

The Ibsenite Nature of Pirandello's *Sicilianità* and Joyce's Irishness

The cultures they fled, the contexts and metaphors that inspired them

Karl Chircop

karl.chircop@um.edu.mt

Abstract: Joyce's Irishness and Pirandello's *Sicilianità* (the Sicilian identity) seem to be negative ideas characterized by a sense of evasion and by an Ibsenite realism keen on unmasking the hypocritical Irish and Sicilian middle class society. Even though geographically distant, their Modernist Irishness and *Sicilianità* reveal quite a curious number of political, religious, linguistic, and social affinities: the stasis of the positive progress of history in Sicily and Ireland; the grudge towards foreign colonial rule (the Anglo-Saxon rule in Ireland, the neglect of Sicily by the Northern oriented governments in Rome); the self-induced exiles of both writers; the betrayal of their great political ideals (the fall of Parnell, the failed Irish initiatives for independence; the Roman Bank Scandal, the violent repression of the *Fasci Siciliani* revolution, the failures of the democratic governments); the stifling moral and political implications of a Catholic Ireland and a Catholic Sicily; the dilemmas of the Irish-English language in Ireland and the choice between the Standard Italian and the Sicilian dialects in Sicily. In this context, the cities of Dublin, Agrigento, and the sulphur depot port of Porto Empedocle in Sicily become claustrophobic landmarks which influence ontologically and existentially the two writers and their works. Both cultures attempt to cast over them not only the influence of an archaic heritage – the Celtic culture in Ireland and the Magna Graecia in Sicily – but also literary models which they end up refusing openly: Joyce denounces the Irish Literary Revival as promulgated by Yeats and Lady Gregory; Pirandello discards the position of the Sicilian *Verismo* masters like Giovanni Verga and Luigi Capuana. These issues are exposed in the

Irish and Sicilian identities which Stephen Dedalus (both in *A Portrait* and in *Ulysses*), Don Cosmo, and Lando Laurentano (in the enigmatic novel *I Vecchi e i Giovani*) attempt to flee. Irishness and Sicilianità become not only 'a nightmare' from which Stephen is trying to awaken, but also a reality which 'does not conclude' according to Don Cosmo Laurentano, the exile who 'has understood the rules of the game'.

Keywords: James Joyce, Luigi Pirandello, Irishness, *Sicilianità*

Pirandello's narrator in the novel *I Vecchi e i Giovani*, published in 1913 and set in Sicily in 1893, says that, in retaliation to his bishop's grotesque pastoral letter amidst the Fasci Siciliani revolt, the priest Pompeo Agrò had written an article on the affinities of Irishness and *Sicilianità*— '*dopo aver paragonato le condizioni della Sicilia a quelle dell'Irlanda*'.¹ This unique narrative detail underscoring Ireland's and Sicily's late nineteenth-century crises serves as an apt starting point to discuss the affinities between Pirandello's *Sicilianità* and Joyce's Irishness.

When Joyce and Pirandello were coming to maturity as writers, Ireland's and Sicily's official status was not supposed to be that of an insular colony: the former was officially a member of Great Britain, the Union of Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and England, whilst the latter was annexed to the rest of Italy after the unification process started in 1860. However, amidst all the nationalistic agitation of those years, just as the Sicilians felt abandoned by the distant post-Unitarian democratic governments intent only on promoting Northern Italy's industrial interests, likewise the Irish did not perceive themselves as an equal partner in the federation.

Irishness and *Sicilianità* seem to be variants of an insular culture and negative ideas characterized by a sense of political betrayal, literary and linguistic issues, evasion, and an Ibsenite tendency to unmask all the hypocritical middle-class compromises. By looking at *I Vecchi e i Giovani* and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, I shall discuss the Irish and Sicilian identities which the characters Stephen Dedalus and Don Cosmo Laurentano respectively attempt to flee. Joyce and Pirandello viewed Irish and Sicilian history through singular facts which crystallized their youth: the political demise of Charles Stewart

1 Luigi Pirandello, *I Vecchi e i Giovani*, in *Tutti i Romanzi* (Milan, 1957), 847.

Parnell and the post-Unitarian governments' betrayal of the sentiments of the Risorgimento in Sicily.

