SELF AND SUICIDE IN PIRANDELLO

Among the most important European novelists and dramatists of the twentieth century, Luigi Pirandello should be of especial interest to Buddhists. Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936, he is best known for plays such as *Six Characters in Search of an Author, Henry IV* and *To Find Oneself,* as well as for his major novels: *The Late Mattia Pascal, The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio* and *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand.* Each of these works challenges conventional notions of personal identity and its attributes; to date, however, readers have not explored the similarities between Pirandello's thought and Buddhism. While it is well-known that our author spent some three years (1889-1891) studying at the University of Bonn, Pirandello scholars have not taken into account the fact that at the time Germany was the European centre for the research into oriental philosophies.[1] It might be assumed that a young student of philology from a small town in Sicily, eager to broaden his intellectual horizon, would have been fascinated by the possibility of discovering a new world beyond the limited vistas offered by a traditional Italian education at that time--and would therefore have seized the opportunity to read the translations that had aroused such interest in intellectual centres of contemporary Germany. Further, there is hard evidence that, even to the end of his life, Pirandello's personal library contained copies of the ancient Indian epic, the *Mahābhārata,* and of Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung.*[2] Our supposition that he had some direct knowledge of Buddhist doctrine is also based on the fact that he referred to *kāmaloka,* thus using the technical term found in Pali, the language in which the Buddha's discourses were written.

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[1] For example, Professor Max Müller began the project of his multi-volume translations of oriental philosophers, entitled *The Sacred Books of the East,* in 1875; Karl E. Neumann published the first comprehensive translations of the Buddha's discourses into a European tongue in 1891; and one of the early standard analyses of Buddhist doctrine, Herman Oldenberg's *Buddha: Sein Leben, seine Lehre, sein Gemeinde* (1881), was reprinted several times and translated into English, Russian and French.

[2] As cited in Alfredo Barbina, *La biblioteca di Luigi Pirandello* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1980), pp. 153 and 159. For a discussion of Schopenhauer's influences on Pirandello, see Chapter 3, "Influssi tedeschi su Pirandello" in Mathias Adank, *Luigi Pirandello e i suoi rapporti col mondo tedesco* (Aarau: Drucker-eigenossenschaf, 1948).

Pirandello is renowned as a master at dramatising the ambiguity of personal existence, but of course he was not the first to discover it. Therefore, if we are to understand the matter fully, it seems to me that we ought to take Buddhist philosophy into consideration, since the Buddha was the first in recorded history to deny the assumption of a stable "self", basing his entire doctrine on that denial. In place of "self" he found *paṭiccasamuppāda,* or "dependent origination", which offers an explanation of the discontent inherent in "samsāric" existence.

The work in which *kāmaloka* is found is *Il fu Mattia Pascal,* where it is used with its authentic meaning as "realm of desire" (in Chapter X, for which see below). This essay seeks to provide an alternative reading of the novel, which I believe lends to it even greater seriousness and a more fundamental relevance to the human condition. But if it truly has "a universal meaning" as Pirandello contends in the "Avvertenza sugli scrupoli della fantasia" (p. 252), then the manoeuvres of its protagonist Mattia or his alter-ego Adriano cannot merely represent aberrant attempts to dodge social responsibilities, as has often been contended; instead, they must dramatise the latent impulse within all of us to *cling to what we take to be ourselves.* As we shall find through an explanation of fundamental Buddhist doctrine, clinging *(upādāna)* is far more pervasive and insidious than what is normally understood by the phrase "smania di vivere".[3] It is this will to live that renders *Il fu Mattia Pascal* tragic, in literary terms, rather than comic.

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[3] "Craving to live": in the Buddha's language, *bhavatanha,* and in Arthur Schopenhauer's, *Wille zum leben.* As a serious reader of Schopenhauer, Pirandello would have undoubtedly come across several references to Buddhism, such as: "If I wished to take the results of my philosophy as the standard of truth, I should have to concede to Buddhism pre-eminence over the others. In any case, it must be a pleasure to me to see my doctrine in such close agreement with a religion that the majority of men on earth hold as their own, for this numbers far more followers than any other." *The World as Will and Representation,* vol. II, Chapter XVII. Further, in *Parerga and Paralipomena,* vol. II, (190) 247; § 115 he writes: "The purpose of the Buddha Sakya-muni ... was ... to free the exalted teaching itself ... and to make its pure intrinsic worth accessible and intelligible ... In this he was marvellously successful, and his religion is therefore the most excellent on earth ...." (Translation by E. F. J. Payne (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974).

The very first words of the novel speculate on the classic Pirandellian theme, the elusive nature of the ego and the personality: "Una delle poche cose, anzi forse la sola ch'io sapessi di certo era questa: che mi chiamavo Mattia Pascal" -- "One of the few things that I knew, or perhaps the only one that I knew for sure, was this: that my name was Mattia Pascal".[4] However, as the story progresses, the protagonist finds that his identity cannot be stated so categorically. A combination of changes brought about both by fate and by his own devise make it impossible for him to determine who or what constitutes his "real self".

The early chapters of the novel recount Mattia's early life, spent in his home town, Miragno. His youth consists of a series of escapades and practical jokes, until all at once he is jolted into maturity: he learns that the executor of his father's estate has embezzled most of the family holdings; he is compelled to marry Romilda, his pregnant girlfriend; and the careless attitude of his life to that point has left him with few opportunities and a family to support. His reputation for irresponsible behaviour makes it impossible to find any job other than that of librarian's assistant in a provincial town where no one reads.

