Written in 1908, Luigi Pirandello’s most important work of literary theory is *L’umorismo* [*On Humor*], an essay whose arguments he hardly modified or qualified in the long career that followed.¹ Though nearly everyone agrees that the essay cannot and should not be read as “a thoroughly objective theory of humor,” it is often said to be the writer’s clearest expression of his own poetics.² However, among the legion of critics who have worked this area of Pirandello studies, it has been seldom noted that the essay also contains many contradictions and subversions of the very ideas that seem characteristic of *umorismo* as practiced in the author’s creative works. Indeed, Pirandello’s auto-exegesis should be read with a healthy skepticism. Much of the essay’s incoherence arises from the fact that *L’umorismo* is really two essays in one which, at times, work at cross purposes; one attempts to situate *umorismo* in a long literary tradition, the other describes it as the artistic process (largely pioneered by Pirandello) which most closely mirrors the internal conflicts inherent in human consciousness. As a treatise defending Pirandello’s insistent focus on the individual psyche, *L’umorismo* deserves the careful analysis I propose here. As a work of literary history, the essay falsifies the genealogy of *umorismo* and, consequently, belies the originality of Pirandello’s modernist foray into the realm of the Self. For example, he spends page upon page (139-44) trying to prove that *I promessi sposi* [*The Betrothed*] embodies the principles of *umorismo* and is, therefore, of a piece with his own works, largely because Manzoni both laughs at and
sympathizes with the much-beloved Don Abbondio. Despite this claim, no one will deny that Pirandello's fictive works are populated with characters who obsess over problems of identity and self-consciousness that never so much as cross Don Abbondio's mind. Indeed, a great deal of what Pirandello attempts to codify and make explicit in *L'umorismo* is present implicitly in all of his work, and especially in *Il fu Mattia Pascal* [*The Late Mattia Pascal*]. My aim here is to analyze the essay, comparing and contrasting its presentation of *umorismo* with the author's practical application of these principles in the novel.

In my reading of the essay, whose essential points need to be culled from a diffuse mass of arguments, *umorismo* is a set of artistic strategies for representing Pirandello's embryonic, pre-Freudian psychological theory of the Self. In Pirandello's hands, what is commonly called "the crisis of modern consciousness" is, above all, the explicit acknowledgment of the radical split between the conscious and the unconscious in the human psyche, which is manifest in primal moments when the Self uncomfortably confronts the Other within itself.

For the purposes of this discussion, I define the Self as one's consciousness of one's own being or identity. In the context of psychology, and without specific reference to philosophy or politics, the Other is not simply another person, i.e., another Self, but also a psychic structure which, by means of internalization, stands in for some lost object, typically the mother. Many psychoanalytic theories contend that individuation inevitably entails a greater awareness of the gap between the Self and the world. Such an awareness is not necessarily traumatic, but, in any case, the psyche develops mechanisms for coping with the sense of loss engendered by separation.

My analysis contrasts Pirandello's notion of the Self with those of Freud, Bakhtin, Lacan, and Irigaray in order to position Pirandello in his historical moment and to position myself as his reader. If his age was troubled by the Self's apparent instability, ours more or less embraces its multiple and provisional nature. It will become evident that none of the notions of Self referred to in my analysis occupy a privileged position vis-à-vis the others; rather, I seek to demonstrate how evolving theories of the psyche have conditioned our assessment of Pirandello's legacy.
Consequently, my approach need not suppose from the outset that the Self is truly knowable in its essence or, indeed, that any existing theories of the mind faithfully model consciousness.