Joyce concentrated mainly on Parnell's fall from power when he sat down to reconstruct the *Irishness* emanating from *A Portrait*. Parnell, who by 1881 was the recognized leader of the nationalist movement in Ireland, was named as the lover of Kitty O'Shea in her famous divorce suit of 1891. Throughout Great Britain, the moral accusations of adultery echoed strongly in the political and religious domains setting off a chain reaction of denouncement by the British prime minister, the political rivals of Parnell, and also the Irish Catholic Church which crippled his own political party and all Irish nationalists. Joyce could not accept the fact that fellow Irishmen deposed their nationalistic saviour at the bidding of the English and the Church on the grounds of sexual immorality. This resentment towards the hypocrisy of political and social life of the Irish middle class and their nationalistic cause finds further eloquence in the essay 'The Shade of Parnell' where Joyce declares that 'They did not throw him to the English wolves: they tore him apart themselves.'² The famous Christmas dinner scene in *A Portrait* epitomizes Joyce's political position in a debate that hinges on the role of the Church in Irish politics, with Dante clearly asserting the Church's supremacy in political and moral matters whilst Mr Casey, a Fenian, and Simon Dedalus, oppose it. These last two characters condemn outright the Church which 'broke Parnell's heart and hounded him into his grave'.³ Stephen, who witnesses the debate as a child, will later on confirm this political stance when Davin asks him to join the nationalists and militate for Ireland's independence: 'you sold him to the enemy or failed him in need or reviled him and left him for another. And you invite me to be one of you. I'd see you damned first.'⁴ Nationalism, for Joyce, was contaminated by many Irishmen who were submissive to Rome's spiritual creed: 'Ireland prides itself on being faithful body and soul to its national tradition as well as to the Holy See.'⁵ The clergy, therefore, and not the English, posed the greatest threat to Irish moral and political emancipation. For this reason Joyce was embittered

2 James Joyce, 'The Shade of Parnell', in *Occasional, critical, and political writing* (Oxford, 2000), 196.

3 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: text, criticism and notes*, ed. Chester G. Anderson (New York, 1968), 33-4.

4 *Ibid.*, 203.

5 James Joyce, 'Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages', in *Occasional, critical, and political writing* (Oxford, 2000), 115.

against the Church that dethroned Parnell; he was convinced that it was useless to ‘fulminate against English tyranny while the tyranny of Rome still holds the dwelling place of the soul’.⁶

Sicily’s context during the years following the Risorgimento reveals a collapse of the patriots’ nationalist and moral values. Pirandello himself testifies in his novel that the government had betrayed the South with acts of exploitation and political repression, a situation that only deepened the scepticism and gloom of the Sicilian peasants: ‘*era vivo e profondo il malcontento contro il governo italiano, per l’incuria sprezzante verso l’isola fin dal 1860*’.⁷ Sicily stood apart from the peninsula as a political and social anachronism caught up in a savage ignorance typical of feudal times: ‘*reati di sangue, aperti o per mandato, ... erano continui e innumerevoli, frutto della miseria, della selvaggia ignoranza*’.⁸ Pirandello soon joined the ranks of the disillusioned, who found the new fatherland reality mediocre and worthless, reeking with the ‘*putride carcasse del vecchio patriottismo*’.⁹ Sicily was also a mire where armed gangs of brigands – the initial forms of Mafia – operated as a socio-political force protected by a conspiracy of silence (‘*Accidia taciturna, diffidenza ombrosa*’¹⁰); a land overwhelmed by the misery of the soiled faces of the peasants and sulphur miners ‘*dalle facce terrigne e arsicce, dagli occhi lupigni*’¹¹ which occasionally exploded into violence and insurrection. The presence of Rome in the novel serves to highlight the corruption of a political establishment, particularly that regarding the Roman Bank scandal (‘*Lo scandalo bancario era come una voragine di fuoco aperta davanti al Parlamento nazionale*’¹²). This scandal involved an immense surplus of banknotes which were printed and delivered illegally by the Roman banks to politicians and ministers in government, thus devaluating the *lira* in Italy. Pirandello’s novel reveals simultaneously the rise of the Sicilian middle class and the development of the Socialist Fasces – a revolt against the establishment by the oppressed peasants and sulphur miners and the subsequent state of siege and military repression. Most of these events are drawn primarily from two important extended Sicilian families: the old displaced aristocratic line of the Laurentano’s,

