it is the influence of hypnotic suggestion on the individual ego that Freud linked to the development of group psychology. The mirror is another version of the proscenium which frames the dialogue of the "other" in the theatre of humankind: it throws back to the audience a picture of itself. The flattening of the image in a mirror makes the individual like art, an object of contemplation. At the same time
Pirandello had his characters act out his own obsessions with writing: they were given the problem of creating a text in almost all of the plays.

It demonstrates the difference between life and art, opens the way to the abyss, documents death, links the present to the past in the act of memory, and even plays the trick of throwing up the image of what is behind the viewer, in his future. On the mirror the text of a life is written in the lines of the face, a unique visual language that only the audience of the eye can read.

The eyes are the reflecting liquid pools of the narcissist, Pirandello's fool mesmerized by his own image. And Echo, the narcissist's companion, plays her part as the quoter of others' opinions, unable to form her own. Such is the fate of the man hopelessly trapped in the worship of his public image, and his friend trapped by the cliché. One concept cannot exist without the other: when there is no self but an image, speech functions merely as quotation. (The development of technology, added to both the rise of the narcissistic personality as a character type and the preponderance of the cliché in mass society, might neatly unite in a forceful analytical statement, if one were to use video and pre-recorded voices in a new staging of the Pirandellian obsession with identity and selfhood.) Early on Pirandello pointed to the linkage of the theatrical self and the psychology of narcissism which helps to define the contemporary character.

In the plays themselves one structure mirrors another, the outer drama encircling the inner story, grotesquely distorting it, the conventions of one text set in conflict with those of another, as Delia Morello the character distorts the "reality" of Delia Moreno the person, and Pirandello the author of the play caricatures Pirandello the celebrity, in yet another comic scene.

There is one other figurative use of the mirror, the most exalted one, consciousness, where thought contemplates itself. Consciousness is, ultimately, the subject of Pirandello's work and his most profound inquiries. The act of thinking finds its way to the blank page, a writer's persistent and personal mirror of interrogation and abstraction.

THE MASK

The mask is a linguistic concept, each mask a surface on which an individual writes the text he will present to the world. Beyond the mask, moving inward, is the mask he constructs for himself. The interaction of the public and private masks creates the struggle for textual supremacy, and
finally, the difference between personhood and persona. Pirandello's plays move between the conflicting actions of masking and unmasking: even Signora Ponza's veil acts as a kind of mask, a blank screen upon which the community projects its own scenario. Sometimes a character will lift his own mask, to let it be known that he is watching himself in a chosen role. Such is the wise character who knows he is a performer. More often than not a character is caught, unknowing, in his own performance. One type of performance is comic, the other tragic, and together they approach the condition of the grotesque that Pirandello called “transcendental farce.” They unite in the metaphor of the human being as a puppet figure manipulated by socially acceptable rules of behavior, an idea which demonstrates the natural linkage of the puppet and the mask in the modern concept of character, and by extension, the individual in society.

Pirandello's instructions upon his death:

No announcements or invitations to the funeral. . . . Let me be wrapped naked in a winding sheet. . . . Burn me. And as soon as my body has been burnt the ashes must be thrown to the winds, for I want nothing, not even my ashes, to remain.

Even in death Pirandello found a way to return to an obsessive idea; the winding sheet was to be a total body mask, impenetrably blank, unwritten on. He had nothing to say to the world.

SUBVERSIVE ACTS

Though Pirandello incorporated in his writing the genres of symbolism, melodrama, realism and the well-made play, he did everything he could to subvert their conventions. He used symbolism’s bizarre lighting effects, its apparitions, and interest in the occult, the emphasis on subjectivity and attention to objects, to analyze the theatrical interplay of appearance, illusion and imagination. He ignored the psychological aspects of the style, while retaining its dichotomy between inner and outer worlds of experience. More interesting is Pirandello’s attitude toward the individual symbol. One could not expect him to believe in the interior, hidden poetry of objects, he only valued the exterior reality manifested in their objecthood which he could then question. He needed the physical presence of the object, to propose the denial of it, and to show how meaning was absent from it. Indeed, with revolutionary insight Pirandello denied fixed meaning not simply to the text, but to the world itself. His was always a negative dialectics. (Pirandello was never attracted to the drama of unconscious or subconscious states of mind—consciousness was his all-consuming subject—so he was unmoved by the influence of surrealism which, besides rejecting rational thought, and distorting reality, denigrated language, for Pirandello the supreme act of mind.)
Approaching drama from another perspective, Pirandello created melodramatic frames to encircle his plays, then scoffed at the moralism of the genre, proving dramatically that there was no such thing as morality, only contingent moralities. He acknowledged none of melodrama's sexual rules, putting in their place the incest, adultery, and unfulfilled passion that quivered beneath the surface of hypocrisy. And from realism he destabilized the center of gravity which propped up the bourgeois character, and cut away its positivist logic to exalt his own pessimism and lack of faith in progress, and disavowal of objectivity, using realism's belief in the access to truth and knowledge to point out the philosophical differences between thought and action, and the deceptiveness of truthful representation. Much of his criticism was directed toward realistic acting which pretended to create a “reality” for a character (that a “character” could contain reality while at the same time being clearly engaged in artifice was questionable), even forcing an individual to duplicate the existence of another. As Six Characters in Search of an Author demonstrated, there was a great difference between the persons of a drama and that drama's actors.

