

Reflections on *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*, by Luigi Pirandello
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As a theme in literature identity is found from the very beginning, when God, in the most famous tautology of all time, identifies himself by saying, "I am that I am." Some 1600 years later, instead of self-identification Jesus lets Peter identify him with his great confession, proclaiming, "You are Messiah, the Son of God."

The theme is there, implicit perhaps, in the ancient Greeks. Who is Achilles? Son of Peleus, to be sure. But also, we learn he is a) the greatest of all warriors, and b) a big baby. And who is Hector? He is a) A noble and graceful man, b) a tender husband and father, and c) the second greatest warrior, whose destiny is to die at Achilles' hand.

Identity is massively explicit in Dante, who gives names to scores of his malefactors, affirming that our individual identities are immortal. This is, of course, one of the great distinctions between the Christian West and all of the religious philosophies of the East—that we have names and will always have them, rather than dissolving namelessly into the great One.

Shakespeare loved the theme of identity and riffed on it repeatedly—mistaken identity in *A Midsummer night's Dream* and *A Comedy of Errors*, and concealed identity in *The Tempest*.

When we arrive in the Romantic Era, an ominous note emerges suddenly with the vicious declarations of Emma Bovary and the Underground Man that they are emphatically not who others take them to be. These disturbed pronouncements set the stage for even greater disturbances shortly to come.

Prior to the eruption of individualism in western culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were several broad loci within which a man would understand his sense of identity. He might say, I am a citizen of Tarsus in Cilicia, no mean city, indicating his identity in his community. He might say, I am a loyal subject of the King, identifying himself absolutely as a subject under a monarchy. Or he might confess to be, as most were, a man of the soil, a farmer whose identity was in his symbiotic relationship with the land. Or again, he might say, I am a servant of the Most High God, expressing his primary identity in terms of his relationship to the Divine. These were the traditional anchor points for understanding one's place in the world. And I will say in passing, that it is my view that true conservatism consists in continuing to think of oneself in these traditional terms.

But the nineteenth century brought unprecedented and radical change. Massive waves of immigration and warfare profoundly disturbed the relationships between many people and their communities. This, in itself, was nothing new, but combined with other changes happening around the same time it proved cataclysmic. One by one monarchies were converting to democracies, which transforms the self-identification with a personal ruler into, at best, the patriotism associated with a political ideal. The industrial revolution was taking people off the land by the millions and removing them to modern cities, where many languished in impoverished anonymity. And the new, higher criticism emanating from Germany was destroying the basis for faith in the minds of many. By the turn of the twentieth century the traditional anchor points for self-identification were in dire straits, and individualism was a well-established intellectual tradition with a century-old heritage.

With these shifting cultural currents disturbing, transforming or even destroying the traditional anchor points where people had placed their sense of self, what were they left with? If a man can no longer define himself by appeal to his community, his King, the land or his God,

where does he look? He looks within. And when he looks within, without any way of connecting himself to that which is without, things get bad.

In fact, people go insane. For Pirandello is absolutely right. If your own mind is the absolute, if you have no way of connecting a bridge between your own perceptions and the objective world outside your mind, you are doomed to a solipsistic nightmare. This is the abyss Pirandello shows to us, and it is the abyss into which Kafka fell headlong. Kafka is such painful reading for precisely this reason: We don't want to go there.

And we don't have to go there. Pirandello himself illuminates two pathways away from the abyss. The first is this: The major consequence of Vitangelo Moscarda's musings is moral action based on a moral reality outside of his mind. He realizes that others regard him as a usurer, and he does not wish to be regarded as a usurer. Usurers are morally depraved, accumulating wealth by exploiting the crises afflicting others. In this judgment Moscarda is right. There is a moral law outside himself, and thus there is at least this one connection back to community and back to relationship with the objective world outside the individual's mind.

The second pathway away from what Pirandello calls "the void with its futile constructions," is Moscarda's acquiescence in abandoning all efforts at "the horror" of being one for himself, and taking refuge instead in the moment by moment awareness of all things outside him being simply *themselves* and *for themselves*. Whether this is, finally, a responsible and philosophically tenable course of action, I leave it to this society to debate. But it seems, in Moscarda's case, to have turned him from the red blanket of flaming and flying madness to the green blanket of serenity and peace. For those of us who have had small glimpses into the abyss, we thank God for the green blanket.