To that point Mattia had always lived without a care in mind, but he must begin to reflect seriously in Chapter V, where he notes that his maturity, like that of fruit brought to market, has been accelerated by bruising. For our purposes, we may say that for the first time he is compelled to confront the pervasive element of *dukkha,* or suffering in existence. His fortunes deteriorate even further after his enforced marriage: his wife does not love him, his mother-in-law is a witch, and his low-wage job is both tedious and futile. Worse, he is soon devastated by the nearly simultaneous deaths of his beloved mother and infant daughter. Suddenly without them, cut off literally and figuratively from any meaningful past or future, he sees nothing left to live for. He can no longer endure life as he knows it:

> After one of the customary scenes with my mother-in-law and my wife, which by now, oppressed and disheartened by the recent double calamity, gave rise to an intolerable disgust, I could no longer put up with the boredom, or rather the loathsomeness of living this way; miserable, with neither the probability nor hope of things getting any better ... without any recompense, even the slightest, for the bitterness, the squalor,

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[4] All translations mine, unless otherwise noted.

the horrible desolation into which I had fallen.[5]

It is at this point that the tragedy of Mattia Pascal begins, only in part because of the suffering he endures. For it is here that he decides to embark on the mission that will change him forever: on the spot he decides to flee Miragno and the wretched life he had led. Thus, even before he commits his first "suicide", he is resolved to find a way out of a shoddy existence characterised by boredom and pain. If we examine the definition of tragedy offered by Oscar Mandel, which gives a high priority to purpose, then the reasons for assigning him such a role will be clearer:

> A work of art is tragic if it substantiates the following situation: *A protagonist who commands our earnest good will is impelled in a given world by a purpose, or undertakes an action, of a certain seriousness and magnitude; and by that very purpose or action, subject to that same given world, necessarily and inevitably meets with grave spiritual or physical suffering.*[6]

The spectacle of suffering, as we know, does much to create our good will towards a character, and by this stage Mattia has endured the loss of the financial security that encouraged his adolescent idleness, as well as the breakdown of his family. But while suffering is a crucial element in the definition, by itself it is not sufficient to constitute tragedy. According to Mandel, the catastrophe must stem from the inevitable failure of the tragic purpose: "Tragedy is always ironic, but it is not because an action *eventually* leads to the opposite of its intention, but because that opposite is grafted into the action from the very beginning."[7]

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[5] Dopo una delle solite scene con mia suocera e mia moglie, che ora, oppresso e fiaccato com'ero dalla doppia recente sciagura, mi cagionavano un disgusto intollerabile; non sapendo più resistere alla noja, anzi allo schifo di vivere a quel modo; miserabile, senza né probabilità né speranza di miglioramento, ... senza alcun compenso, anche minimo, all'amarezza, allo squallore, all'orribile desolazione in cui ero piombato; per una risoluzione, quasi improvvisa, ero fuggito dal paese ... (p. 88).

[6] Oscar Mandel, *A Definition of Tragedy* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 20.

[7] Ibid., p. 24.

Up to the point where Mattia flees Miragno, we may say there has been no real "action" in the novel; like many, during his youth, he accomplishes little, without foreseeing the consequences of his ways. Suddenly, life intervenes with its ennui and suffering, he looks back with regret, and rather than go "on and on like that until he dies", he absconds to Monte Carlo. At first his action is precipitated solely by the desire to escape the domestic hell of life with Romilda and her mother; hence, after he is blessed by a run of good luck at the casino he entertains the notion of returning home.

But his plans take on far greater dimensions after astounding news reaches him in Chapter VII. While on the train, Mattia buys a newspaper and reads an account of his own death: a body found in a mill-race had been identified as his own. After he recovers from the initial shock, it occurs to him that since everyone he knows believes him to be dead, he does not have to return home to resume his previous life. Instead, he can start an utterly different one. Thus, he can continue his pilgrimage, not just in better circumstances, but as a completely *new man* :

> I had to acquire a new attitude towards life, without taking the slightest account of the disastrous experiences of the late Mattia Pascal.
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> It was up to me: I could be and I had to be the architect of my new destiny, to the extent that Fortune would allow me.
>
> "And first of all," I said to myself, "I shall guard my freedom: I shall go as I please through byways that are smooth and ever new ... Little by little I shall improve myself; I shall transform myself with stimulating and patient study, so that, in the end, I may say that I had not only lived two lives, but that I had been two men."[8]

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[8] Io dovevo acquistare un nuovo sentimento della vita, senza avvalermi neppur minimamente della sciagurata esperienza del fu Mattia Pascal. Stava a me: potevo e dovevo esser *l'artefice* del mio nuovo destino, nella misura che la Fortuna aveva voluto concedermi. "E innanzi tutto," dicevo a me stesso, "avrò cura di questa mia libertà: me la condurrò a spasso per vie piane e sempre nuove ... Mi darò a poco a poco una nuova educazione; mi trasformerò con amoroso e paziente studio, sicché, alla fine, io possa dire non solo di aver vissuto due vite, ma d'esser stato due uomini" (p. 114, italics mine).

What could be a more "serious purpose" than this: the total re-formation of one's life, of one's character? Mattia is determined to take advantage of his rare opportunity, to start anew with the proverbial clean slate. And in this new identity *he* will take charge of his destiny, in absolute freedom, setting out for new lands, unencumbered by the errors of the past; he alone will be the artificer of his "self". Significantly, the very first thing he does is to choose a new name for himself -- "Adriano Meis" -- which he compiles from a conversation he overhears on the train. It very much indeed resembles a new "incarnation" for him, with the exhilaration that accompanies every new birth: the possibilities seem endless, and thus his resolution to live not only a more pleasurable existence, but also a better one, seems quite feasible. This time, it will be different.

Life is indeed different as Adriano, but not better. Freedom and independence do not relieve him of frustration and suffering, and as time passes he finds that he is neither as free nor independent as he had thought. Ultimately Mattia fails in his mission, but *not* simply because he makes a bad job of it. From our standpoint, the reasons for Mattia's failure is not so readily apparent as traditional readings suggest. By definition, as soon as he undertakes the quest to become a different person, his failure is inevitable. The implications are stunning: why must his resolution *necessarily* lead to disillusionment?

The reasons are deeply imbedded in the very nature of identity, of "being" itself. According to Buddhism, chief among them is *taṇhā,* which is normally translated as "hunger" or "craving"; but much of the time the craving is so subtle that we are often unaware of it. *Taṇhā,* we may recall, has three distinct aspects to it: *kāmataṇhā,* the desire for pleasure and comfort; *bhavataṇhā,* the desire to be, to continue personal existence; and *vibhavataṇhā,* the desire for "unbeing", the undoing of present circumstances. *Taṇhā* is a more profound phenomenon than what is normally understood by our English renderings. In order to comprehend it fully, we must see it principally in terms of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* nexus, and how it holds a central position in the establishment and continuation of *samsāra.*[9] According to *paṭiccasamuppāda,* being and death are inextricably linked to craving: they are all conascent. The formula runs as follows:

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[9] Literally, the "running on and on" of existence. We must keep in mind that in Buddhist thought the ultimate goal is to put an *end* to existence, not merely to make it "better". See note 38, below.