Pirandello also belittled realism's reliance on the use of objects which it inherited from the well-made play, by refusing to bestow on them any narrative privileges. Within the narrative itself he created characters who didn't know themselves, much less let others reveal them, perverting in this way the “recognition scene” of drama—how could identity be determined for certain? If realism presented the closed text, with all its problems resolved and tidied up at the end, the furniture and characters in place, Pirandello purposely celebrated the open-ended situations he created, leaving more than a few plays to find their own endings, on occasion even setting up a scene he would decide not to stage. The theatre he envisioned drew its energy from the freedom of collapsing genres and patterns of thinking, in the text that always interrupts itself to go off in new directions. It was inevitable that Pirandello would be drawn into a struggle with the very form of theatre, a form based on the act of duplicating identity, which he loathed on principle—theatre, confident in its role as a mirror of society, a mirror he distorted ruthlessly. He demolished realism’s “fourth wall” with great élan, by bringing real life into theatre, and taking theatre out of the auditorium, an act which anticipated happenings' invitation to the spectators and actors to co-mingle in the same space. And finally, he created a model for real people to see fictionalized versions of themselves on stage, a development which would refer later, not to the history or documentary play, but to the use of autobiography in the theatre.

Pirandello never stopped playing with and questioning the conventions of making theatre and making a text. He transvalued the old forms in radical modernist settings that encompass theatre and a critique of theatre, drama and a new textuality. Even more importantly, starting with the split between art and life—for the sake of illusion—that characterized realism, and instead highlighting their coming together that defines modernism, he show-
ed how easily the two could be considered variations on the same theme.

**SCISSORS**

Madame Pace materializes with such an odd character-prop, a pair of scissors. The traditional Freudian approach is to view *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in thematic, symbolic terms. In that scheme of things the scissors are identified as an instrument of castration. The psychological approach, all too common in dramatic criticism, especially on Pirandello, stifles a play in its reduction of it to a series of simple equations corresponding to what is already known, not what can be imagined. On the other hand, a more metaphorical approach to the scissors as an object opens up its poetic options within the world of the play. Metaphorically, then, let's suppose that the scissors cause a tearing apart, a gap in the continuity of the text. With scissors Madame Pace cuts herself an entrance into the text which then has to be pieced (peaced) together again. A director who wants to link new literary theory to the play might stage it as a text about writing, and Madame Pace would signal a disruption, a coming apart of the text; in another setting, perhaps one of political oppression, the same Madame Pace and her scissors might be read as an instrument of censorship.

Everytime *Six Characters* is opened to the page where Madame Pace enters the text, there she will be with her scissors hanging from a chain at her waist. But those scissors don't embody meaning. Possibilities for interpretation of a text are a cultural and historical matter. Theatre defines itself as the reinterpretation of the text, so theatre, more than any other art form which has a literary manifestation, embraces the idea of playing with a text, even cutting it apart. A play is, therefore, always in the making. Pirandello's own view of the text as immutable form is romantic, possessive; it encourages the idea of the singular reading. But a text lives only in its ability to change, to give the appearance of having new qualities—it does not exist independently of an historical moment. A "classic" is only interesting when one reads the future in it; anything that can be thought will at some moment be present in the world. Criticism in the broadest sense, whether the work of the director, of the spectator, of the reader, is the activity in which one uncovers the shape of history in a text.