*Umorismo* is not merely a description of the Self but, more significantly, an attempt to transform psychological theory into artistic practice. Pirandello was not alone in asserting the psychological profundity of laughter. Just three years before he wrote his essay, Freud argued that jokes open the door to the unconscious by expressing, in socially acceptable form, libidinal or aggressive thoughts that are normally suppressed. On the other hand, Pirandello is quite original in proposing that humor can be rigorously defined as an aesthetic concept. *L'umorismo* attacks Benedetto Croce’s article of 1903 which asserts that humor is a psychological state having nothing directly to do with art making. Clamorously rejecting this claim, and Crocean aesthetics in general, Pirandello responds that “l'artista, in fondo, non fa altro che definire e rappresentare stati psicologici” [at bottom, the artist does nothing but define and represent psychological states] (124). This assertion is borne out in his texts where the nexus of art and psychology lands squarely on the problematic epistemology of the Self. Simply stated: how does the Self know and recognize the Self? Pirandello’s answer is that the Self becomes the artist and attempts to represent itself to itself. The mechanical and rhetorical analogy for this self-representation is the mirror image, for it is here that his characters reveal and confront their unsuccessful efforts to create a coherent, integrated Self. The Pirandellian mirror is a visual analogy for the self-consciousness and the self-estrangement inherent in *umorismo*. Since Pirandello is trying to represent the distancing and detachment of the Self from itself, it is appropriate that, of all the senses, he privileges sight, the most abstract and cerebral one.

Several critics have compared *umorismo* to Jacques Lacan’s theory of the “mirror stage,” a period of psychological development in which the infant begins to recognize a distinction between its own body and the outside world. While the child experiences acutely its inability to control its limbs, the sight of its image in the mirror, which appears unified and in control, contributes to the formation of self-identity by means of an imaginary correspondence between Self and image.
This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the infans stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursing dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject. (2)

But if Lacan's description of this pre-oedipal stage is useful in regard to umorismo, it is only as a counter-example of psychological functioning. The child's false sense of integrity, its misperception that its reflected image is its body, is exactly the opposite of the estrangement Pirandello's characters experience when gazing upon themselves. While the "mirror stage" comes in infancy before the Self "is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other" and thus "before its social determination" (2), the Pirandellian mirror reveals the socialized individual in the process of fleeing from society. Any number of Pirandello's protagonists effectively isolate themselves from the world: from Mattia Pascal to Enrico IV, from Serafino Gubbio to Vitangelo Moscarda.10

Another interpretation of the essay gaining currency, although without compelling reasons, suggests that umorismo, with its multiple angles of perception, is a Bakhtinian or dialogic form of art.11 However, since Bakhtin held that social and class relations are dialectical, a comparison between his thought and umorismo sheds little light on Pirandello's ahistorical notion of the Self, which operates on the assumption that the human mind has a structural quality (the split Self) unaffected by external events. Pirandello makes a minimal effort to historicize umorismo, claiming that Copernicus, the sixteenth-century astronomer, was "uno dei più grandi umoristi, senza saperlo" [one of the greatest humorists without knowing it] (156) because he punctured our inflated notion of humanity, thus changing forever our self-perception. But, on closer inspection, we see that Pirandello's argument barely touches on the evolution of modern society and its impact on the individual, while he dwells at length on the nature of the individual mind. Moreover, he proposes no solution to the "crisis of modern consciousness," nor does he theorize the possibility of
one, instead electing only to represent the psyche's turmoil by means of umorismo. Far from responding to Pirandello's sense of crisis, Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist argue that Bakhtin's dialogism celebrates alterity: it is a merry science, a *fröhliche Wissenschaft* of the other. As the world needs my alterity to give it meaning, I need the authority of others to define, or author, myself .... The fact that we can never achieve full presence, a unitary identity complete in itself, either in immediate experience of ourselves or in the logical rigors of dialectical thought, is not to be lamented. (65-6)

In a rarely cited article on *L'umorismo*, Umberto Eco argues convincingly that Pirandello does a very poor job indeed of defining humor because his definition is far too inclusive, such that the essay could be titled “Everything (but Nothing Else)” (165). However, after this joke and a few others, Eco offers his own original observation: that the real essence of Pirandello's *umorismo* is most cogently stated by someone else—by Brecht, when discussing his concept of alienation, *Verfremdung*. According to Eco, the Brechtian artist adopts the following strategy: “I must show what happens to me as if it didn't happen to me, or as if it were not true or, finally, as if it happened to someone else” (168). If this is a false characterization of Brecht's idea of alienation, it is an apt formulation of *umorismo*, and becomes even more illuminating, I suggest, when recast in psychological terms: in the specular moment, when the unconscious is engaged, the Self spies something foreign and other in itself, and resorts to a number of distancing mechanisms, the most common in Pirandello's case being a kind of detached mirth in the face of high anxiety. As we shall see, Pirandello's goal in *L'umorismo* is to show that this estrangement has a crucial function in the artistic process.