> With ignorance, [there arise] the determinations, with determinations, consciousness; with consciousness, the senses; with the senses, contact; with contact, feeling; with feeling, craving; with craving, grasping, ["holding onto experience"]; with grasping, being; with being, birth; with birth, aging-and-death, sorrow-lamentation-suffering-grief-and despair come into being.[10]

The doctrine of dependent origination is difficult to fathom, not solely because of the language: it offers, in fact, an entirely different notion of causality.[11] The term *paccayā* expresses the mutual dependence or "co-arising" of all the links in the chain, almost as if they were one and the same. Therefore, if one is present, all will be present; similarly, to eliminate any one link in the chain is to eliminate them all, since none of them can exist independently of the others. We will restrict most of our observations to the elements of *avijjā, saṅkhārā, nāmarūpa, bhava and taṇhā:* ignorance, determination, name-and-form, being and craving.

Usually we understand craving in only one of its aspects, as *kāmataṇhā* or the desire for pleasure. This desire includes not just the erotic, but also those freedom, comfort, and so on which Adriano mentions at the beginning of Chapter VIII. For the Buddhist, then, pleasure is pleasure, and desire is desire -- wanting a beautiful woman is not substantially different from wanting a beautiful panorama or some other sensual pleasure considered "more refined". The drive of *kāmataṇhā* is so latent in us that it is extremely difficult to perceive, let alone abandon, and it becomes even more subtle when it operates in conjunction with the other two aspects of *taṇhā.* For craving is the very

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[10] avijjāpaccayā saṅkharā, saṅkhārāpaccayā viññaṇam, viññaṇapaccayā nāmarūpam, nāmarūpapaccayā saḷāyatanam, saḷāyatanapaccayā phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, vedanāpaccayā taṇhā, taṇhāpaccayā upādānam, upādānapaccayā bhavo, bhavapaccayā jāti, jātipaccayā jaramarana sokaparidevadukkhadomanass'upāyāsā sambhavanti (Mahātaṅhāsamkhaya-sutta, Majjhimanikāya 38).

[11] The importance of this formula cannot be overstated. As we find in the Mahāhatthipadopamasutta (Majjhimanikāya 28): *yo paticcasamuppadam passati so dhammam passati; yo dhammam passati so paṭiccasamuppādam passati:* "He who sees dependent origination sees the truth; he who sees the truth sees dependent origination."

foundation of existence, as Schopenhauer contends:

> Therefore what is always to be found in every animal consciousness ... in fact what is always its foundation, is the immediate awareness of a *longing,* and of its alternate satisfaction and non-satisfaction ... Thus we know that the animal *wills,* and indeed *what* it wills, namely existence, well-being, life, and propagation.[12]

Thus whenever there is *kāmataṇhā,* the craving for sensual pleasures, there are also *bhavataṇhā* and *vibhavataṇhā,* or craving for being and also craving for "unbeing" (we hasten to say that the latter is not necessarily a death-wish). That is, when we crave pleasure, we also crave the continuance of *attā,* or our (imagined) "self" in a pleasant state.[13] The gratification of a sensation or experience reinforces desire and consequently the ego-conceit, as the "I" tries to hold on to the pleasurable as long as possible:

> In the process of "grasping" there is ... [a] "projection" of desire ... whereby the split in experience widens into a definite gap between a subject and an object. "Becoming" or "existence" is the make-believe attempt to bridge this gap, which, however, remains forever unbridged, for the material on which it relies is perpetually crumbling underneath. Yet it somehow props up the concept of an ego--the conceit "I am" *(asmimāna)* ... The ego now finds itself "born" into a world of likes and dislikes, subject to decay-and-death, sorrow,

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[12] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* translated by E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1966): II, 204, Chapter XIX. The similarity between Schopenhauer's *Wille zum Leben* and the concept of *taṇhā* was recognised as early as 1903 by Professor Alessandro Costa. See *Il Buddha e la sua dottrina,* (Torino: Fratelli Bocca Editori), p. 83.

[13] As Pirandello rightly observed, the self is an illusion, but nevertheless "it is if you think it is". [Hence the title of our author's 1918 drama, *Cosíé (se vi pare)*]. This may be applied to *sakkāyādiṭṭhi:* the adherence to the view of personhood. The mirage of a fixed identity is "real" as long as one (mistakenly) sees it is there.

lamentation, pain, grief and despair.[14]

Both the "I" and the clinging *(upādāna)* will continue as long as the experience is felt as pleasure. As Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda notes, desire engenders the ego-conceit. In the context of dhamma language, this means birth, being, and consequently, *dukkha*. Further, explains Lama Anagarika Govinda, because it is "intentional", this birth has far more implications than the physical exit from the womb:

> "Birth" *(jāti)* in the Buddhist sense is not merely a particular single movement in each life ... but the "conception", the "conceiving" that is called forth continually through the senses, which effects the appearance or manifestation ... of existence ... the seizing of the sense-domains ... the continuous materialization and new karmic entanglement.[15]

This "birth-in-experience" is subject to change, impermanence: in Pāli, *anicca*. The first characteristic of existence is stated by the Buddha as *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*. or, "All determinations are impermanent". His statement regarding *anicca* does not simply mean that, as everyone knows, people grow old and things eventually wear out; more importantly, it means that the process of ego-construction based on pleasurable sensation is ever-changing. It is this mutability, along with *dukkha*, that undermines the whole notion of selfhood: being, and its continuance, are found to be dependent on the vicissitudes of pleasure and satisfaction.[16]

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[14] Bhikku Ñanananda, *The Magic of the Mind* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1974), p. 33.

[15] *The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), p. 50.

[16] "The *puthujjana* is first and foremost after feeling and perceiving pleasure. But this pleasurableness (or pleasure) he perceives is **always** something ... in association with the false perception of a permanent subject, which he refers to as 'I' and 'my self'. It is the root-structure of his experience. And this root-structure is the ready-made means (the *fait accompli*) within which he constantly finds the perception of pleasurableness." R.G. de S. Wettimuny, *The Buddha's Teaching and the Ambiguity of Existence* (Colombo: Gunasena & Co., 1978), p. 185.