*What one can add to Pirandello's profound inquiries, and certainly to the social sciences, is an ethics of performance, and its necessary adjunct, a theory of performance value.*
PERFORMANCE ACTS: PIRANDELLO AND THE ANTHROPOLOGISTS

The conventional anthropological view of performance as social drama, which Erving Goffman, Richard Schechner and Victor Turner have popularized, and linked to theatrical theory, presupposes a belief in a social order that gives all human activity a ritual frame (a predetermined narrative, as it were), as if performance acts were entirely structured by social relations. In contrast to this conservative view of performance (role-playing) as symbolic, the more anarchic mind of Pirandello, who should not be overlooked for his contribution to this area of thinking, considered performance an ontological act, outside the time frame, possessing the power to generate a radical individualism in a performer's gestures toward recreation. So, while the anthropological school believes in everyday “performances” as a development in the construction of a self, Pirandello, who refused to acknowledge the notion of a “self,” more precisely saw such developments as the construction of a mask.

There are two fundamentally opposite views outlined in the directions these two schools of thinking follow, and ultimately, they address questions of politics and methodology. The anthropological view enforces a closed system of signs and structures that define and codify body language and social interaction; this approach, derived from structural anthropology, presupposes a universality in nature. Pirandello's work projects a disbelief in the ability of signs to generate meaning out of context; his view of the world is rather an argument against the fixity of nature as a set of values in a culture. A significant difference between Pirandello's aesthetic definition of performance and the anthropological one, and thus problematically a struggle between theatre and social science, frames the more provocative question: Is performance an art or an activity? Anthropologists tend to separate the realms of art and life, viewing performance, which is an aesthetic transformation of the self, as a temporary excursion into art. Pirandello's own thinking moved toward bringing art into life on a more permanent basis, art wasn't simply a way to bracket everyday activities. Art was a model for a more poetic way of life. In light of the current movement of culture, it seems that Pirandello's work offers the more enlightened model for a way of being in the world.

Pirandello makes it clear when a role is objectively real to the social order and subjectively real to the character. He questions the reality of the parts people play, while anthropologists accept them at face value. Therefore, it is not surprising that Pirandello understood how role-playing isolates the individual in society through the process of aestheticizing experience, by abstracting the individual from his possibilities of selfhood, while anthropologists naively believe in it as a model of the social integration of an individual. Pirandello created three kinds of performers who can serve as prototypes of the individual in relation to the modern problem of identity:
Hidden in his work is an argument against photography . . . . Without literally addressing the topic Pirandello framed the modern problem created by photography and the impulse to reproduce reality.

1. the self-conscious performer who watches himself act out society’s version of a social role. He abstracts himself to play the form of the role, in full comprehension of its cognitive and philosophical dimensions. (Henry IV)

2. the non-conscious performer who has no self-knowledge, only a repertoire of masks. He acts out the content of the social role, its informational aspects. (The Unknown Woman of As You Desire Me)

3. the performer who is in search of a role to give form to his life. (Ersilia Drei of To Clothe the Naked)

The anthropological conception of a role is essentially undramatic because there is no conflict and contradiction between performer, role, and scenario, only a catalogue of images—there is nothing going on beneath the mask to produce a real drama. The socially ritualized performer is no risk to his society, instead he acts out its values. Actual dramatic form, on the other hand, poses a greater danger in its potential for attacking the values of a society, and disrupting its social organization.

Pirandello created a drama that outlines a new relationship between subject (the individual) and object (the world). In its most lavish moments it pointed to the possibilities of individual revolt against established social structures, looking to the freedom of the artist as an ideal. In Pirandello’s hierarchy of being “art is the kingdom of perfected creation. . . . Each of us is seeking to create himself and his own life with those very faculties of the spirit that the poet employs in creating his work of art. . . . ” And in its cynical moments his drama outlined the individual’s capitulation to the crowd. Through the infinite suggestions of irony and its relationship to audience, Pirandello had his masked men and women move between the opposing poles of tragedy and comedy (which special triangle do comedy, survival and performance intersect in?), each with its own set of social imperatives. Now that the social sciences have shown their limitation in creating a profile of the performing self, it is time to recover performance theory from science and return it to a more humanistic study in the reflection of art and morality.
Pirandello’s writing opens up role analysis to its political dimensions, a field of inquiry anthropology and sociology ignore. What is the relationship between role-playing and society? How far can one take the freedom to act out versions of the self? What one can add to Pirandello’s profound inquiries, and certainly to the social sciences, is an ethics of performance, and its necessary adjunct, a theory of performance value. This could be the beginning of a deeper, more engaged perspective on performance in relation to private and public life, self and role, structure and free expression, ethics and contingency, individualism and group psychology.

