

The Misplaced I: *Il fu Mattia Pascal* and the Spectrality of Identity

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To live an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life: to be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others, to be deprived of an “objective” relationship with them that comes from being related to and separated from them through the intermediary of a common world of things, to be deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself.

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

What we know about ourselves may very well be just the combination of how others perceive us in various social settings. There is a wonderful line from V. S. Naipaul’s 1967 novel, *The Mimic Men* that reads, “We become what we see of ourselves in the eyes of others” (25). The identity of any given individual, then, may constitute a complete and utter fabrication often grounded in parody—a simulacrum, or inauthenticity if you will. Luigi Pirandello’s *Il fu Mattia Pascal* takes the notion of one man’s identity and scatters it over the murky terrain of an untimely, yet astonishingly convenient death. Pirandello’s novel shows us that not only can we not go home again, but it may also be impossible to completely flee our own identities and start over. This essay argues that our identity ultimately controls our being in ways rendered by Pirandello comically tragic, and that our lives can be read as inherently textual. This textuality is demonstrated through Mattia Pascal’s attempts to make a new life for himself outside the seemingly constraining provinces. By “extracting” himself from life, Mattia Pascal attempts to divorce himself from any and all personal accountability.

As Antonio Gramsci states in one of his reviews of Pirandello's plays, "The truth in itself does not exist. There is only one's interpretation of it, and this interpretation is true when there is enough evidence to permit men of good will to arrive at it" (81). Gramsci is referring to what he calls "Pirandello's parable," but one can just as well recognize his own notion of hegemony at work within the parable. *Il fu Mattia Pascal* deconstructs the concept of identity, both personally and collectively, by challenging the self-representation of ourselves in the social world. That is to say, our dependency on the social world to inform our identities takes precedence over who we see ourselves as in our own homes. The "truth" of one's identity is determined by how one is perceived by others. Despite the fact that one may resist this notion at first, one slowly (or quickly, depending on the circumstances) comes to realize that he or she has taken on the role of an identity that others have laid out. The social spills over into the private, and in this incredibly Marxist idea of identity one finds oneself at the mercy of the public realm. It is within the polis as such and not the private realm where we find our true selves. Yet, that public self, when interpreted in this way, forms the very basis of an authentic identity. That is, through the public realm our identities reveal themselves as socially determined constructions. If we are to take into consideration the Marxian formula that "social being determines consciousness"¹ as our starting point, the inauthenticity of a socially determined identity begins to assume a greater significance. The private lives we lead and the identities that go along with those lives increasingly withdraw into the background as our social identities become more dominant. In the end it may be that we are wholly dependent upon socially-determined consciousness and are ourselves in name only.

The resistance to such a determination or imposition of identity on the self is fairly evident throughout *Il fu Mattia Pascal*. Pascal's determination to resist the imposition of identity forces him to attempt to alter fate by taking control of the uncontrollable. Pascal does this through the act of writing. One of the fundamental aspects that informs my reading of this novel is that Mattia Pascal is writing all of this down after the fact. What we are reading is Pascal's attempt to put into some order a life that has, since the death of his father, been in a constant state of decay and chaos. Writing, in this sense, becomes Pascal's only way to domesticate his life, to force it into some kind of manageable form. Throughout the entire narrative he continually re-iterates that he is "outside of life." As a writer he further detaches himself by assuming the "role" of an omniscient author—an author, moreover, who can re-write his life and ultimately bring about another ending. The themes explored by Pirandello in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* are perhaps first explored here. Themes of detachment, alienation, and unconventionality pervade the discourse of the novel in a way that lays the groundwork for Pirandello's later work.