What happens when the pleasure dissipates or disappears -- as it must, sooner or later? The subject will then of course not crave the furtherance of the present experience, which is what brought about the *asmimāna* in the first place. The experience of "I", based on what the it is going through at the moment, becomes unsatisfactory or even painful, and thus, *sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā,* "All determinations are unsatisfactory". The trouble is that because of the law of *anicca,* any experience, no matter how pleasant, will eventually change, and become unpleasant. At this point, one yearns for "death", or the end of immediate existence now tedious or painful, and this is what we may understand by *vibhavataṇhā,* the craving for "unbeing". In sum, when we experience pleasure, we crave "being", and when we are frustrated, "unbeing" -- the latter as a continuation of existence, but not of the unsatisfactory manifestation we are undergoing at the moment.

Therefore, conventional or "samsāric" existence may be viewed as merely an incessant alternation of birth-and-death, based on sensations. What most take for granted as a constant, substantial self is really a shifting mirage that appears with the onset of desire or aversion. Or, to use Ñaṇananda's image, the personality is a bridge constructed on an ever-crumbling foundation. Adriano perceives its inconsistency at the beginning of Chapter XV: "As day is different from night, so perhaps are we one thing by day, another by night, and a very wretched thing, alas, in both."[17] Thus follows the third characteristic of phenomena, *sabbe dhammā anattā* : "All things are not-self." The persona to which we cling, it turns out, is not a stable reality, but a slippery ambiguity.

With this understanding of the Buddha's analysis of *taṇhā* and its metaphors, we can truly grasp the tragic purpose of *Il fu Mattia Pascal,* and why it is, in many respects, uncomfortable to read. It not only subverts conventional notions of identity, as most readings suggest, but as we shall see, it also calls into question the entire mechanism by which we think and act. For most of the narrative the protagonist, like every *puthujjana* (or, to use an existentialist term, *l'homme moyen sensuel),* longs for fundamental change in his existence. This he hopes to achieve by constructing a new being *on the death of the previous one.* In the context of narrative fiction, there is no better way to communicate this tension between *bhavataṇhā* and *vibhavataṇhā* than

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[17] Com' altro è il giorno, altro la notte, così forse una cosa siamo noi di giorno, altra di notte: miserabilissima cosa, ahimè, così di notte come di giorno.

with the series of "suicides" that Mattia contemplates or commits whenever there is no other way out of *dukkha*, dissatisfaction, suffering. Even his devil-may-care attitude at the Monte Carlo casino is based on the premise that if he loses every centime, there is always an alternative: "there was no lack of trees -- sturdy ones -- in the garden around the gambling house. At the end of the reckoning, I could be hung cheaply enough from one of them, using the belt of my trousers; I would make quite a sight."[18]

This is only the first in a series of references to death and suicide that pervade the novel, and often the option is seen as desirable, as the only way out of the oppression of life. Later, in Chapter VI, Mattia finds that one of the other gamblers has availed himself of that very alternative, accomplished with a gun instead of a belt. Then, he reads of the suicide of the man who drowned himself in the mill-race. In Chapter X he learns that Silvia Caporale, another tenant in the same Roman household where he rents a room, has twice tried to kill herself.

Of course most of us, when we crave "unbeing", do not really want to undergo physical death: that is, we do not want to be annihilated. As Adriano's landlord Anselmo Paleari says, what we do crave is *another* life, an improved "I" in better circumstances, which is neither conservation nor extinction. This is precisely the case of Mattia/Adriano and why *he always survives his suicides.* When desperate, he contemplates death with a fair amount of sang-froid, but he is squeamish when it comes to its grim reality. The recollection of the bloody corpse he saw outside the casino unnerves him, and when he reads the newspaper account of the Miragno drowning, he is similarly haunted by the repugnant image of his own body "in an advanced state of putrefaction". What he really wants is to escape the suffering of the "I" that comprises Mattia: the life made miserable by an ugly wife and a shrewish mother-in-law, "a different nightmare, just not as bloody", not existence *per se;* and his apparent suicide, plus new-found financial independence and plenty of time in which to pursue his aspirations, allow him the opportunity to act out everyone's fantasy: the chance to start all over again.

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[18] ... non difettavano alberi -- solidi -- nel giardino attorno alla bisca. In fin de' conti, magari mi sarei appeso economicamente a qualcuno di essi, con la cintola dei calzoni, e ci avrei fatto anche una bella figura (p. 90).

At first, given the unique circumstance that befalls him, it does seem altogether possible for him to create a new life and a new man. And yet the whole project, which by now appears believable and realisable, collapses within a relatively short time. As we noted earlier, the question is why it *must* fail. Mandel gives us a clue: "The overthrow of the protagonist appears inevitable in the original configuration; that is, at the very time of the tragic action."[19]

What is it about the original configuration that dooms Mattia's mission at the outset? To state it concisely, *any escape from being via unbeing is impossible.*[20] If this observation sounds curious, consider once again what we noted about the phenomenon of *taṇhā*. Being and desire are inseparable. Every instance of one reinforces the other, so every craving for different or greater pleasure reinforces being. It naturally follows that *vibhavataṇhā* reinforces the very being one is trying to abandon.[21] Thus, as Adriano, he cannot so easily eradicate his previous existence as Mattia Pascal, and he recognises this to some extent even while constructing his new identity, which must be based on deconstruction, or "unbeing". He has to look and act in a certain way in order not to look and act like his former self. In the midst of his "re-birth", his previous incarnation survives:

> "Adriano Meis! Lucky man! It is too bad that you have to wear your hair that way ... If it were not for that errant eye of his, of that imbecile, then all in all you would not look too bad. If that other guy had not worn his hair so short, you would not now be obliged to wear it so long; and it is certainly not to your

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[19] Mandel, op. cit., p. 33.

[20] *ye va pana keci ... vibhavena bhavassa nissaranamano-hamsu sabbe te anissata bhavasmati vadāmi.* "I say that those ... who think that there is an escape from being through unbeing do not escape from being." Udana, Nandavagga: 10.