PIRANDELLO/PHOTOGRAPHY/FILM

Pirandello’s thinking is so much a part of the history of modernism it is easy to overlook the fact that he lived thirty-three years in the nineteenth century. How he must have hated that century’s invention, photography, for its power to fix reality in the contours of an ambiguous image. Just as he would later use film and the record player (he would have found a way to use holograms if they existed in his lifetime), he turned first to the photograph in order to subvert its relationship to the photographic subject. Hidden in his work is an argument against photography; the camera lens is another version of the distorting mirror. Without literally addressing the topic Pirandello framed the modern problem created by photography and the impulse to reproduce reality: the contradictory relationship between an individual’s attraction to images and his alienation from them, and the ease with which the image can free itself of moral and ethical content in its denial of presence. That there is hardly any metaphoric use of visual images in the plays (aside from his progressive interest in light and color as he worked more in the theatre) only serves to force his characters to reveal themselves in the way that they are present to each other at every moment.

It was inevitable that Pirandello’s philosophical insights into the problem of existence would play themselves out in the world of theatre because only this art form acknowledges the “real” value of its subjects while at the same time calling into question the “fiction” of illusion and representation. Pirandello needed theatrical realism, a genre which grew side by side with the development of photography, to criticize the social construction of reality which he viewed as fiction.

More remarkably, in his 1916 novel Shoot!: The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator which, according to film theorist Yvette Biro, gave to literature its first filmmaker, Pirandello understood from the start the alienation of the cameraman from his machine, “... as I turn the handle, I am what I am supposed to be, that is to say perfectly impassive. ... A hand that turns the handle.” As Walter Benjamin, most certainly a writer who learned from this novel, has written, Pirandello also pointed out the alienation of actors in exile from their bodies in the filmic image. It was the loneliness created by the distance between self and role. An artist who...
revered the liberating act of imagination, Pirandello questioned whether technology as a means of production could be rightly considered an art, and if so, what the role of the poet would be in a “mechanical birth” that separated the act of creation from the creator. Beyond that he connected technology (the camera) and the consumption of imagery (“It eats everything, whatever stupidity they may set before it.”) in a metaphoric thought that describes the way images proliferate in, then dominate, a technological society, prophesying, finally, that life would become like the movies to audiences who would measure life against film reality. The representation of reality would substitute for the experience of it.

Six Characters in Search of an Author

is, at its core, a play about writing, about authorship.

Pirandello, who answered so many of the questions social psychology has hardly begun, with few exceptions, to ask could see from the perspective of the inchoate film industry the role mass society would play in a technological age. He sums up his vision at the end of the novel when the cameraman, mesmerized by a growing horror, cannot stop himself from shooting a scene in which two actors are accidentally killed, one devoured by a tiger, the other “shot” by a rifle. As the tiger feeds on the man, the film feeds on him. Now the public will feed on the images, and the film studio on their voyeurism. The final touch of irony is the cameraman’s muteness, caused by the shock of witnessing the graphic violence. Now he is a silent film character, merged with his machine. Pirandello’s range of critical thinking, in whatever areas of questioning he extended thought, made an original contribution to our understanding of the individual and the loss of individuality in the development of the modern world. Against the backdrop of contemporary society, his insights into the relation of the self to the world of public imagery now appear extraordinary in their visionary provocation.

As with many events in Pirandello’s life, he switched sides of an issue when it suited his purposes. If he argued against the encroachment of film as a further division of the individual from the things of his world, he also allowed films to be made from his work, even participating in their adaptation for the cinema. Perhaps there is a clue to his attitude toward film imagery in the choice of two major works which made it to film, the play As You Desire Me and the novel The Late Mattia Pascal, each of whose central character is subsumed by an identity crisis. In fact, the action of each story is that character’s performance in a role he or she creates, then plays, involving other characters in the “fictional” scenario. Film reality was simply another level of illusion, another space in which to depict the philosophical dimen-
sions of his life-long study of the phenomenology of being.