6 Ibid., 125.

7 Pirandello, *I Vecchi e i Giovani*, 851.

8 Ibid., 608.

9 Ibid., 732.

10 Ibid., 609.

11 Ibid., 608.

12 Ibid., 732.

and the rising one of the Salvo's, the ambitious and unscrupulous middle-class capitalists. The Catholic Church in Sicily remained indifferent to the chaos of exploitation, poverty, and the Fascist revolution. It opted to foster tradition with the backing of the pro-Bourbon aristocracy in decline and the rising conservative middle class, while the peasants – having a '*stupidità armata di diffidenza e d'astuzie animalesche*'¹³ – barely survived in their fatalism, superstitious faith, and timeless reality. In *I Vecchi e i Giovani*, Pirandello depicts a meeting of the diocesan chapter of Girgenti, where the young generation of priests are appalled by the hypocritical stance of the older priests and by the ambiguity of the pastoral letter of their bishop: '*I più giovani canonici, intanto, che più di tutti avevano prestato ascolto alla lettura, si scambiavano tra loro occhiate di disgusto.*'¹⁴ The bishop of Girgenti, Mgr Montoro, is another negative cleric described as a rich hypocrite, '*uomo di mondo e senza ubbie d'alcuna sorta*'¹⁵, with a corpulence described as '*molle rosea grassezza donnescamente curata*'.¹⁶

Besides nationalism, politics, and the Church, the other intricate domain pertaining to Joyce's Irishness and Pirandello's *Sicilianità* regards the literary models – and their accompanying language issues – which attempted to voice the plight of Ireland and Sicily. These were options which both writers would eventually abandon, but not before a confrontation with their maturing artistic vocation.

In Ireland, the Irish literary movement fostered a portrayal of the ancient Irish indigenous heritage and adopted the Gaelic language; Yeats, Douglas Hyde, and Lady Gregory were all engaged in a cultural nationalism via the National Literary Society and, subsequently, the Irish National Theatre. The literary movement intended to emancipate Ireland from English cultural domination and thus, with this purpose in mind, Yeats, along with Douglas Hyde, founded the National Literary Society in 1892. Hyde's plans for Irish cultural independence culminated in 1893 when he founded, with the help of Eoin MacNeill, the Gaelic League.¹⁷ Its aims were to preserve Irish as the national language and to extend its use as a spoken language, as well as to cultivate a modern literature in Irish. All these literary and linguistic options were unacceptable to Joyce

13 Ibid., 851.

14 Ibid., 847.

15 Ibid., 570.

16 Ibid., 574.

17 Dominic Manganiello, *Joyce's Politics* (London, 1980), 24.

since: 'Just as ancient Egypt is dead, so is ancient Ireland.'¹⁸ Joyce felt that what Ireland needed was not more patriotic literature, but literature of a higher artistic value; it was to be accomplished writing, and not patriotism, that would adjust literature to the moral necessities of Irish life.¹⁹ Joyce found it unacceptable to be a nationalist in Dublin and obliged to place one's country before everything else – just as Davin tells Stephen in *A Portrait*, 'A man's country comes first. Ireland first, Stevie. You can be a poet or a mystic after.'²⁰ Stephen disassociates himself so as to engage on what *A Portrait* calls 'the mode of life or of art whereby your spirit could express itself in unfettered freedom'.²¹ Joyce desired this sense of artistic freedom even for the theatre. In his essay, 'The Day of the Rabblement', he accuses the Irish theatre of being 'the property of the rabblement of the most belated race in Europe'.²² Joyce began to fear that such a theatre, in dealing solely with Irish themes and producing only Irish plays, ran the risk of becoming obsessively overloaded with Irishness. By allying itself to nationalist movements Yeats' Irish Literary Theatre had to 'surrender to the trolls'²³ and, hence, any claims of freedom were delusive: 'the most seeming-independent are those who are the first to reassume their bonds'.²⁴ To be an artist, Joyce asserted, one must free himself from any contaminating influences and therefore he preferred the tradition of Ibsen to that of Yeats and Lady Gregory especially on the motif of peasant life. At the end of *A Portrait*, Joyce portrays an unpretentious old peasant in Stephen's journal who speaks first in Irish to his visitor, Mulrennan, but then in English, as if to indicate the pointlessness of the language revival: 'Old man spoke Irish. Mulrennan spoke Irish. Then old man and Mulrennan spoke English.'²⁵ A similar episode shall be re-enacted in the *Telemachus* chapter of *Ulysses* when Haines, the English student, speaks in Gaelic to the milkmaid who mistakes it for French.

