CHAPTER 1

Sicily

Beatrice Alfonzetti

Places

Pirandello's birth and early childhood are surrounded by an almost legendary aura, from the cholera epidemic, which also hit Sicily, to the solar eclipse that the writer would remember as an adult.[1] Girgenti and Palermo, the two cities of his youth, were the areas most at risk for the spread of cholera. For this reason, his mother, awaiting the birth of her second son, moved temporarily to the family farmhouse, nicknamed Chaos, located outside Agrigento. Here Luigi was born on June 28, 1867. With good reason, he would be called son of the Xàos, referring to the Greek origins of the place and to the idea that the world before its formation was indistinct matter: "I therefore am the son of chaos; and not allegorically, but in reality, because I was born in one of our country spots, which is near an intricate wood, called, in dialect, Càvusu by the inhabitants of Girgenti."[2] Years later he would craft a real myth of his birth, scribbling in a fragment of *Information on My Involuntary Sojourn on Earth*, "One night in June I fell like a firefly under a great solitary pine in a country of Saracean olive trees overlooking the edges of a plateau of blue clay on the African sea."[3]

In this peculiar autobiography, sketched shortly before his death, the writer uses fabular images to talk about the randomness of life and death and the smallness of man in the face of the infinite universe. The art of *humorism* is born of the contrast between this condition and the place that man believes he occupies in nature, and it carries the imprint of Nicolaus Copernicus, whom, following Leopardi, Pirandello points to as an involuntary humorist.[4]

The author's production and poetics revolve around the Copernican argument, well explained in a letter of December 10, 1887, to his parents: "I have no sadness; but I laugh, I laugh and it is a joy to see. He is, for I have seen the Earth, where we all are, small and great men, from a point a

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108339391.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

little too high, and it seemed to me, those who can save yourselves, do!, a lemon . . . At that height one laughs, like crazy. Are we really serious? Are we really serious?"[5]

Sicily's Greek roots had a strong influence on Pirandello's poetic imagination and life choices, beginning in his adolescence. Enrolled at the Technical Institute by the will of his father Stefano, who owned a sulfur mine, he studied in secret to pass the high school exams completed in Palermo, where the family moved in 1880. He was already a *young man against*: against his father's authority and against the authority of the university professors during his career as a student, which unfolded in three stages – in Palermo, Rome, and Bonn. In Palermo, where in 1886 he enrolled simultaneously in the Schools of Law and Letters, he came to know the writings of philosopher Raffaele Schiattarella on the formation of the universe; these, along with Francesco De Sanctis' *Essay on Leopardi*, left a visible influence as early as the poems of *Troubled Joy* (Palermo, 1889). These were fervent years for the young man, spent between reading, study, falling in love with his cousin Lina, and writing his first theatrical works. His passion for the theatre, born in his youth, is documented in many letters from Palermo, where his experience as Pirandello-the-spectator began. This continued in Rome, where he arrived in the autumn of 1887, choosing to pursue a degree in literature with a specialization in philology.

The seven years spent in Palermo were fundamental for the opportunities the city's cultural life offered, and Luigi was receptive, immediately inserting himself in the intellectual and artistic milieu. He delivered news of it to the family, who had returned to Agrigento, in regular letters, which parade images of the eighteen year-old who is stooped over Greek and Latin textbooks, "thirsty for dreams and aspirations,"[6] and who tells of duels, deaths, and attempted suicides of acquaintances, friends, and relatives without failing to ironically comment on the notices that wallpaper the city during the elections for the sixteenth legislature. He imagines himself as a future university professor and at the same time reveals a precocious capacity for observation and reflection. In his vision, men are already "little worms" and the earth a "little globe," and he is certainly a person "out of place" who already knows that he will "satirize the world."[7]

Among the places he frequented most, besides the university, were cafes, editorial offices, and theatres, especially the Bellini, where he must have seen Italy's famed actress Eleonora Duse perform. Palermo is where his first poetical and theatrical tests took place, and the young man was so enthusiastic that he aspired to have none other than the divine Eleonora as

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his first interpreter. In Palermo, he forged lasting relationships with Enrico Sicardi, the future philologist, and with the poet Peppino Schirò; in Rome, his Sicilian friends would include Ugo Fleres, Luigi Capuna, Nino Martoglio, and, above all, the young Pier Maria Rosso di San Secondo.