**PIRANDELLO IN AMERICA: A VERY BRIEF HISTORY**

While most of the American theatre was earnestly engaged in bringing psychological truth and objective reality to the stage, a small countertradition was quietly working to show that there was no such thing as reality in the theatre. The first group of experimenters was The Living Theatre who produced Pirandello’s *Tonight We Improvise* and Jack Gelber’s Pirandellian play *The Connection*, and on their own reordered reality and subjectivity in a radical vision of politics. But it was eventually to fall to Richard Foreman to take up what Pirandello claimed as his accomplishment, the conversion of “intellect into passion,” in his attempts to stage the activity of critical thinking, and just as surely as the actors drove Dr. Hinkfuss out of the theatre, so one of his own creations, the character Rhoda, pushed Foreman aside, having become independent of her Author. Though only on a theoretical basis, Pirandello had anticipated the removal of the author from the theatre by the director, then the removal of the director by the actors, and finally, he went so far as to show the murder of actors by the audience (a juncture to which we have happily not arrived in anything other than metaphoric terms). Mabou Mines carries Pirandello’s spirit into another area of experimentation, the ironic interplay of appearance and reality in the social construct of the individual; the actor and the role were further detached in the activity of “performance,” which played with the illusion, as opposed to acting which merely reinforced it. Squat came from Hungary with its own surreal political expansion of Pirandellian ideas which would mirror the erasure of the public and private worlds through the looking glass.

**Now that the social sciences have shown their limitation in creating a profile of the performing self, it is time to recover performance theory from science and return it to a more humanistic study in the reflection of art and morality.**

But no group has extended Pirandello’s ideas (many as yet unexplored even today) more than the Wooster Group (it’s no surprise that they eventually gravitated toward Thornton Wilder, America’s first Pirandellian), which made the very relationship between fiction and autobiography, and character and actor, the starting point of its experiments. Here the actor
himself, not simply the role he plays, is the stuff of fiction. Is it any wonder then that Spalding Gray, the source of the group's major fictions (or realities, whichever way you look at it), should emerge as the consummate Pirandellian actor—the complete (con)fuson of character/actor and real/fictional aspects in one persona? Gray plays out the Pirandellian process to its logical end: he un masks himself in the solo work, masks himself in the group pieces. He generates myths about himself, then demystifies them. He is the dialectical actor/individual par excellence, a true character in search of an author. Gray begins to approach tragic proportions the more he becomes inseparable from the mask, the more naively he lets the audience define his proportions of self and role. That much of his audience now refuses to acknowledge the fictional aspects of his "character" points to the diminishing returns of playing with fiction, and a certain entrapment in reality that poses an intriguing theatrical problem. Having come this far in exposing the realities of making theatre, theatre might now turn around and show how illusions are created there. Perhaps it is time for the emphasis to shift away from the myth of the playwright or director or actor to the audience, and the actual experience of theatre.

PIRANDELLO/BRECHT/PERFORMANCE

In the evolution from acting to performance which, in the world of representation, is the difference between creating illusion and commenting on illusion (representation vs. the real), Pirandello and Brecht laid the groundwork for reordering the relationship between character and role. Pirandello led the way in the separation of the actor from the role (in his theatre trilogy especially), repudiating acting styles of his day which fused the two. What he instigated, and Brecht evolved further though in another direction, was the idea of drama as a critique of reality, from the point of view of the actor. What united them intellectually, and produced this new vision of theatre which worked itself out in the definition of character, was the dialectical method of thinking, a process of thought which ushered in the modern era. The approach to drama as a critique of reality, philosophical in its grounding, has had few practitioners in the twentieth century, but those who brought philosophy into the theatre, to the names Pirandello and Brecht one can add Artaud and Witkiewicz and, in our own time, Heiner Müller, who in his remarkable plays provides the synthesis of Pirandello and Brecht (by way of Genet), have been the most important thinkers in the art. The philosophical drama they created (Artaud excepted because his contributions lay elsewhere than in dramatic form) evolves from a materialist approach to drama, working itself out in the actual production of the text, that is, in the working out of the relationship of character, role, and text, in the theatre event. By leaving room for the character to critique himself and his role in a specific attitude visible in the performing of that role, Pirandello and Brecht instigated the evolution toward "performance": the performer, now demonstrating his separate identity, relinquishes his equation to a
character, to act out his own attitude toward his contribution in the making of the text; in contemporary performance, he is free to act himself out. (The concept of performance, a major development in acting theory in this century, is closely linked to the use of narrative, story-telling, even literary prose passages in the drama. Some breakdown of conventional dialogue, as the completely outer-directed “I” of each speaker, has to occur to allow for a character to move out of a role, and either into himself or into the quotation of a character type or attitude, but more significantly, into a third person-oriented mode of speech presentation.)