The operative mechanism of *umorismo* is a faculty Pirandello calls *riflessione* which spontaneously reflects, or mirrors, the various competing and contradicting sentiments in the artist's mind. The creative result is a unitary work of art which expresses incoherence. Ultimately, one could argue that Pirandellian art is not about representing objective reality, but is a means for represent-
ing the psyche’s incoherent and illogical perceptions of reality. This principle is clearly derived from Pirandello’s sense that soul is not one, but a combination of many different and conflicting personalities. “Le varie tendenze che contrassegnano la personalità fanno pensare sul serio che non sia una anima individuale.” [The various tendencies which characterize the personality lead us to think in earnest that it is not composed of a single soul.] In support of this rudimentary notion of the unconscious, he cites the “meravigliosi esperimenti psico-fisiologici” [marvelous psycho-physiological experiments] discussed in Alfredo Binet’s Les altérations de la personnalité of 1892 (150). But in the mind of the ordinary artist, Pirandello explains, riflessione is ignored, which implies that the unconscious is thoroughly suppressed. “D’ordinario, nell’artista, nel momento della concezione [of art], la riflessione si nasconde, resta, per così dire, invisible” [Ordinarily, in the moment of art’s conception, riflessione is hidden within the artist and remains invisible] (126). The result is traditional art, which abstracts and concentrates, representing “l’idealità essenziale e caratteristica” [the essential and characteristic perfection] (157) of a thing or person. For the humorist, on the contrary,

le cause nella vita, non sono mai così logiche, così ordinate, come nelle nostre comuni opere d’arte, in cui tutto è, in fondo, combinato, congegnato, ordinato ai fini che lo scrittore s’è proposto. L’ordine? La coerenza? Ma se noi abbiamo dentro quattro, cinque anime in lotta fra di loro: l’anima instintiva, l’anima morale, l’anima affettiva, l’anima sociale?

[one’s motives in life are not so logical and ordered as they appear in our everyday works of art, in which, at bottom, everything is arranged, contrived and ordered according to the ends intended by the writer. Order? Coherence? But what if we have within us four or five souls, each at odds with the others: the instinctive, the moral, the affective, the social?] (157)

Humorist art, which acknowledges the split Self and the fundamentally irrational character of the psyche, is organized by principles diametrically opposed to those governing traditional art.
Here, and throughout his essay, Pirandello argues that the humorist’s art (i.e., his own) is more compelling than traditional efforts precisely because it incorporates the inner struggle that informs the Self.

At this point, one might ask how Pirandello understands the nature of the split? In other words, what message does the unconscious wish to send, by means of riflessione, and why does the conscious mind ordinarily try to repress the message at all costs? Armed with Freudian theory, one could surmise that taboo desires and castration anxieties, such as those which give rise to the Oedipus complex, are relegated to the unconscious, and that these desires and anxieties are the message. But Pirandello, pre-Freudian that he is, only knows that the unconscious “appare orrido nella sua crudezza impassibile e misteriosa” [appears horrid in its impassive, mysterious harshness]; that it is “un vuoto strano, come un arresto del tempo e della vita, come se il nostro silenzio interiore si sprofondasse negli abissi del mistero” [a strange void, like a stoppage of time or life, as if an interior silence plunged us into mysterious abysses]; that underneath consciousness “c'è qualcos'altro, a cui l'uomo non può affacciarsi, se non a costo di morire o d'impazzire” [there is something else which man cannot face, except at the cost of death or madness] (153). We might well say that at the center of Pirandello's art are a mysterious void and a looming threat of madness. Italo Svevo, by contrast, is Freudian in his conception of consciousness. In La coscienza di Zeno [The Confessions of Zeno], Zeno's behavior is hardly a mystery to us: we know that his obsessive behaviors arise from profound oedipal anxieties; we know, for example, that his sublimated desire for his mother drives him to smoke obsessively because he unconsciously associates cigarettes with his father's phallic power. Unlike Svevo's playful resignation, Pirandello's humor, as we shall see in Il fu Mattia Pascal, is marked by a frenetic and insistent search for the Self.