It is with the concept of unconventionality that I would most like to pause over here. The correspondence of identity and narrative form constructs a life in various ways. In a sense, we all narrate our lives based upon how we would like to see ourselves in the world. The narration of our lives, turning existence into a story that can be read and thus interpreted, is a decidedly *public* exercise. Narration needs an audience, and the reception of our narratives by the socially-specific audiences begins to take on a greater role in the creative process of narrating identities. When Mattia Pascal sits down to write

his memoir he is attempting to gain control over his life in a way that has otherwise been impossible for him. As A. L. de Castris notes in his article “The Experimental Novelist:”

The consciousness of living is, then, the new dimension in which Mattia Pascal moves. Life is an absurd prison of vain, provisional forms whose result for humanity is oppressive and alienating; society rivets man to a false individuation that warps his wishes and will, thereby breaking up his unity of consciousness into a deceitful multiplicity. He therefore rebels, escapes, refuses conventions and the artifice of a hated mask. (93)

However, as *Il fu Mattia Pascal* clearly demonstrates, rebellion can only take one so far. To rebel, to refuse the confining boundaries of convention, as Mattia Pascal does throughout most of the book, would be to completely leave aside any notion of a “model behavior.” It is perhaps only through conventional form that our boundaries can be clearly drawn. To transgress those boundaries (again, as Mattia Pascal does) would only invite one to live spectrally, without any ties to community or place. Without these ties one would necessarily find oneself “outside of life,” and thus, beyond the *protection* and *security* of citizenship. To place oneself beyond citizenship, one becomes nothing more than an ephemeral memory tossed about on the wind of grief. But grief itself is, for the most part, ephemeral; that is, except for the exile. The grief experienced by the exile is a constant reminder that he or she cannot return to the safety and security of the homeland. Mattia Pascal’s exile is more complicated, more grief-stricken than most. The world thinks him dead, and as such he must continue to move about the world in a ghost-like state; he is neither here nor there, neither alive nor dead. What then remains of his “old”

identity is the name and the dates on a tombstone to stand as witness to that name as having passed through the lives of those he or she once encountered.

I draw your attention to the very end of the novel. In the Miragno Cemetery the tombstone contains a name, "Mattia Pascal," as well as a short message. What are conspicuously absent are dates. We are told that the stone was placed as a marker by "grieving fellow citizens." Ironically, the body in the ground is a stranger, one with no name or personal narrative. Pascal's narrative is, as the lack of dates testifies, unfinished. The stone as monument is therefore not only inadequate, it marks the death of a false man. Mattia Pascal becomes the name of an inauthentic specter destined to roam restlessly through the world in a state of errancy. One cannot rest while the remains of a stranger has taken over one's name. Yet, paradoxically, one cannot take part in a life either. This condition of spectrality is not tied to a specific place or title (the tomb stone states Pascal's occupation as "librarian,") but to a name. This is where the notion of errancy enters into the narrative. Errancy etymologically means "to stray, or wander." Pascal has wandered not only beyond the community he has called home (with all its conventional roles; son, husband, son-in-law, employee, father) in a profound sense. He is essentially a failure in all the roles he attempts to play. As a husband, as a friend, as a father he fails to live up to an ethical standard that would ultimately situate him as a responsible, productive citizen. If anything, Pascal disrupts the harmony of the domestic worlds he finds himself entangled with. His failure as a productive citizen constitutes an errancy on the most social level. By "productive citizen" I mean a citizen who contributes to the community rather than feeds off it. It is clear that Pascal's contribution to the overall good of the community is minimal. As Pascal explains, "I began looking

for some kind of occupation, to provide for the family's most pressing needs. I was no good at anything, and the reputation I had won by my youthful exploits and my idleness certainly didn't inspire anyone to give me a job" (33). Pascal's failure as a productive citizen does, however, leave him with some sense of responsibility. He feels guilty at having left himself and his mother at the mercy of the Widow Pescatore.