The philosophic ideal in drama demands a character who is in a high state of consciousness at all times. The actor, like the character, must be aware of himself in the making of the persona and its relation to the process of making theatre, at every moment. If the character could give a critique of the “character” as written in the drama, so the actor could give a critique of the role in the making of the play. In other words, instead of simply acting his role unquestioningly, the actor/character would have a social attitude toward his status as an agent of reality; he would acknowledge performance as an act. This kind of performance attitude presupposes a new view of audience perception: it led Brecht to the alienation effect, for Pirandello it related to the concept of humorismo, the precursor of Verfremdungseffekt. Each of these important theories is linked to the role of irony and to the function of the sign in the theatre. Together the two provide the necessary components in the historical progression from acting to performance, which had to wait for the new vision of the thinking actor in the theatre, and the attraction to quotation in society, fully to materialize.

Both Pirandello and Brecht decomposed characters in order to expose their oppositions and contradictions: Brecht studied character in relation to epistemology, Pirandello emphasized ontology. Brecht believed in the wholeness of a character whose contradictions were incorrect political choices—simply the wrong side of the self, false consciousness. Pirandello’s characters have no self, no right or wrong side, only an ever-changing set of beliefs contingent on each new situation. If Brecht’s characters could learn from experience and change, Pirandello’s could not: personal survival was all that counted. The very separate, often dissimilar,

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research into character that these two writers carried out would lead them to diametrically opposed political conclusions. In one sense, they outline the main currents of political choice at its most extreme ends. These choices evolve from the situation of the individual in relation to the group: Pirandello saw the group and the power of public opinion to maintain psychological control over the individual as a force that deprived him of any individualistic thought or action; Brecht took this relationship but set it in the context of political ideology to show how the group reflected the Marxist ideal of the collective mind.

The crucial difference between Pirandello and Brecht, and thus between different schools of thought on perception, rests with the concept of the mask. For Brecht there was no difference between outer appearances and consciousness because there was no sense of mask. He believed totally in the sign which is the basis for his theory of gestus; the creation of a classical mind, gestus is founded on the universality of action and truth. Conversely, Pirandello disrupted the logic of the sign, which is the center of identity, because he was only interested in showing up the ambiguity of the signifier, and its inability to sustain a hierarchy of values and identifiable concepts. That Brecht was an ideologue, and Pirandello unsystematic as a thinker, explains their contrasting views on the problem of the sign and its function in society. Pirandello’s vision allowed for the concept of the mask to transform itself throughout the twentieth century into the social idea of the image, and because his work relentlessly pursued the elusive meaning of the sign, while Brecht was more concerned with engendering meaning in it, Pirandello is the more important contemporary mind, yet to be exhausted as an inspiration for his observations on social activity.

AN EXCURSION TO PALERMO

A bookshop. Marranca and Bookseller.

—Do you have any books by Pirandello?
—Yes, just a moment . . . here they are.
—An autographed novel, signed 1937. . . . Didn’t Pirandello die in 1936?
—No, he died in 1937.

(Is this a forgery or a European four, I thought?)

SIX CHARACTERS AND THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

For Pirandello the text was irrevocably bound up with the primal, instinctual will to survive. In Six Characters in Search of an Author which is, at its core, a play about writing, about authorship, major power struggles are played out in a contest of textual supremacy that functions on at least three separate, but inter-related, levels of dramatic action:
1. The text of the characters challenges the text of the actors. A third text, *The Rules of the Game*, a Pirandello play which the actors are rehearsing, intervenes as a reference point.

2. The written text claims hegemony over the unfinished, unwritten, spoken text presented by the actors. “Just because there is no ‘book’ which contains us, you refuse to believe....” The Father accuses the director and actors, suggesting an argument for the work-in-progress vs. the text already made. Beyond that, it is a rejection of logocentrism.

3. A conflict arises between The Father’s text that forces itself on the other characters and the actors, and The Son’s text which he himself refuses to elaborate. In a larger perspective, this generational conflict is part of the rebellion of a writer who offers a breakthrough of new writing to conventional theatre, against the six characters who represent the old melodramas that keep theatre from entering the modern age. The clash of the two views of the text generates a dialogue on the nature of theatre.

What Pirandello does is to show his disdain for stereotypical characters and their text, and the acting company’s own stale approach to staging, while simultaneously exploiting them to explore the making of drama in a self-conscious, subversive way that highlights his own thinking about writing for the theatre.

Pirandello valued the life of drama, making it equal to the life outside of art, even more honored than life itself which, he believed, lacked the beauty of form. He had his own theory of origins, which the wondrously passionate sentiment expressed in these lines of The Father describes: “... one is born to life in many forms, in many shapes, as tree, or as stone, as water, as butterfly, or as woman. So one may also be born a character in a play.” For Pirandello there was a difference between a writer’s actual creation (craft) of a character, and a character’s natural birth, free of the writer and his technology. Yet, while the characters had life, they did not have a structure.