* * *

The Pirandellian mirror is the first-person narrator's most important tool for self-discovery in Il fu Mattia Pascal, written just four years before the essay on humor. This is the tale of a
fellow with a lazy eye (amblyopia, in medical parlance) who leaves home, only to return, and who, when thought dead, takes the opportunity to change his identity, only to attempt unsuccessfully to reclaim it. Clearly, Mattia's journey of return is not only real but also psychological. Read this way, the novel is a bildungsroman of dysfunction because it renders impossible the coherent formation of Mattia's personality.\(^{14}\)

From the outset, he is a happy-go-lucky fellow, even though he has suffered personal tragedies like the death of his father and the robbery of his inheritance by the unscrupulous Malagna. Eventually, an extremely disagreeable mother-in-law (Marianna Pescatore), an impetuous aunt, his pregnant wife's morning sickness and financial difficulties all contribute to Mattia's crisis, speeding his entry into the painful world of adulthood. His "maturazione" ["ripening"], the title of the novel's fifth chapter, is nearly complete when he comes to believe in the need for laughter in confronting adversity. After a brawl involving his mother-in-law's sharp finger nails and some very sticky bread dough, Mattia is transformed and now able to laugh at his troubles by viewing them with an almost neurotic sense of detachment, as if he is watching these ills befall someone else.

Posso dire che da allora ho fatto il gusto a ridere di tutte le mie sciagure e d'ogni mio tormento. *Mi vide* [my italics], in quell'istante, attore d'una tragedia che più buffa non si sarebbe potuta immaginare: mia madre, scappata via, così, con quella matta [his aunt]; mia moglie di là, che... lasciamola stare!; Marianna Pescatore, lì per terra; e io, io che non avevo più pane, quel che si dice pane, per il giorno appresso, io con la barba tutta impastocchiata, il viso sgraffiato, grondante non sapevo ancora se di sangue o di lagrime per il troppo ridere. Andai ad accertarmene allo specchio. Erano lagrime; ma ero anche sgraffiato bene. Ah quel mio occhio, in quel momento, quanto mi piacque! Per disperato, mi s'era messo a guardare più che mai altrove per conto suo.

[I can say that, from then on, I took pleasure in laughing at all of my calamities and torments. In that instant, I saw myself an actor in the most comic tragedy that was ever imagined: my
mother, gone, just like that, with that nut [his aunt]; my wife over there, who . . . leave her be! Marianna Pescatore, there on the floor; and I, who had not the next day's bread, neither literally nor figuratively, but a flour-covered beard and a scratched face, moist I did not yet know with blood or tears from too much laughter. I went to the mirror to find out: it was tears but I was also badly scratched. In that moment, my eye pleased me to no end! Out of desperation, it began, on its own accord, to gaze about more than ever.] (361)

In keeping with Pirandello's privileging of vision over the other senses, Mattia develops his humorist perceptions while standing before a mirror, the literal site of riflessione, where he thoroughly objectifies himself. Since he is narrating events forever fixed in the past, there is at play here a second mirror as well, or perhaps one could call it a spyglass of temporal distance. Imagining himself an actor in a "tragedia . . . buffa" [comic tragedy], complete with grotesque blood and flour make-up, he re-presents his life as though it were a theatrical scene and, consequently, adds yet another layer of perception that further undermines the gravity of the situation and distances the narrator from his story. Pirandello would have us believe that umorismo, in rendering visible a previously unobserved gulf between our experiences and our interpretation of them, creates nothing less than a new genre which occupies the shadowy, paradoxical space between tragedy and comedy. If the mind is like a cracked mirror, art must represent the multiple shards of the Self. Thus Mattia's aberrant eye, which focuses where ever it pleases, acts as a physical manifestation of the split Self, giving the character a kind of double vision that mimics the effects of riflessione. Pirandellian self-consciousness is precisely this: not merely living, but watching oneself live with an objectifying detachment, as if with an eye not quite one's own.