Mattia Pascal's guilt over having placed his mother in this dire predicament is the only thing that keeps him tethered to any conception of what it means to be human. Guilt is perhaps the overarching human emotion. It pervades our being in ways incomprehensible and strange. This emotion, this uncanniness, seeks a cure. Therefore, when burdened with guilt we intend to atone for our "sins" by attempting to rectify them. For a time Pascal does feel guilt and he does search for a way to end his mother's suffering. Yet, as we discover, once his mother dies he has nothing left to tie him to the ethical *potentialities* of what it is that makes us human. As a result Pascal sees himself more and more as an actor playing a part. The domestic situation Pascal finds himself trapped within begins to take on the connotations of a farce. He begins to see himself as an actor playing the lead role in that farce:

At that moment I saw myself as an actor in a tragedy that could hardly have looked more comical: my mother had run out with that madwoman; my wife was in the other room busy...we'll skip that! Marianna Pescatore there on the ground; and I myself...not knowing where to turn for my daily bread. I was quite literally without bread for the morrow. My beard was all floury, my face scratched and wet—whether with blood or tears of laughter I didn't yet know. I went to the

mirror to examine myself. The wet came from tears, but I was also thoroughly scratched. Ah that eye of mine, how I liked it at that moment! (38)

Pascal's realization that he is in a situation that is far beyond his control does not occur to him until later. He has, at this point, duped himself into thinking that he can still cure the situation. Yet, like the damaged eye staring back at him from the mirror, his failure will soon be complete. His only recourse, as he later comes to discover, is to remove himself from life and live spectrally.

That a life can be lived spectrally is perhaps nowhere as evident then in the chapter "Adriano Meis." After Pascal comes to the realization that he is thought dead by those in his home town, and that he is now a "free man," he begins to delude himself into thinking that changing identities is as easy as changing trains. "My next, and immediate step was to make a new man of myself, not so much to deceive the others, who had chosen to deceive themselves with a carelessness perhaps not deplorable in my case, but certainly not praiseworthy. No, this next step was taken rather to obey Fortune and to fulfill my own personal need" (79). Pascal's realization leading to this "next step" is entirely consistent with his previous actions. That is, the next logical step is a completely selfish one. Without regard to his family and responsibilities he has left behind, Pascal believes that Fortune has opened a door for him; a door that allows him to step out of his old life, a life completely determined by his entanglement with others, and into a new entanglement-free mode of existence. "I was alone now, and no one on earth could be more alone than I, with every tie dissolved, every obligation removed, free, new, completely my own master, without the burden of my past, and with the future before me,

which I could shape as I pleased” (79). But, what Pascal fails to realize is that no one can really escape the burdens of their past any more than we can escape ourselves.

Our ties to the past, to family, upbringing, and community, determine the people we grow into in later life. The past self is indissolubly linked to the present self, and our attempts to change that or escape, however noble the reasons may be, will ultimately prove to be an impossibility. Moreover, our actions have consequences, and these consequences are, at this time, completely absent from Pascal’s consciousness. His sole aim, his sole mission, is to begin again and live spectrally and without obligation in the world. With Mattia Pascal thought dead by all who know him he no longer is obliged to give an account of himself. His ties to the world of the living have been severed, he thinks, irrevocably. However, what Pascal mistakenly neglects is the fact that when one dies one leaves things behind.

The first thing Pascal does after hearing news of his “death” is alter his physical appearance by having his beard trimmed very short. He decides to let his hair grow long and to wear dark glasses to hide the tell-tale damaged eye—a key to his past self. Yet, the most thought-provoking aspect of this chapter is his attempt to construct a life for a name he comes to by chance; Adriano Meis. Although Fortune has given him the opportunity to abandon his old self, and given his new name, Pascal is competent enough to realize that he must construct a new past for himself so as not to arouse suspicion. What follows is Pascal assuming yet another role, that of author, by constructing, fictionalizing and textualizing a past. The function of narrative is at its playful best in this scene. Pascal, again traveling by train, sets himself the task of constructing a new past, a “possible past,” if you will. “I set myself thinking about Adriano Meis, imagining

a past for him, asking myself who was my father, where had I been born, etc. I did this calmly, with an effort to see everything clearly and fix it all in my mind, down to the smallest detail” (85). Like an author, Pascal begins a narrative construction of a life that will be unlike his in that it will hold the possibility for happiness that his old life did not have.