Some of the questions Pirandello asked in his play that literally did change the “rules of the game,” in so far as theatre was concerned, and with great sophistication deconstructed theatre before there was a name for what he was doing, are very simple yet they rush into the soul of writing, and its hermeneutics, in a profound, unsettling way. Who is the author of a text? Can a text be known? Does it embody a fixed, single meaning? Is there such a thing as an original? What is the relationship between the world of the playwright and the world of his characters? Pirandello’s six characters call into question the very status of the text, and its transformation in the act of staging which is always, or should be, a critique of the text. They do not doubt that there is a difference between dramatic literature and theatre. The play itself transvalues the relationships of dramatic text/writer/actors as it struggles, theoretically, to find its own life as an autonomous entity—to give itself—going so far as to suggest a concept which in literary
theory has come to be referred to as the “Death of the Author,” while it continues its homage to the world in the text.

Pirandello was still fighting with the myth of the Author, and the ambiguous pleasures of authorship, toward the end of his career, with his attraction-repulsion pattern creating the paradoxical center of his attitudes toward writing and working in the theatre. But the subject shifted perspective between the time he wrote Six Characters (1921) and When Someone is Somebody (1933), written the year before he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. It moved from the subject of authorship to that of celebrity. Now a famous author invents another identity for himself in the fictional double of a young poet. If in his first investigation of writing there were six characters in search of an author, in his last there is one character who runs away from an author.

In almost everything he wrote, Pirandello studied the relationship of the private and public aspects of an event, finally taking the point of view of the writer in this prophetic meditation on celebrity. Though he complained all his life of being misunderstood or ignored—even when it wasn’t so—Pirandello nevertheless rejected more fiercely the status of a “somebody” second guessed by his public. He saw the life of the text as separate from its creator’s life, denying the classical notion of individual genius which rigidly joined the two. He saw a public that demanded a writer to live up to its preconceptions of him and his work, denying him the opportunity for surprise and novelty. Eventually his rights would be consigned to the state of “public domain,” and he would become a part of history. In his own lifetime Pirandello saw his name transformed from a noun to an adjective, often to characterize work he himself took no part in. When this occurs a man is no longer simply a writer but takes on instead the mythic stature of Author.

When Someone is Somebody is a look at the writer in relation to his public, at the very least an acknowledgement of the media’s role in creating celebrity. Pirandello anticipated the link celebrity-making would forge with technology in the play’s Nam June Paik-style image of the cliché the famous author, XXX (Pirandello didn’t even give him a name), visualizes: “Split my back open and put the gramophone in my belly. Then I’ll talk and you can all stand around and listen.” Ignoring the privilege of speech, the author commits poetic suicide at the end of the play, actually turning into stone; he becomes a literary monument. “When one is somebody, then at the opportune moment, one must decree one’s own death and remain locked up, mounting guard against one’s self.” The public craving for the cult of the author is the end of spontaneous writing: is it any wonder that the rise in global communications has contributed further to this crisis in the world of literature, while at the same time spawning its utopian corrective, the desire for the Death of the Author? Pirandello gave to the world of letters a blueprint for this theory, decades before its need was proclaimed. He had wanted simply to roam in the world of his imagination: to be a man, a writer.
Looking backward through history it seems as if Pirandello, with the strength of a great writer who sums up the vision of his age, had early on outlined the profile of the individual ripe for totalitarianism, a politics that works through group psychology and the renunciation of individualism in a new vision of reality.

PIRANDELLO IN THE FUTURE TENSE

Pirandello's contributions to the theory of social psychology—the study of the individual in relation to the group, which forms the basis for any social theory of character the work suggests—has been systematically overlooked in favor of what they might reveal about the disintegration of the ego, loss of identity, and abnormal psychology in the individual. His interests extending beyond individual psychology, Pirandello dramatized the loss of self and the breakdown of a fixed social order that made individuality less acceptable, and the power of the group to define thought and action, more attractive. He concentrated less on the psychology of the crowd than on the individual who was ripe for being seduced by crowd opinion. In other words, Pirandello was interested to a lesser extent in the mass mind than in the individual who could be transformed into the mass, through peer group pressure; he demonstrated how this development turned the individual into a performer of roles in the social world, and finally, how performance is related to the concept of the mask in the theatricalization of everyday life.