[21] "Every attempt towards 'unbeing' *(vibhava)* directly involves the confirmation or assertion of 'being' ... Trying to get away from 'being' through 'unbeing' is only remaining tied to 'being' further--like the dog that is tied to the post with a leash, in attempting to release itself from the post, only keeps runnning round and round the post." Wettimuny, pp. 137-138.

liking, I know, that you now go around beardless as a priest."[22]

Thus, the new man Adriano celebrates is not as new as he believes. As long as he is subject to *tanha,* do what he will, he cannot escape his old "self", represented by the errant eye. Similarly, after the faked suicide of Chapter XVI, the same eye, once corrected, remains an unwanted reminder of Adriano when he decides to return to Miragno. Even after cutting his hair and re-growing his beard he notes, "I still seemed to see something of Adriano Meis in my features."

That "I" pursues him as long as he pursues pleasure, and thereby perpetuates the dilemma of being/unbeing. As we have noted, the nature of pleasure is ephemeral. At first, Adriano delights in a life lived here today, elsewhere tomorrow. But in the very next Chapter, the same sensation is no longer felt as a pleasurable one; the "journey" of Chapter VIII quickly becomes a "vagabondage" at the beginning of Chapter IX. At first he exults, "Alone! alone! alone! master of myself! without having to answer to anyone!" Two pages later, he sighs, "Deep down I was already a little tired of roaming around, always alone and silent. *Instinctively* I began to feel the need for some company."

I have added the italics because, as we have seen, such a change in perception from pleasure to unpleasure is latent, instinctive; so too is the urge to escape from it via more pleasure. Even after experiencing at first-hand the mutability of the reactions on which pleasure is founded, he is seduced nevertheless into its insidious network all over again. This is because he, like most of us, does not know any better: "He, touched by unpleasurable feeling, delights in sensual pleasure. And why? The uninstructed *puthujjana* does not know an escape from unpleasurable feeling other than sensual pleasure."[23]

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22 "Adriano Meis! Uomo felice! Peccato che debba esser conciato così ... Se non fosse per quest'occhio *di lui,* di quell 'imbecille, non saresti poi, alla fin fine, tanto brutto ... Se quell'altro non avesse portato i capelli così corti, tu non saresti ora obbligato a portarli così lunghi: e non certo per tuo gusto, lo so, vai ora sbarbato come un prete" (pp. 122-123).

23 so dukkhāya vedanāya puṭṭho samāno kāmasukham abhinandati. taṃ kissa hetu. na hi ... pajānāti assutavā puthujjano aññatrā kāmasukhā dukkhāya vedanāya nissaranaṃ. (Saṃyuttanikāya vol. IV, vedanāsaṃyutta 6).

After a period of relative freedom, represented by peregrinations throughout Europe and the absence of relationships and attachments, he is bored with it all, and wants to end his existence as a "foreigner to life". Therefore, he ceases his travels and settles in Rome. But this "rebirth" leads him to establish a new persona and to involve himself in a new set of "karmic entanglement", which, despite his best intentions, necessarily incurs sorrow and death. Thus the irony at the end of Chapter IX, which concludes with the asseveration "In sum, I had to live, live, live."[24]

In the opening pages of the following chapter, Adriano begins to understand that this craving to "live, live, live" in fact renders him as good as dead:

> Who knows how many in Miragno were saying:
>
> Lucky him! No matter how he did it, he solved his problem.
>
> And meanwhile, I had not resolved anything. I now kept finding myself with Anselmo Palieri's books in my hands, and those books were teaching me that the dead, the really dead, especially the suicides, were themselves in my very condition,

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[24] Joseph Masson shows why Adriano's words are ominous: "La douleur de base, ce sont les éléments même[s] de mon existence, tels que les conçoivent les bouddhistes, en tant qu'ils sont essentiellement précaires et unis fortuitement dans une illusion d'Ego; le souci de cet Ego à maintenir et à promouvoir, en une entreprise erronée et désespérée dès l'abord, est la plus profonde des douleurs, car on doit bien constater la faillite du désir radical: vouloir vivre et survivre. D'où la conclusion: 'Qui prend plaisir dans les *khanda* prend plaisir dans la douleur; et qui prend plaisir dans la douleur n'en sera pas délivré.'" [The very elements of my existence constitute fundamental suffering, as the Buddhists conceive them, in so far as they are essentially precarious and fortuitously united in an illusion of Ego; the preoccupation of this Ego to maintain and advance in an enterprise erroneous and desperate from the start is the most acute of all suffering, because one must observe the bankrupt nature of innate desire: the will to live and survive. Hence the conclusion: 'He who delights in the khanda delights in suffering, and he who delights in suffering will never be free of it."] *Le Bouddhisme,* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1975), pp. 59-60.

> in the "shells" of *Kāmaloka,* whom Mr Leadbeater, author of *The Astral Plane* ... depicts as excited by every sort of human appetite, which they cannot satisfy, stripped as they are of their physical body and yet unaware that they have lost it.[25]

In Pāli, the term *kāmaloka* means the world of desire, of sensual pleasure, the world of *kāmataṇha.* Those who inhabit that realm are depicted in Buddhist mythology as the so-called "petas" or hungry ghosts. As Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa points out, they really represent ourselves in the state of craving.[26] So indeed, by employing the Buddhist term and the references to rebirth, Pirandello warns us that Adriano has not solved anything, since the issues of longing and dissatisfaction have not been put to rest.[27] If Mattia/Adriano cannot conceive of himself as either dead or alive once and for all, it is because, as we see in the *bhavataṇhā/vibhavataṇhā* dilemma, the apparent opposites are actually part and parcel of each other. Whereas before, as Mattia, he was alive and longing for death, now he is dead, afraid of dying, and longing for life:

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[25] Chi sa quanti, a Miragno, dicevano -- "Beato lui, alla fine! Comunque sia, ha risolto il problema." E non avevo risolto nulla, io, intanto. Mi trovavo ora coi libri d'Anselmo Paleari tra le mani, e questi libri m'insegnavano che i morti, quelli veri, si trovavano nella mia identica condizione, nei "gusci" del *Kāmaloka,* specialmente i suicidi, che il signor Leadbeater, autore del *Plan Astral* ... raffigura eccitati da ogni sorta d'appetiti umani, a cui non possono soddisfare, sprovvisti come sono del corpo carnale, ch'essi però ignorano d'aver perduto (pp. 140-141).