Yet, as the chapter progresses Pascal begins to realize that his new identity is conditioned by his being forced to live a solitary existence. Not only is he living the life of a fictional person, he is also the only one who knows the truth about the body that had washed up in his home town. Interestingly, it does not take Pascal very long to come to the conclusion that his feelings of exclusion as Mattia Pascal have taken on a new resonance as Adriano Meis. “My real “foreign-ness”, if you want to call it that, was of another kind, and I was the only one who knew it. I was no longer anything; no official records registered me, except the one in Miragno, but then as a dead man and under another name” (90). This condition of being doubly estranged soon wears on Pascal and he decides to search for something more permanent. At the end of this chapter he comes across old man with a puppy. He instantly becomes taken with the puppy, and on impulse, decides to purchase it. However, he quickly surmises that the dog would constitute “a first step towards compromising my freedom” (93). He informs the old man that the price of the dog is too high and walks away. What is significant is that Pascal begins to understand the conditions for his new found freedom. The price of that freedom is being that of being forced to live an isolated existence that does not allow for companionship of any kind—even a dog’s. The chapter ends with Pascal walking away

with his hat down over his eyes while the rain begins to fall; alone, unloved, and helplessly remote.

The only cure for such a *condition of spectrality* is writing as a form, a much more “living” form, of monumentalization. This brings us back to the beginning of *Il fu Mattia Pascal*. The reader is told quite explicitly that the idea to write his memoir is suggested to Mattia Pascal by Don Eligio. “The idea, or rather the suggestion that I should write this book was given to me by my reverend friend, Don Eligio Pellegrinotto, the present librarian of the Boccamazza collection, to whom I will entrust [thereby entombing the manuscript within the collection, which in turn is entombed within the library at that] this manuscript as soon as I have finished it, if I ever do” (1). The English translation, as great as I think it is, fails to carry across the Italian word “*custodia*,” implying the “custodianship,” the “care” for the manuscript. For the sake of orientation I present the text in the original: “L’idea, o piuttosto, il consiglio di scrivere mi è venuto dal mio reverendo amico don Eligio Pellegrinotto, che al presente ha in *custodia* (emphasis mine) I libri della Boccamazza, e al quale io affido il manoscritto appena sarà terminato, se mai sarà (6). What is implied in the Italian that fails to come across as strongly in the English translation is that the “finished” manuscript will always be beholden (by which I mean to say, a part of) the Boccamazza collection. It becomes just another voice in the crowd, and a voice that remains quite silent until someone comes and dusts off the volume to open and hear the voice (the disembodied voice) of Mattia Pascal once again. Interestingly, the “life” of Mattia Pascal, even in the written form, is beholden to the public realm of the reader. Pascal is doomed to remain forgotten, dead,

unless a reader comes across the manuscript and decides to read it. Once again, existence becomes relevant *only* when it enters into the stream of the social.

The theme of a “living” form of monumentalization is, to my knowledge, first explored by Umberto Mariani in his essay “The One Hundredth Anniversary of a Masterful Novel.” However, what Mariani provocatively suggests is that the discourse of the novel is itself oral. That is, Pascal is not only writing this down, but he is actively engaged in a “live” conversation. As Mariani states early on in his essay, “The listener the narrator talks to is not the reader who might eventually read his book, but a living and present listener who might even interrupt him, ask questions, question his interpretations as Don Pellegrinotto does, and to whom, therefore, the narrator must explain things on the spot, as he *tells* them (19). By “telling” them, the words of Mattia Pascal become more ephemeral. This, it seems now quite clear to me, provides an even richer and more complex layer to my own reading of the novel. Applying Mariani’s claim to my own reading reinforces my thesis that in the end we are really nothing more than a name. Mariani’s reading provides an incredibly theatrical twist on to the function of narrative in the book. The orality of Pascal and Don Pelligrinotto’s conversation, when read in the way that Mariani suggests, becomes increasingly performative, and thus ephemeral. The spoken word is fleeting, while the written word captures time through the process of monumentalization. What we are left with via the written word is an artifact that can be traced, checked, and nailed down.