In Italy, the Sicilian *Verismo* was promulgated by Pirandello's fellow Sicilians Luigi Capuana and Giovanni Verga, who reigned

18 Joyce, 'Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages', 125.

19 Manganiello, 30.

20 Joyce, *A Portrait*, 203.

21 *Ibid.*, 246.

22 Joyce, 'The day of the Rabblement', in *Occasional, critical, and political writing* (Oxford, 2000), 50.

23 *Ibid.*, 52.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Joyce, *A Portrait*, 251

supreme in the literary sphere with their supposedly objective portrayal of the sufferings of Sicily. Pirandello's first narratives were actually modelled on the aesthetic canons of the Sicilian *Verismo*: the objective presentation of events, the detailed descriptions, an impersonal narrator trying to give an objective image of a specific environment. However, after a period of experimentation, Pirandello breaks away from Naturalism's pretence of objectivity by adding to his narratives the elements of *umorismo* – irony and paradox – together with an irrational element, where characters fall prey to chance as the unexpected intrudes upon them. In a famous biographical sketch Pirandello states: '*Io dunque son figlio del Caos*',²⁶ thus emphasizing the mythical proportions of his particular birth place. Pirandello's being born into chaos is also a key element in the creating of his personal mythology and an allegorical sign for his creative universe, one dominated by the belief in an incomprehensible and unmanageable world where disorder and chance – chaos, the void – reign supreme.²⁷ This sense of displacement, which undermines all the authorial objectivity and distance theorized by *Verismo*, finds its first most eloquent expression in Pirandello's third novel *Il Fu Mattia Pascal* (1904). Curiously, it is his third novel and not the fifth one, *I Vecchi e i Giovani* (1913), which marks the young Pirandello's break from the Naturalist movement. This has obviously created many ambiguities to Pirandello's canon since, *prima facie*, *I Vecchi e i Giovani* seems to be a recant of his Modernist *umorismo* and a relapse back to the *Verismo*'s historical novel. Only recently has it been re-interpreted as an anomalous historical novel which challenges the objective facts of naturalist discourse.²⁸ In fact, the characters have subjective interpretations of ideas, events, and experiences; they seek to make sense of reality and need to constantly delve beyond the surface into the chaos of the human psyche. Don Ippolito Laurentano, the philo-Bourbon aristocrat, is estranged from any contemporary political and social developments in Sicily; he day-dreams about a mythic *Akragas* – the Greek name for Girgenti – with a deep sense of nostalgia and

26 Luigi Pirandello, *Saggi, poesie e scritti vari*, ed. Manlio Lo Vecchio Musti (Milan, 1965), 1281.

27 Fiora Bassanese, *Understanding Luigi Pirandello* (Columbia–South Carolina, 1997), 2.

28 Wladimir Kryszynski, 'Il pessimismo dei destini umani e la negatività della storia', in *I vecchi e i giovani: storia, romanzo, film*, ed Enzo Lauretta (Agrigento, 2006), 165.

alienation. Staring at the *Valle dei Templi* he feels ‘*una pena indefinita per quei superstiti d’un altro mondo e d’un’altra vita*’.²⁹

Pirandello’s gradual break from naturalism proceeded further with the bourgeois dramas of 1917 which offered a new interpretation of the individual’s struggle, based on both feeling and reason, against the oppressive forces of existence and society. The break from *Verismo* is final in 1921, with the first play of the meta-theatre trilogy.