Pirandello never cut ties with Palermo, especially in the years spent in Rome and Bonn and then again in Rome from 1891 – and never with Sicily either, with its sunny countryside and the African sea of Porto Empedocle, where he spent the summers of his childhood and where he would continue to go because his loved ones were there. And there he chose to take his final journey, in the cinerary urn brought to Sicily, to be walled up in the countryside of Agrigento, where, as recorded in "My Last Desires to Respect," he was born.[8]

Attachments

Away from home, after a cheerful parenthesis in Porto Empedocle thanks to the Easter holiday, the nineteen-year-old student complained about the absence of letters from family members and, imagining them in various poses, admitted that he could not write anything about his mother, for there would be so many things to say: "She does everything, my queen, and I would have to write a lot to portray all those scenes in which I imagine her."[9] Pirandello's mother, Caterina Ricci Gramitto, was a fundamental figure in his life. He was bound to her by utter devotion and the certainty of being loved and understood. In his letter of November 6, 1887, he confessed to her what he had kept silent until then, even to himself: a spasmodic drive toward the religion of art, experienced as an ideal lover, which he ranked above all else. And it was certainly not by chance that over time Pirandello would superimpose the myth of maternity, understood in a sacred sense, and the myth of art: thus, for example, the two sides – one natural, the other artistic – of the writer Silvia Roncella, protagonist of the novel *Her Husband*. Not unlike characters such as Mattia Pascal (Adriano Mies), Pirandello speaks of his beloved mother in almost religious terms: the holy mother. And few texts are more intense than "Interviews with Characters," a dialogue with the shadow of his recently deceased mother, whose image returns constantly to him, whose voice he hears echo in his mind.[10] The feeling that united him with his older sister Rosolina, called Lina, was likewise intense, based on elective affinities and a shared affection that extended to the youngest sibling, Annetta, as well. The men of the family – his father Stefano and his two brothers, Ippolito and Giovanni – complete the picture of a family

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with strong emotional ties to each other and with solid moral values, proud of its Garibaldian past, belonging to the middle class, and not lacking a certain culture. In the letters, Luigi speaks of books, musical works, and states of mind and heart in the manner of Leopardi.

He often addressed his father, on whom his finances depended, while actually writing to everyone and especially Lina. This is seen in the letter dated February 3, 1886, in which he also mentions his father's hunting dogs:

> A hundred, a thousand kisses to everyone, to Mamma, to Rosolina, to Annetta, to Innocenzino, to Giovannino. A piece of bread for me to Linda and Argante. To Rosolina who never writes to me, or who writes so little that it is less than nothing, you will say that I love her very, very, very much and that, between a lacquer and a burnt Siena, she should smile a little more in her mind with my crooked sheep's eyes that are always looking for her.[11]

The more Pirandello felt a deep communion with his mother and sisters, the less he seemed to feel such exaltation for the other women in his life, at least until he fell in love with Marta Abba. An exception is the German parenthesis, which would see him in a joyous love affair with Jenny Schulz-Lander, wrapped in guilt and nostalgia for the rituals, festivals, and sound of the bagpipes of Christmas in his "distant hometown."[12]

If Palermo was the city of first love, for his cousin Rosalia, whom Luigi called "Lina of Palermo" to distinguish her from his sister, it was also the place of disenchantment and the first experience of neurosis pushed to the point of madness. Already in 1889, two years after his engagement, he wrote to his sister Lina that he was shocked at the sight of the shameful and hysterical behavior of the "poor sick girl" whom he could no longer love, since the "adored," "pure and sacred" image of her had vanished.[13]

Agrigento was instead the setting for the meeting arranged by the family, in March 1892, with his future wife, Antonietta Portulano. Pirandello was so strongly rooted in Sicilian customs that it seemed normal to him to return to his hometown to take a wife. Everything happened as if in a novel: the date of the wedding that nearly went up in smoke because of the hostility of Calogero Portulano; Antonietta's obstinacy in wanting Luigi to marry her; the place of their life together, Rome; their very falling in love. The conditions of the match, of Antonietta's dowry, were set by the two in-laws, owners of sulfur mines.[14] Luigi's letters to her quiver with impatience, although he had only seen her a few times: Having escaped from the labyrinth in which he was struggling, he affirmed that he had become normal like other men, with a special touch – love for art. Antonietta did not understand, but he persisted in telling her about the

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split between the big me and the little me, one sad, the other happy.[15] Meanwhile, at the end of the honeymoon, February 1, 1894, he wrote to his loved ones from Villa Caos, thanking them for the wine, coffee, French bread, and ham, and describing himself as having been made stupid by love. Then in 1895, he published the novella, also expunged from the *Stories for a Year*, "Dialogues between the Big Me and the Little Me," a seeming confession of the divided state of mind with which one relates to the daily necessities of which sex, love, and a wife are all a part, and all prerogatives of the little me:

> Enough now! Of the two of us, I am the one who must soon die: you have the pride to live beyond the century; so let me enjoy my little time in peace! Think about it: we'll have a comfortable little house, and we'll hear these silent rooms of quiet life resounding, our woman singing, sewing and boiling the pot in the evening . . . Aren't these things good and beautiful too? You will be alone, secluded, working.[16]