Because we are never really in complete control of our lives, we rely on the function of narrative to provide some context and meaning to our existence. The first paragraph of the second forward informs the reader, or attempts to justify to the reader,

the importance of narrative in our lives. Narrative is a way to capture time, to transform it into something concrete and stable. Furthermore, narrative gives us the means to not only make some sense out of life, but affords us the opportunity to attempt to control our lives as well. When we engage in narration we are taking an assertive approach to the way we think about the *how* and *why* of existence as such. As de Castris goes on to argue, “For the failure of Mattia Pascal’s anarchic attempt includes not merely the provisional escape of man *from the prison of conventional forms* (emphasis mine), from mystifying society, in search of a genuisness of selfhood that will make him free and master of himself. It includes also, and above all, the discovery of the tragic necessity for that oppressive form and inhuman prison” (94). The necessity of conventional form (and by conventional I mean teleological) is all we have on which to put down our lives and histories. Without it, meaning as such continues to spiral toward some unfathomable depth from which the singularity of a man or a woman cannot hope to emerge. I am suggesting that Pirandello’s attunement to this, especially via a humorous turn, anticipates the absurdity that figures like Camus and Ionesco will develop further decades later.

An aspect of this absurdity is the degree to which we are held accountable to the reputation of our names. Most of us have very little control over the names we are born with. Our names, like the families we are born into, are almost determined by chance. In the third chapter of *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, we are told that Mattia’s father never had a permanent dwelling, or home. Therefore, the “House of Pascal” is one in name only—it’s illusory. Despite the fact that Mattia Pascal the elder owned several properties, he never set up a headquarters from which to conduct his business. “We owned several

houses and farms. A wise and adventurous man, my father *never had a permanent headquarters for his dealings* (emphasis mine). He was always traveling on his boat, buying merchandise of every kind where he found prices best and immediately selling it again where he could make a profit” (5). The fact that Pascal’s father was “always on the move” suggests a transitory existence that is not fundamentally tied to any geographically specific place. The Pascal family does have a home town, but one that they feed off of instead of giving back to. Pascal’s father never had a permanent dwelling, or home. Therefore, his “house” is one in name only. The family name is not necessarily tied to the land. When read in this way the family becomes almost nomadic.

When the father dies, at the young age of 38, the family’s holdings are entrusted to a sinister double-dealer, Batta Malagna. Pascal did not provide for his family by thinking of their future. The point, briefly, is that there is a correspondence between a house and a name. That correspondence for the “House of Pascal” is linked by decay once the father dies. It is apparent that the widow Pascal and her two sons did not have enough common sense to look out for their own interests; a lack which opened the door for someone like Malagna to enter and set in motion the events that make up the narrative.

Further in the novel Pascal comes to the realization that he cannot, as Adriano Meis, take part in society, even though he has been wronged and has found love. Adriano Meis is a citizen of nothing and nowhere. “I [who] had assumed that I could become another man, live another life. Another man, yes, but on condition that I do nothing” (181). Thus the Pirandellian predicament: since Mattia Pascal is “dead” and Adriano Meis is fictitious, neither men are citizens and find themselves in a narrative that

can never conform to the accepted greater social narrative. The memoir that Mattia Pascal is forced to write after his return is really a meditation on a poetics of exclusion. Once again, while narration resumes a conventional model, the memoir, the author remains unconventional, unhomed and contradictory; a concrete name entombed among the spoken words drifting away from us like the smoke of some anonymous cigarette or the forgotten pages of deteriorating manuscript paper.

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¹ For more on this see Marx and Engels's *The German Ideology*.