However, at this point in the novel Mattia is not a fully mature humorist in that he does not yet accept the inevitability of the split Self and the resultant self-estrangement. He attempts to flee his family and adopt another identity, becoming Adriano, only to finally admit his inability to escape from his incoherent, conflicted Self. Though Adriano may be viewed as Mattia's
double, or mirror image, he never amounts to more than a detour through the problem of one's outward, social identity on Mattia's road back to the more pressing concern over self-perception. In my view, against most readings of the text, the social and legal circumstances prompting Adriano/Mattia's decision to return home are not determinate but only plot expedients. Indeed, the question of social norms, and whether one can live outside them, seems trivial in comparison to Pirandello's engagement with the turn-of-the-century debate about the nature and integrity of the Self. To serve Pirandello's ends, Mattia's journey must conclude in his hometown where the problems of self-representation are most insistently interrogated. By the end of the story, the "late" Mattia Pascal, who virtually lives outside society, is the perfect incarnation of the Pirandellian humorist-artist. Now resigned to the inherently fragmented nature of human identity, and conscious of his dual status as Self and Other, Mattia is able to act as both narrator and the focal point of his own humorist scrutiny within the novel's autobiographical structure. However, Mattia's brand of self-knowledge does not lead to closure, as it would in canonical nineteenth-century novels like I promessi sposi, whose maturing protagonists purportedly come to know themselves more profoundly and to recognize Truth. In fact, Pirandello's work forcefully rejects the realist project by demonstrating that the late nineteenth-century rise of philosophical relativism is firmly tied to the insoluble problem of self-representation.

This analysis of Il fu Mattia Pascal invites us to consider in similar fashion other Pirandellian texts which feature estranging encounters with mirror images. In his reading of Uno, nessuno e centomila [One, None and a Hundred Thousand] Gian-Paolo Biasin asserts that Moscarda's mirror-gazing induces him to "try to see himself as an other than self," and that such self-scrutiny "leads toward madness" (102). At the conclusion of Act I of Enrico IV [Henry IV], the mad king's carefully maintained delusions of eternal youth are threatened when he regards his portrait painted years before. Suffering from interior conflicts and repressed memories, the characters of Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore [Six Characters in Search of an Author] hope that the actors representing them will project coherent and palatable images of the characters' personalities. The character of the father voices Pirandello's
over-riding concern with the interior torments of modern consciousness, saying

Il dramma per me è tutto qui, signore: nella coscienza che ho, che ciascuno di noi—veda—si crede «uno» ma non è vero: è «tanti», signore, «tanti» secondo tutte le possibilità d'essere che sono in noi.

[For me, the drama is all here, sir: in the consciousness I have, that each one of us—look—it seems to be single but it's not: it's many, sir, many, in accordance with all the ways of being that are within us.] (61)

* * *

If we exclude Pirandello's attempt to map out a literary history of humor, L'umorismo is well-conceived and describes very closely the important qualities of the author's fictional works. However, there are a number of points where the essay is inconsistent in its theoretical presentation. I will discuss just one inconsistency as a means of summarizing my own claims for umorismo. The most often cited pages in the entire essay, which attempt to explain with precision the mechanism of umorismo, are also some of the most misleading. Here, Pirandello defines the comic as “l'avertimento del contrario” ["the perception of the opposite"], the awareness that something is not as it appears to be, or as it should be. By contrast, when riflessione is in operation, the humorist-artist brings human compassion and sympathy to the situation; he or she does not merely laugh but cries as well, thereby reaching “il sentimento del contrario” ["the sentiment of the opposite"] (127). Pirandello's famous example here is the vecchia signora [old lady] who tries most unconvincingly to look young, so that she might sustain the love of her much younger husband. We laugh at how ridiculous the signora looks, but, Pirandello explains, if we put her individual predicament in the context of the human condition, (that we all grow old and die, that we all need love) then we can not help but sympathize with her. Thus, umorismo seems to stake out a high moral ground in its insistence on sympathy and compassion.
However, what remains unsaid about this famous example is that it fails in nearly every respect to capture the essence of umorismo as Pirandello practices it in Il fu Mattia Pascal and elsewhere. In fact, Pirandello's art seldom emphasizes a moralizing sympathy for the tribulations of others, and seldom turns on the ability of Pirandello's characters to identify profoundly with the Other. On the contrary, I have argued that riflessione is a mechanism for detachment and distancing, and that the sight of the Other inside the Self leads to estrangement. Thus, in this conception of the Self, the external Other is only secondary. There is plenty of unintended irony in Pirandello's seizing on a figure, the signora, with whom he hardly identifies, when Mattia Pascal is estranged from himself, the person with whom he can most closely identify. Recall that in the moment of Mattia's identity crisis, the women in his tortured life (i.e., pregnant wife, mother-in-law, aunt and mother) appear to be the source of his alienation: his flight from home is spurred by an inability to negotiate the female world which engulfs him. More compelling than Pirandello's claim that umorismo demands a sympathetic response is Maggie Giinsberg's assertion that, subtextually at least, the signora functions as an abhorrent figure of "the post-menopausal woman" (9). In any event, it should be stressed that the true Pirandellian drama is interior: in the case of the signora, it would unfold if we, as the audience or readers, witnessed her psychological decomposition as she scrutinized her image, struggling with the fact that her self-representation is a rather shabby and unconvincing work of art.