Many years later, when Pirandello was forced to commute between Rome and Agrigento, not only for holidays or festive occasions but also because of Antonietta's recurrent manifestations of paranoia, he wrote to his friend Ugo Ojetti:

> I do not have a single house, a single hell; but two houses, two hells: one here, in Rome, the other in Girgenti; two and three times a year I have to take my family from one to the other hell, my three poor children with their mother, who is frantically pursuing her reason without being able to find it anywhere.[17]

Fables

From Gramsci – spectator of *Liolà* at the Teatro Alfieri in Turin on the evening of April 2, 1917 – to Leonardo Sciascia, the most intelligent theorist of the Sicilian character of Pirandello's work, there exists an authoritative tradition on the Sicilian matrix of Pirandello's texts and characters.[18] Although he was a writer of international caliber, Sicily lurked in his DNA and returned in his writings, represented in three modes: late veristic, mythical, and historical. The mythical Sicily persists across his work up to the posthumous *The Mountain Giants*: from the sun that warms the prince who came from the North in *The Changeling* (1934) to the island inhabited by the magician Cotrone, nostalgia for the South infiltrates his artistic creation, interwoven with a remarkable wealth of literary and theatrical impressions.

Sicily makes its appearance as early as the seventeen-year-old Luigi's debut in the 1884 "Capannetta," a "Sicilian sketch" that clearly shows the

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influence of the masters of *verismo*, the Sicilians Giovanni Verga and Luigi Capuana. This influence would remain until at least 1904, when *The Late Mattia Pascal* appeared, marked by its Copernican poetics and adopting the techniques and styles of Sicilian naturalism. Duels, honor, closed-mindedness, and religious festivals fill the plot of *The Outcast*, which sees Marta Ajala driven out of her home by her husband because he falsely suspects her of betraying him with Gregorio Alvignani and then taken back in after she has actually done so. The story unfolds between a "Sicilian town" that is clearly Girgenti, named after the patron saints Cosmo and Damiano, and Palermo, "a paradise" that offers a "truly magnificent spectacle": the cloister of mountains, Morreale, the flowery countryside, Monte Pellegrino, the sea, and the bright sky, all of which drag Marta "as if she came out of a dream" into Alvignani's arms.[19] Girgenti takes its revenge on Palermo in Pirandello's second work, *The Turn*, in whose contemplation of the city one already glimpses a leap toward myth:

> In that landscape lay a vanished city, Agrigentum, a sumptuous city, rich in marble, where people had lived wise but idle lives. Trees grew now around the two ancient temples which were all that remained, and their mysterious rustling mingled with the constant rumble of the sea in the distance and with an unceasing quivering sound, which seemed to derive from the gentle moonlight in the still air, but was in fact the chirping of crickets, in the midst of which there sounded from time to time the mournful, remote *tu-whit tu-whoo* of a horned owl.[20]

Sicily was the gateway to the theatre. Pirandello grabbed his chance to do theatre on the fly, albeit with a bit of a bellyache, with two Sicilian actors – Angelo Musco and Giovanni Grasso – thanks to his friendship with Nino Martoglio, a playwright from Catania.[21] From 1910 to 1921, Sicilian settings and dialect recur in his plays: from *Sicilian Limes* (Messina, June 4, 1915), to *Think It Over, Giacomino!* (Rome, July 10, 1916), to *With the Yellow Gloves*, staged at the Biondo of Palermo in 1921, the same year as *Six Characters*.

Alongside this Sicily, there was the mythical one tied to a nostalgia for ancient fables and bearing the traces of the island's Greek ancestry, its beliefs and rites. *Liolà*, a playful comedy "full of songs and sun" and centered on a "peasant poet, filled with sunshine,"[22] like Pirandello's translation of Euripides' *Cyclops*, was written in the dialect of Agrigento, which, for Pirandello, was the right choice because "the work of the Greek poet, in all that forms the essential virtue of his poetry, still lives down there and is so much of the island's very life."[23] Already the first reviewers had identified the satirical and Renaissance archetypes of *Liolà*: a fabulous

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mockery, set in the "countryside of Agrigento,"[24] that welds the theme of youthful eros, triumphant over the old man's impotence, to the myth of fertility. Sicily-made-mythical-memory will triumph on the European scene in the author's dramatic texts: *The Festival of Our Lord of the Ship* (1924), *The New Colony* (1928), and *Tonight We Improvise* (1930).