[26] "The term *hungry ghost* (peta) in everyday language refers to a creature supposed to have a tiny mouth and an enormous belly. He can never manage to eat enough and so is chronically hungry ... The hungry ghosts of dhamma language are purely mental states ... Anyone suffering from too intense a craving ... can be said to have been born a hungry ghost here and now. It is not something that happens only after death." Bhikkhu Buddhadasa, *Me and Mine* (Albany: Suny Press, 1989), p. 134.

[27] Giovanni Macchia has shown the connection between thought, desire and creation of being in Leadbeater and its influence on Pirandello. See his article "Pirandello e gli spiriti," *Il corriere della sera,* 18 luglio 1972, p. 3.

> Not that I really believed I was dead: it would not have been a great harm, since dying is the hard part, and once dead, I don't believe that one can retain the sad desire to return to life. I became aware all of a sudden that I had to die again, for real: this was the problem! After my suicide, I had naturally seen nothing before me other than life. And here, now, Signor Anselmo Paleari continually put the shadow of death before me.[28]

Despite what he says, Adriano does have the "sad desire to return to life", one which becomes more ardent as he becomes more comfortable as a tenant in Paleari's household, and especially as he becomes romantically involved with Adriana, his landlord's daughter.[29] He himself recognises this in Chapter XIII: "I felt myself already caught in the clutches of life ...". This desire gets him into trouble with the surly Terenzio Papiano, his rival for Adriana's hand. Adriano fully realises that he is in danger, but nevertheless cannot take the reasonable course of action and leave the house. Later, in Chapter XV, when contemplating the implications of the kiss he gave to Adriana -- "the kiss of a dead man" -- he laments, "Look: those cords had already retied themselves; and life -- for all that I had been on guard against it -- life had dragged me back with its irresistible force: a life which was no longer mine." Of course it is not life *per se* that is irresistible, but rather the desire for it and its sensual pleasures, what Schopenhauer called the will-to-live. And Mattia's return to life -- in the guise of Adriano -- means inevitably another death, the shadow that Palieri continually puts in front of him. Pirandello will relentlessly exploit this dilemma throughout the rest of the novel.

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[28] Non che credessi veramente di esser morto: non sarebbe stato un gran male, giacché il forte è morire, e, appena morti, non credo che si possa avere il tristo desiderio di ritornare in vita. Mi accorsi tutt'a un tratto che dovevo proprio morire ancora: ecco il male! ... Dopo il mio suicidio ... *io naturalmente non avevo veduto più altro, innanzi a me, che la vita.* Ed ecco qua, ora: il signor Anselmo Paleari mi metteva innanzi di continuo l'ombra della morte (Chapter X, p. 141; italics mine).

[29] Adriano's desire is sad, especially from our standpoint, since it will lead to further "births and deaths."

This is how Adriano falls into "the clutches" of life: when he arrives in Rome he really has no ego, but soon his desire for Adriana creates and reinforces the persona of Adriano. For a long time he speaks of nothing specific, and lives in generalities and equivocations precisely to avoid establishing a discernible identity. It is when he engages in conversation "for her alone" that he assumes a discrete "I". Only because of Adriana does he actually feel like a new person:

> I understood ... that despite my odd appearance she could love me. I didn't say it even to myself, but from that evening on the bed I slept on in that house seemed softer; the objects surrounding me more delicate; the air I breathed more gentle; the sky above more blue and the sun more resplendent.[30]

Furthermore, it is at this point that the similarity of the two names acquires significance. It is not simply a matter of seeking his other half, but of craving for self-identification. It is because of Adriana that he truly becomes himself, or as we might say in Pāli, *Adrianapaccayā Adrianaṃ:* "With Adriana as a condition, Adriano is." At this point his persona becomes "real", not just a series of evasions and fictions, and acquires a life of its own; and it is Adriana who sustains that persona. Because of her he is no longer "padrone di sé", master of himself; no longer the man who was resolved to be circumspect in his every move, leaving nothing to chance. His attachment eventually leads to a loss of composure and lapse from reason. He courts the vulnerable Adriana even though his love is "begotten by despair upon impossibility". Without a true identity, he can never hope to marry her; yet, driven by his emotions, he continues to woo her : "I lost my self-control ... I openly began using all my strength against Adriana's shyness; I closed my eyes and abandoned myself without any longer reflecting on my feelings."

The pervasive and complex phenomenon of *taṇhā* thus leads Adriano onto a merry-go-round of "being" and "unbeing". He himself sets in motion, but at the same time he becomes carried away by it, always towards sorrow and disaster. The Buddhist perspective shows that the inevitability, the tragedy, lies

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[30] Compresi ... che, nonostante quel mio strambo aspetto, ella avrebbe potuto amarmi. Non lo dissi neanche a me stesso; ma, da quella sera in poi, mi sembrò più soffice il letto ch'io occupavo in quella casa, più gentili gli oggetti che mi circondavano, più lieve l'aria che respiravo, più azzuro il cielo, più splendido il sole (p. 155).

in the very act of *self-creation,* which is conascent with desire and destined to ruin. The tragic ending is, in Mandel's words, "grafted on" to the beginning, the process represented by the link in the *paṭiccasamuppāda* chain known as *saṅkhāra.*

We met with the term *saṅkhāra* before, when we noted the characteristics of existence. There we translated it as "determination", as it can mean "something that conditions something else" and as such it includes the notions of what causes, creates or constructs another thing, and that constructed thing is *saṅkhāta.* Now let us consider once again the doctrine that all determinations are impermanent, unsatisfactory, leading to suffering, and not-self.