But one might well ask if Pirandello could apply his mirror principle to the signora or any woman. Since in the Western tradition the image of woman is the image of the Other par excellence, can it also be the image of the Self? Luce Irigaray, an influential theoretician of psychoanalytic feminism, weighs in against that possibility when she states that "we can assume that any theory of the subject has been appropriated by the masculine" (133). In other words, a dominant, male perspective tends to devise false universals, ignoring the probability that woman is psychologically different from man, that her relationship to the Other might be complicated by a deep sense that she is the Other. Elaborating on this male solipsism, Irigaray argues that "The
Copernican revolution has yet to have its final effects in the male imaginary" (133). Indeed, the obsession of umorismo with the internal Other, with what Irigaray calls "his other," seems to support her claim that the male subject, be it Pirandello's, Freud's or Lacan's, is not fully de-centered and fractured after all.

The [male] subject henceforth will be multiple, plural, sometimes di-formed, but it will still postulate itself as the cause of all the mirages that can be enumerated endlessly and therefore put back together again as one. A fantastic phantasmatic fragmentation. A destruc(tura)tion in which the "subject" is shattered, scuttled, while still claiming surreptitiously that he is the reason for it all. (135)

This egoism is undoubtedly relevant in Pirandello's case, despite his homage to Copernicus, in that both Mattia's search, and the analytical one carried out in the essay, are not searches for the external Other but quests for the anguished Self. Modernist irony abounds but the faint outlines of heroic narrative remain intact. Pirandello proclaims the dissolution of the individual psyche, yet, by making this disintegration the focus of his art, he ultimately reinforces the centrality of the individual consciousness in Western culture since the Enlightenment.

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NOTES

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1 The essay is in two parts: the first analyzes the word umorismo and cites examples of it in the works of ancient and modern writers. The second, and more valuable part to Pirandello scholars, titled "Essenza, caratteri e materia dell'umorismo," explains the function of umorismo in the creative process.

2 Illiano and Testa, xiii. "L'umorismo . . . has long been recognized as the most complete statement of Pirandello's esthetic" (viii).

3 On the other hand, his appreciation of Don Quixote makes more sense in that Cervantes' novel is thoroughly self-reflexive in regard to its own literary artifice, a significant feature of Pirandello's novels and plays. See Alter, 1-29.

4 For other critiques emphasizing the Self-Other dichotomy in L'umorismo, see Donati, 11-33, and Janeva, 161-67.

5 With regard to umorismo and "the crisis of modern consciousness," see Caputi, 1-10 and 31-47.
6 See Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious (1905). In a 1927 essay, Freud describes humor as “laughter in the teeth of disaster,” a formulation strikingly similar to Pirandello’s. See Gutwirth, 81.

7 See also Croce’s Estetica (90–3). Pirandello attacks Croce’s aesthetics in the second edition of L’umorismo (1920) in which most of the revisions are anti-Crocean in nature. He aggressively critiques Croce’s interpretation of how the reality is perceived by the spirit and of how art functions to express this reality. He accuses Croce of having distorted the creative act by limiting it to the single faculty of intuition. In fact, the Crocean formula is sometimes summarized “intuition equals expression,” and therefore the artistic production originates from a singular spirit and is a thing of beauty, reason and harmony. Pirandello, on the other hand, felt that many faculties of the spirit, and not just one, collaborate spontaneously in the creative act.