Pirandello's characters, who change their beliefs from one moment to the next, when confronted with the possibility of isolation from majority opinion, are the ancestors of the unthinking individual in mass society. The plays dramatize people's need for public acceptance of majority opinion, and their inability to cope with the reorganization of social and moral codes, reflecting the historical period of modernism they grew out of. Pirandello understood how society, miniaturized in his plentiful communities of neighbors and family, was shaped by the forces of public opinion: an individual can be influenced by the opinions of others even when they contradict his own rational thought and self-interest. There was no such thing as objective reality, reality was subjective, temporary, infinitely malleable according to the needs of the ruling ethos which defined the uniqueness of individual (that is, separate) realities, and proposed instead that the same values and beliefs be mass reproduced throughout the community. In the writing there is almost always the attempt by characters to con-
trol, construct, or reshape reality; essentially, he was not interested in the negative energy of disintegration of structures of reality. Looking backward through history it seems as if Pirandello, with the strength of a great writer who sums up the vision of his age, had early on outlined the profile of the individual ripe for totalitarianism, a politics that works through group psychology and the renunciation of individualism in a new vision of reality.

Pirandello’s plays suggest a social model that reveals the psychological laws of the modern character. His raisonneur, director or author functions as “leader” of the crowd or community, and manipulator of the individual who is set in a struggle with the will of the group. (Interestingly, the pioneering sociologist Gabriel de Tarde first pointed out the link between the role of opinion in small communities and the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy, a relationship which has some bearing on the social and dramatic structure of the plays.)

Pirandello showed how role-playing, the retreat behind the mask, was an act of self-creation, sometimes of liberation, that had the power to turn one into a work of art. He anticipated that the artist, in the age of lost individualism that characterizes modern life, would be the person most able to cling to individuality and independence as mass society valued those qualities less and less, and that the ordinary individual, understanding this gradual loss of selfhood, of poetry, would try to imitate the artist’s ability to regenerate himself through art. Only art holds the promise of transformation and change, but more importantly, transcendence. Art, always in flux, offers a way to keep life from becoming fixed form whose ultimate manifestation is, of course, death. This merging of the common man with the yearnings of the artist, the desire for art to be more a part of life, would in our own time, particularly in America, link modernism and its worship of subjectivity to mass culture values, in a new development of group psychology within democracy. Furthermore, the need for transformation and transcendence, the constant renewal in the act of becoming a new person, is a desperate refusal of death: here Pirandello’s life-long fear of death, and the denial of death which is part of the American experience, meet in a special ordering of Romantic idealism.

Pirandello showed that role-playing and acts of self-creation (performance acts) would allow one to create any amount of new images of oneself, in effect, to re-write one’s life, but looked at from another perspective, the liberated individual who is unable to break through his own subjectivity is fated to recast himself in the image of what is socially sanctioned behavior and opinion. Pirandello’s masked performers who have no strong inner self—the opposite of realism’s complete bourgeois character, they are like Peer Gynt’s onion which reveals a new layer as each successive old one is peeled away—experience existence purely from the outside. They thrive on their need for a public persona within the public realm (the public eye). The plays demonstrate the disappearance of the private realm, the prologue to
the totalitarian process, and the emergence of the public realm as sole mediator of opinion and belief. In the public realm one can only be a performer of sorts, playing an assortment of roles currently in fashion, because it is unsafe to be seen without a mask. The private I is expendable—maintaining an acceptable image is all that counts. ("Image" is simply a contemporary revisioning of the concept of the mask, a more visual metaphor that suits a technological age.) Finally, Pirandello's ubiquitous mirror, in this context, gains deeper metaphoric significance as the symbolization of public response (the audience) to the individual act.

The contemporary infatuation with performance as a way of presenting oneself in public, and totalitarianism, which has always been linked to spectacle, imagery, the creation of fictions, and theatricalized public life, intersect at this juncture. (One of the early modern social psychologists, Gustave Le Bon, connected crowd psychology to the role and power of images in public life, a relationship which is becoming more and more discernible with the assistance of technology and its influence on mass mentality.) Pirandello, who was not a political artist, followed his aesthetics all the way into fascism, unable in the end to separate art and life. Will the contemporary attraction to the aesthetic way of life, the gradual submersion of individualism in group ethos, and the disinterest in maintaining a distinction between public and private lives, interact to create the social conditions ripe for totalitarianism, or will they more kindly show that democracy and totalitarianism, two different approaches to illusion, are at the same time two possibilities of the same desire for transcendence?