Pirandello’s linguistic issues regarding *Verismo* and Italian literature had two main stances: firstly, he discarded the *Verismo*’s studiously cultivated approach to the Sicilian dialect, and secondly, he rejected the purely literary form of Italian that had prevailed for centuries in canonical creative writing. Both stances stem out from Pirandello’s choice of spontaneous expression based on current usage with a considerable infusion of dialogue. It is vital to remember that some of Pirandello’s plays in Sicilian employed dialectic expressions or popular forms of speech that served comic, ironic, and mimetic functions, going beyond the mere verbal representation of regional speech as suggested by *Verismo*.³⁰

This paper has focused on the writers’ generational need to voice their unresolved relationship with Irishness and *Sicilianità*. The novels bear witness to their sense of betrayal in politics and Church intervention in Ireland’s and Sicily’s chaotic state of pseudo-colonialism. The literary models stemming out from the cultures of Ancient Ireland and Magna Graecia did not offer any gratifying solutions. The only point of arrival for Stephen Dedalus and Don Cosmo, who represent best the spirit of their authors, is a self-imposed exile.

Don Cosmo is a spectator of life, seeking refuge in negative epiphanies inspired by nature’s landscapes at twilight—nature becomes the place where historical conflicts do not create internal ones in the character. Don Cosmo is the *raisonneur* in the novel, the character who does not disintegrate into history through death, political exile, or insanity – as opposed to Mortara who is killed by the soldiers he meant to help, or Lando who flees in exile to Malta. By not intervening, he is also the only character who opts for self-exile; with self-irony he declares that he has understood the game – ‘*aver capito il giuoco*’;³¹ life is just an arbitrary game of masks and self-illusions which has to be played eternally in perpetual illusion: ‘*Se non*

29 Pirandello, *I Vecchi e i Giovani*, 575.

30 Fiora Bassanese, *Understanding Luigi Pirandello*, 24–5.

31 Pirandello, *I Vecchi e i Giovani*, 886.

conclude, è segno che non deve concludere, e che è vano dunque cercare una conclusione. Bisogna vivere, cioè illudersi.³²

Just like Parnell was a martyr for the national cause, Stephen is the artist who chooses exile in an act of martyrdom, to safeguard his autonomous art.³³ Art in exile would supersede any religious conscience which stifled and paralysed the will to live and create: 'When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.'³⁴ Therefore, the only way to avoid captivity into Irishness or *Sicilianità* is to choose self-exile and self-irony. But flying by those nets of Irishness will prove to be not so easy to the artist; history shall resume its haunting 'nightmare' from which Stephen is constantly trying to awaken – as he shall tell Mr Deasy in *Ulysses*.³⁵

So what has been removed from these two characters' lives in their self exiles? Does exile eventually turn out to be a gift to their concept of Irishness and *Sicilianità*? The relationship between the lack of belonging to a fatherland and the creativity of Pirandello and Joyce is quite clear: with a displaced sense of fatherland they both seem to have created a deeper bond to their Irishness and *Sicilianità*. Just like Heidegger's *Dasein* in *Being and Time*, they actually had to remove their islands to a distance, beyond the boundary of their *spielraum*³⁶ (leeway), in order to bring them close enough to deal with. Having paradoxically cleared a space around themselves through their exile, a space that they could never cross or escape, only then could they occupy a place within that Irishness and *Sicilianità*. This is practically Don Cosmo's game, or what Stephen classifies as a weapon – one of the weapons really – with which to continually assess his country: 'I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning.'³⁷ Through the eyes of a cosmopolitan Europe, Pirandello and Joyce would write with greater insight and creativity than would have been possible if they had remained at home. Their distance becomes the only solution for preserving any sort of intimacy with Irishness and *Sicilianità* through literature.

32 Ibid., 886.

33 Manganiello, 39.

34 Joyce, *A Portrait*, 203.

35 James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Annotated Student Edition, ed. Declan Kiberd (London, 1992), 42.

36 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco, 1962), 419.

37 Joyce, *A Portrait*, 247.