In his response to the L’umorismo, Croce noted the fundamental philosophical gaps in Pirandello’s argument and disparaged the style of the essay, which constantly alternates between theoretical and intuitive modes. While Croce relied on logic as an organizing principle, Pirandello was profoundly opposed to it because he felt that it merely served to gloss over the contradictions within the mind itself. Although the two men held certain unreconcilable beliefs, their visions shared common ground: they were both strongly opposed to positivism, had similar roots in idealism, and had faith in the ability of the spirit to create art without merely imitating nature, even though they did not agree on the mechanics of this process. See especially Caserta and Illiano.

8 All translations are my own.

9 See, for example, Lucente, 116, 154; and Radcliff-Umstead, 110, 261, 292.

10 If Lacan’s pre-oedipal stage (i.e., the imaginary) sheds little light on the nature of umorismo, a more promising route is still untried: an analysis of Pirandello’s poetics in relation to Lacan’s version of the Oedipal conflict (i.e., the symbolic) which identifies the father with language. Brockelman writes that “with the acceptance of the father’s authority as the authority of language itself, the child faces, in the sign, a different kind of “object,” an object which, constituted by the absolute “cut” between signifier and signified, itself preserves absence. . . . The gap between signifier and signified creates the “space” that eludes every representation. Thus, for Lacan the rift between signifier and signified reproduces the representational alienation of the subject from itself” [my emphasis] (218).

11 Donati, 81–92; Luperini, 48.

12 In fact, Brecht’s notion of alienation, owing a great deal to Marx, is a societal condition rather than one of individual psychology. According to The Cambridge Companion to Brecht, Verfremdung is a “repertoire of estranging effects” by means of which the playwright aims “to produce a double perspective on events and actions so as at once to show their present contradictory nature and their historical cause or motivation. . . . Verfremdung would therefore produce a jolt of surprise and illumination, as the familiar and predictable were not only historicised and seen afresh but ‘seen through’”(191).

13 A more ample citation of the passage follows. “Ordinariamente—ho già
detto altrove, e qui m'è forza ripetere—l'opera d'arte è creata dal libero movimento della vita interiore che organa le idee e le immagini in una forma armoniosa, di cui tutti gli elementi han corrispondenza tra loro e con l'idea-madre che le coordina. . . La coscienza, in somma, non è una potenza creatrice, ma lo specchio interiore in cui il pensiero si rimira; si può dire anzi ch'essa sia il pensiero che vede sé stesso, assistendo a quello che esso fa spontaneamente. E, d'ordinario, nell'artista, nel momento della concezione, la riflessione si nasconde, resta, per così dire, invisibile: è, quasi, per l'artista una forma del sentimento" (126).

14 Luperini, 59.

15 The question of vision is clearly more metaphorical than real. As a child, Mattia is forced to wear glasses in order to straighten out his wandering eye, but he cannot stand it. "Erano per me, quegli occhiali, un vero martirio. A un certo punto, li buttai via e lasciai libero l'occhio di guardare dove gli piacessi meglio" (333). Mattia's fragmented perception is an integral part of his character that cannot be cured.

16 Consider, as well, Dombroski's analysis: "The story Moscarda tells revolves around a fundamental principle: the position of the subject as the object of analysis and the ongoing process of verifying the radically divergent relationship between the narrative 'I' and the Other—the 'you' whom Moscarda continually addresses" (381).

17 Anglophone readers have missed the psychological dimensions of this passage, and of the play as a whole, because the most widely available translation, Eric Bentley's, translates "coscienza" as "conscience" leaving the reader to surmise that mere moral weakness is at the center of Pirandello's drama (231).

18 As an example of the supposed sympathy engendered by riflessione, Pirandello erroneously claims that Giuseppe Giusti's poem, "Sant'Ambrogio," is a fine instance of umorismo because the poet's hatred of the occupying Austrian soldiers is tempered by his realization that they are also "poveretti addogliati e derisi" (158; see also 128-9). While the poem underscores the fact that human affairs are never black and white, "Sant'Ambrogio" can hardly be said to decompose our perceptions of consciousness in the manner that Pirandello's works do.