Finally, there is the "historical" Sicily, site of a collective drama and generational conflict that, together with corruption, make up the central themes of *The Old and the Young*, the 1913 novel that is both historical and humoristic. In a December 18, 1908, letter to Ugo Ojetti, Pirandello wrote about the novel and announced its publication in installments (which would then be discontinued) in *Rassegna contemporanea*:

> a vast novel, in which I portrayed the sad drama of Sicily after 1870: a drama that ends with the events of 1893–94: a terrible year for Italy (there was the scandalous collapse of the Banca Romana and the bankruptcy of the old patriotism) – the year that marks a real *crisis of growth* for our country. The novel consists of two parts and an intermezzo: the first and second parts take place in Sicily, the intermezzo in Rome.[25]

In 1912, while the writer was finishing what he considered to be his most important work, he stated that it is the "novel of Sicily after 1870, bitter and populous novel, which encloses the drama of my generation."[26] The dedication alludes to the novel's cyclical perspective: "To my children, young today, old tomorrow." But in the novel, Pirandello's generation represents the young, who adhere to the Sicilian *fasci*, provoking peasant revolts and thus, unwittingly, the massacres brought on by the state of siege imposed on the island by the government, presided over by the Sicilian and former Mazzinian Francesco Crispi.

"Hunger is hunger, and when it cannot be satisfied . . . ": This consideration contains the sense of the riots that are about to erupt.[27] Alongside poverty, another evil is attacking the island: the perception of an inept and corrupt political class, and a lack of confidence in institutions. So the mud will rain down on Rome, radiating all the way to Sicily, while blood will flow in rivulets. *The Old and the Young* remains the beloved writer's most current novel.

Notes

Translated from the Italian by Patricia Gaborik.

1 *Album Pirandello*, ed. Maria Luisa Aguirre D'Amico (Milan: Mondadori, 1992), 16. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's or editor's.

2 Luigi Pirandello, *Saggi, Poesie, Scritti varii*, ed. Manlio Lo Vecchio Musti (Milan: Mondadori, 1973), 1281.

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3 Ibid., 1105.
4 Luigi Pirandello, *Saggi e interventi*, ed. Ferdinando Taviani (Milan: Mondadori, 2006), 944.
5 Luigi Pirandello, *Lettere giovanili da Palermo e da Roma 1886–1889*, ed. Elio Providenti (Rome: Bulzoni, 1993), 238.
6 Ibid., 132.
7 Ibid., 103.
8 Pirandello, *Saggi, Poesie, Scritti varii*, 1289.
9 *Lettere giovanili*, 123.
10 Luigi Pirandello, *Novelle per un anno*, ed. Mario Costanzo, vol. III, tome ii (Milan: Mondadori, 1990), 1145–53.
11 *Lettere giovanili*, 98.
12 As in *Christmas on the Rhine*, published in 1896.
13 From a letter to Lina (March 30, 1889): *Lettere giovanili*, 323.
14 See Andrea Camilleri, *Biografia del figlio cambiato* (Milan: Rizzoli BUR, 2000), 141–51, and *Luigi Pirandello intimo: Lettere e documenti inediti*, ed. Renata Marsili Antonetti (Rome: Gangemi, 1998), 104–34.
15 Luigi Pirandello, *Lettere della formazione 1891–1898: Con un'appendice di lettere sparse 1899–1919*, ed. Elio Providenti (Rome: Bulzoni, 1996), 190.
16 *Novelle*, III.ii, 966.
17 Letter dated April 10, 1914. Luigi Pirandello, *Carteggi inediti (con Ojetti Albertini Orvieto Novaro De Gubernatis De Filippo)*, ed. Sarah Zappulla Muscarà (Rome: Bulzoni, 1980), 78.
18 Leonardo Sciascia, "Pirandello e la Sicilia" (1961), in *Opere*, ed. Claude Ambroise (Milan: Bompiani, 2002), vol. III, 1051–54.
19 Luigi Pirandello, *L'esclusa*, in *Tutti i romanzi*, vol. I, ed. Giovanni Macchia (Milan: Mondadori, 1973), 147, 153–57.
20 Pirandello, *The Turn*, trans. Howard Curtis (London: Hesperus, 2007), 13.
21 According to Camilleri, "Without Martoglio there never would have been a Pirandello, playwright in dialect," Introduction to *Opere teatrali in dialetto*, ed. Alberto Varvaro, in Luigi Pirandello, *Maschere nude*, IV, ed. Alessandro d'Amico (Milan: Mondadori, 2007), 1254.
22 See the letter to his son Stefano dated October 24, 1916, in *Il figlio prigioniero: Carteggio tra Luigi e Stefano – Pirandello durante la guerra 1915–1918*, ed. Andrea Pirandello (Milan: Mondadori, 2005), 157.
23 *Saggi, Poesie, Scritti varii*, 1214. *U Ciclopu* is in *Maschere nude*, IV, 1653–80.
24 *Maschere nude* I, 356.
25 *Carteggi inediti*, 29.
26 *Saggi, Poesie, Scritti varii*, 1288.
27 Luigi Pirandello, *I vecchi e i giovani*, in Luigi Pirandello, *Tutti i romanzi*, ed. Giovanni Macchia and Mario Costanzo (Milan: Mondadori, 1973), II, 127.

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