What are the implications in terms of the novel? The narrative makes it clear that Adriano is in fact *a constructed thing.* As we noted above, his very name is put together, drawn out of the argument overheard on the journey from Alenga to Torino. From then on, he is both the architect and the artifice of a "self" that does not really exist. As he puts it on page 114, "I would be able to mould myself to my own satisfaction." Several other similar references to self-fabrication follow. Here is a typical example from Chapter VIII: "I followed boys through the streets and parks ... taking note of their expressions, so that by degrees I put together the youth of Adriano Meis. I succeeded so well that in the end the composite seemed almost real."[31]

This implies a number of things about the nature of identity. First of all--and most importantly--what appears to be totally self-constructed is also in large part other-constructed. We tend to think that we are the sole determiners of what we are, that our idiosyncrasies are simply a matter of choice, but in fact the choice is determined by the "building materials" available to us. Adriano appropriates his own "reality" from features and behaviour observed in others. Even though they all add up, as he observes, to "a walking invention", they are *felt* to be his own, eventually assuming a separate entity in his consciousness. This sum of parts erroneously taken to be a whole is, in fact, a more "realistic" version of Frankenstein, an assemblage sewn together by desire and bound by suffering, as we find in the Aṅguttaranikāya III, 61: *sukhā vedanā eko anto,*

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[31] E seguiva per le vie e nei giardini i ragazzetti ... e raccoglievo le loro espressioni, per *comporne a poco a poco* l'infanzia di Adriano Meis. Vi riuscii così bene, che essa alla fine *assunse nella mia mente una consistenza quasi reale* (p. 121, italics mine).

dukkhā vedanā dutiyo anto ... taṇhā sibbanī; tanha hi naṃ sibbati tassa tass'eva bhavessa abhinibbattiyā. "Pleasure is at the one end, suffering is at the other end ... and craving is the seamstress, for craving is just what sews one to this ever-becoming birth." Hence, the depiction of himself as "quel mostro", in Caporale's words, becomes especially evocative.

This is exactly what the Buddha meant when he said that all things were void of self. He did not contend that we simply do not exist; in fact, he vigorously denied any affinity with nihilism. Identity cannot be asserted or denied: as Pirandello says to Dr. Fileno in the short story *La tragedia d'un personaggio,* "We are and we are not, dear doctor!" With the doctrine of *anattā* in mind, we can see that the "self" is very much like Adriano's shadow:

> But that shadow had a heart, and could not love; that shadow had money, and anyone could take it away from him; it had a head, but only in order to realise that it was the head of a shadow, and not the shadow of a head. That is what it was like.
>
> Thus, I felt it as something living, and I felt sadness for it, as if a horse and the wheels of a carriage and the feet of passers-by had really crushed it.[32]

Adriano's shadow is a product of will and desire, which itself wills and desires; and that volition sustains its existence. For this reason, as well as that of its close association with death, the shadow is a perfect metaphor for the "self": an elusive coincidence that we "determine" but cannot control. Therefore, when Adriano makes up his mind to kill "that mad, absurd fiction" it is not as simple as it sounds: it is not a matter of doing away with nothing, but rather one of eliminating the latent urge to *be.* Pirandello later takes up the same issue of using "fictions" in our vain attempt to create a fixed form out of the endless movement of life:

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[32] Ma aveva un cuore, quell'ombra, e non poteva amare; aveva denari, quell'ombra, e ciascuno poteva rubarglieli; aveva una testa, ma per pensare e comprendere ch'era la testa di un'ombra, e non l'ombra d'una testa. Proprio così! Allora la sentii come cosa viva, e sentii dolore per essa, come il cavallo e le ruote del carro e i piedi de'viandanti ne avessero veramente fatto strazio (Chapter XVI, p. 207).

> The concepts, the ideals to which we would like to keep ourselves consistent, all the fictions we create, the conditions, the state in which we try to establish ourselves, are the forms in which we seek to arrest, to harness the continuous flux within us. But deep down, below the embankments and beyond the limits we impose as we make up our conscience and construe our personality, the obscure flux continues.[33]

Is there any alternative to *saṅkhāra,* to creating recurrent fictions? We are back to the essential question: can the issue be resolved via unbeing? At this point Adriano still thinks so: "There was no other escape for me!" So he decides that the only way to resolve his problems in Rome is to feign another suicide and return to Miragno. In still another instance of *vibhavataṇhā,* he imagines that he will be better off by returning to the way things were before. Yet his exultation at the thought of reassuming the identity of Mattia Pascal strikes even him as ironic: "And yet, I recalled the other journey, the one from Alenga to Turin: then, in the same way, I had considered myself happy. What madness! 'Freedom!' I used to say ...". And in both instances, he uses the words "quell'imbecille" -- that imbecile -- to refer to a "previous incarnation". But while he may be persisting foolishly in a fruitless course of action, essentially he is simply behaving like every *puthujjana*: as long as he is driven by desire, he will continue "seeking delight here and there" (*tatra tatra abhinandini*). As we have argued, the impulses that plague him are latent in, or bound up with, existence itself. This is why his tragedy is that of all those of us who are caught in the snares of *taṇhā* : "Everyone, everyone, just like me would surely have considered it a stroke of luck to be able to free himself ... from a sorrowful and miserable existence like mine."[34]

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[33] Le forme, in cui cerchiamo d'arrestare, di fissare in noi questo flusso continuo, sono i concetti, sono gli ideali a cui vorremmo serbarci coerenti, tutte le finzioni che ci creiamo, le condizioni, lo stato in cui tendiamo a stabilirci. Ma dentro di noi stessi ... il flusso continua, indistinto, sotto gli argini, oltre i limiti che noi imponiamo, componendoci una coscienza, costruendoci una personalità. *L'umorismo* Part II, chapter V.

[34] Tutti, tutti, come me avrebbero stimato certo una fortuna potersi liberare ... d'un'egra e misera esistenza come quella mia (p. 199).

On his return to Miragno, our protagonist discovers once more that his reincarnation will not go according to plan. The same aspirations and anticipations delude him, for what he imagines to be a constant experience, fixed in time, changes -- in fact, it does not even last until his arrival. When he did away with his alter ego he assumed that the previous set of conditions which defined the old Mattia Pascal would be intact; he thinks that he can take over from where he left off, as if nothing had happened. Or rather, not as if nothing had changed, but as if those conditions that once combined to form his identity (*saṅkhāra*) had not changed. However, he returns to his home town to find that no one recognises him, and that Romilda is already remarried to Pomino, his childhood friend. Mattia, of course, views his reappearance in town as something extraordinary indeed. But excluding Romilda and her new husband, to whose marriage his reincarnation could pose a threat, no one cares. Hence, he finds that his existence is also dependent on contingencies such as being recognised by others. If one is not acknowledged, where is one's identity? This is why our "self" is undermined when others do not take us for "what we are":

> Nobody recognized me because nobody thought about me any more ... And I, who had imagined an outburst, a great fuss over me as soon as I had shown myself in the street! In a profound state of discouragement, I felt a humiliation, a contempt, a bitterness that I wouldn't know how to put into words ... Ah, so this is what it means to die! Nobody, nobody remembered me any more, as if I had never existed.[35]

At the nadir of disillusionment, Mattia makes his courageous decision: he will neither give rise to another entity nor re-assert his previous one. He relinquishes his right to take back Romilda and he declines to have his name removed from the municipality's list of the dead. That is to say, he refuses to occasion more "being", and thereby he brings the entire "samsaric" process to an end. This means no more ignorance, in terms of imagining changeless states free from suffering; no more determinations, constructions of fictional identities; no more cravings for existence or non-existence based on sensation; no more clinging to experience or identifying with it as "self". With the cessation of all

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[35] Nessuno mi riconosceva perché nessuno pensava più a me ... E io che m'ero immaginato uno scoppio, uno scompiglio appena mi fossi mostrato per le vie! Nel disinganno profondo, provai un avvilimento, un dispetto, un'amarezza che non saprei ridire ... Ah, che vuol dir morire! Nessuno, nessuno si ricordava più di me, come se non fossi mai esistito... (p. 246).

these elements of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* network, that which constitutes his personality disappears: for then there is no longer any "I"-making or "mine"-making. Now he is *asaṅkhāta*, not-determined, not-made, not-willed.

This is the crucial difference between the Mattia that left Miragno and the one that returns. Something *essential* is missing. The intangible element known as *saṅkhār'upādāna*, the holding-and-fabricating that constitutes the essence of subjectivity, is absent. Hence, Mattia may remain an individual (i.e., as distinct from others) but cease being a person, a self, a subject. And so now he must be referred to as "il fu" (the late) Mattia Pascal, because his psychological being and its attributes are no more. With this in mind, those opening lines of the novel acquire greater significance: "One of the few things that I knew, or perhaps the only one that I knew for sure, was this: that my name was Mattia Pascal".

Before he leaves Miragno the only thing that he is convinced of is his identity, of that name and all that it entails. But at the end, once he knows how flimsy is the construct of "self", the one thing he knows for sure is that he is *not* Mattia Pascal or anybody else. A name (as Vitangelo Moscarda will point out in the later novel *Uno. nessuno e centomila*) is what we use to designate a "person", that continuing entity which consists of craving, clinging and willing.[36] So while at first reading it might appear as if our protagonist were worse off than before, as if he had "lost" knowledge, it is not so. Before, he did not know the insubstantiality of identity, he did not realise the ambiguity of his existence. Now, at last, he is undeceived. What was known as Mattia Pascal no longer is; there is no longer a subject, a centre appropriating experience and thereby perpetuating itself.

The final scene of the novel underscores our point. Our protagonist is the only one in town who visits the grave of the man identified as "Mattia Pascal" (i.e., the man who really did drown in the mill-race). There, someone asks him, "So who the hell are you, after all?"; and *the only possible response* he can offer is this: "Eh, my friend ... I am the late Mattia Pascal." *Nothing else can be asserted.* Traditional readings of Pirandello have ignored the crucial implications of the final chapter, and have not take into account the fact that in the end, the protagonist sees the dangers of sustaining any identity whatsoever, and so he stops the process altogether. At last he finds the way out of *dukkha* -

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[36] As we read in the Khandāsaṃyutta, *yam kho bhikkhu, anuseti tena saṃkhaṃ gacchati*: "one aquires a name by that which one clings to."

- not through suicide, but through fully understanding its mechanism: *ettāvatā abhiññeyyaṃ abhijānāti ... diṭṭ'eva dhamme dukkass'- antakaro hotīti.* "Thus knowing, thus seeing, one puts an end to *dukkha* here and now."

Pirandello says that in our craving for being we habitually create form, that we put on masks, but he does not say that we *must* do so. If we have the courage, we can live without them, as does the late Mattia Pascal. He does not, as so many readings suggest, "return to life", and this is why the so-called "sage" remarks of Don Eligio -- "it is not possible to live outside of those circumstances, happy or sad that they may be, by which we are who we are" -- are neither applicable nor representative of Pirandello's thought.[37] As Mattia retorts, "But I pointed out to him that I had not returned, either under the law or to my particular circumstances. My wife was now Pomino's wife, and I couldn't tell precisely who I was."

Precisely because he finds that a "self" leads to suffering, the late Mattia Pascal abjures the evasions of *bhavataṇhā* and *vibhavataṇhā,* and refuses to revive his former "self". Like Peter Schlemihl, he is liberated when *he stops running after his shadow.* "Enough. I now live in peace, together with my elderly aunt Scolastica".[38] Therefore, Mattia's non-existence is not plagued by bitterness or anguish, as is usually assumed; rather, it is liberated from the bitterness and anguish which characterised the tragic existence of the old Mattia. Our protagonist may not have succeeded according to conventional values, but precisely those values have been repudiated: they belong to his former incarnation. The important fact is that he now lives in peace.

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[37] "Marta mia, guai se si pensa alla realtà che ci dànno gli altri! ... a curarsi di quella che gli danno gli altri ci sarebbe da impazzire o da non vivere più." [Marta, woe to whoever thinks about the reality that others assign to him ... to pay attention to what others assign to him would make him go mad or not live anymore.] Letter dated 30-3-31 in *Lettere a Marta Abba* a cura di Benito Ortolani (Milano: Mondadori, 1995), p. 707.

[38] Basta. *Io ora vivo in pace,* insieme con la mia vecchia zia Scolastica ... (p. 247, italics mine).

Mattia Pascal only experiences bitterness and anguish as long as he nourishes "il tristo desiderio di tornare in vita". After he renounces it utterly, there is nothing to indicate that he experiences any emotion in particular. Perhaps as a result of a cultural predisposition, or of having been conditioned by existentialism, many Western readers assume that not to have an identity is a predicament of anguish.[39] But the novel has shown us differently: it is craving for being/pleasure that causes bitterness; it is self-construction that leads to suffering; and this insight represents another facet of Pirandello's genius.

M. JOHN STELLA

[39] For a discussion of how the East sees the absence of being as a desirable end, see Jean Grenier, *Absolu et choix* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961), p. 23.