



De Francisci, E. (2021) Verga, Duse and Pirandello: Without an Author. *PSA: Journal of the Pirandello Society of America*, 33, pp. 16-32.

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Deposited on: 16 September 2021

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This article traces Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and the tradition of metatheatre back to the *veristi*. An examination of Pirandello's association with the *verista* movement, particularly his predecessor Giovanni Verga, indicates that Verga, above all, was treading on the same grounds which the *Agrigentino* himself would later revolutionize: the meta-literary. The present analysis of Verga's use of impersonality will show that his characters were already, in part, "without an author." A close look at Verga's early tales, namely his "Nedda" (1874) and "Fantasticheria" ["Picturesque Lives"] (1880) from his collection, *Vita dei campi* [*Life in the Field*], will illustrate that the author's innovative narrative technique arguably paved the way for Pirandello's *Six Characters*. I propose that, from as early as *Nedda*, Verga was already experimenting with the meta-literary, anticipating Pirandello's "La tragedia di un personaggio" [*The Tragedy of a Character*] (1911)—one of the bases for Pirandello's groundbreaking play. Moreover, I illustrate that Verga's theatre, specifically his collaboration with the celebrity star actress, Eleonora Duse, also had a role in shaping Pirandello's notions of art and reality, which Pirandello would then problematize in his *Six Characters*. This article will thus go some way in drawing our attention back to the key figures who inspired Pirandello's meta-theatre.

### Verga and His Narrative

Pirandello always had ambivalent views of his Sicilian predecessors, particularly of Giovanni Verga. After finishing his doctoral studies at the University of Bonn in 1893, Pirandello moved to Rome where he first encountered the *veristi*, Verga and Luigi Capuana, both of whom wrote largely about Sicily in their literary works. Verga was a major figure in this realist movement, and Pirandello would certainly have had to accommodate his influence when he began writing his own fiction (De Francisci, *A "New" Woman in Verga and Pirandello* 8). From his arrival in Rome to approximately 1916, Pirandello, as with the *veristi*, initially drew the subjects for his fiction from his motherland, Sicily, with the publication of his plays *Il berretto a sonagli* [*Cap and Bells*] (1916), *La giara* [*The Jar*] (1916), and *Liolà* (1916). But unlike Verga, who wrote in "Sicilianized Italian," (a form of Italian with a heavy Sicilian dialectal imprint superimposed), Pirandello was keen to employ Sicilian itself in his dialect plays. While Verga's idiosyncratic register allowed the author to both retain the local color in his narrative and enable his Italian readers to taste the Sicilian flavor of his stories, Pirandello, instead, rejected this hybrid form of writing, keeping his use of Italian and Sicilian separate. As we know, Pirandello wrote his *Liolà* in his local *Agrigentino* dialect in 1916 and produced a literal translation which he placed alongside the original text in 1917, revising his use of Italian in 1928 and shortly before his death in 1936 (De Francisci, "Translating Pirandello's *sicilianità*" 223-235).

The first time that Pirandello publicly expressed his views about Verga was on September 2, 1920, when he was invited to deliver a speech at the Teatro Massimo Vincenzo Bellini in Catania in honor of Verga's eightieth birthday. He added to this with a speech at the Reale Accademia d'Italia, December 3, 1931, this time to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *I Malavoglia* [*The House by the Medlar Tree*] (1881). In the latter speech, Pirandello acknowledged two groups of Italian authors: those who adopt a "stile di cose" ["a style of things"] (*Saggi, poesie, scritti vari* 391)—for example Dante, Machiavelli, Ariosto, Manzoni, and Verga—and those who adopt a "stile di parole" ["a style of words"] (*Saggi, poesie, scritti vari* 391)—including Petrarch, Guicciardini, Tasso, Monti, and D'Annunzio. The writers who adopted a "stile di parole" employed an antiquated "high" Petrarchan variety of Italian, what Pirandello had labelled earlier "[lo] sriver bello" ["[w]riting beautifully"] in his critical essay "Soggettivismo e oggettivismo" (1906) (*Saggi, poesie, scritti vari* 202, emphasis in original), while the writers who adopted a "stile di cose" offered their characters the freedom to speak in their natural, "low" regional variety of Italian, what Pirandello this time referred to as "[lo] sriver bene" ["writing well"] (*Saggi, poesie, scritti vari* 202, emphasis in original). This is what Pirandello admired

about Verga. He praised Verga's innovative style of writing, which allowed his Sicilian characters to speak in their idiosyncratic register, and as a result considered him "il più 'antiletterario' degli scrittori" ["the most 'anti-literary' of writers"] (*Saggi, poesie, scritti vari* 394 and 415). In a typically Pirandellian manner, however, beneath these commendations lie some acrid remarks:

Fu detto anche che il Verga "vede nella realtà il mondo quale esso è, e si spiega che non può essere diverso da quello che è" [...]. Bisognerebbe diffidare di noi stessi, della realtà del mondo posta da noi. Per sua fortuna il Verga non ne diffida; e perciò appunto non è, né può essere, nel senso vero e proprio della parola, un umorista (*Saggi, poesie, scritti vari* 399).

[It was also said that Verga 'regards reality as the world as it is, and it is clear that it cannot be different from that which it is' [...]. We ought to doubt ourselves and the reality of the world as we see it. Fortunately for him, Verga has no such doubts, which is precisely why he is not—nor can he ever be, in the true and proper sense of the word—a humorist.]

These closing remarks stress a significant point of divergence between Pirandello and his predecessor. Pirandello, here, maintained that Verga, as with the French Naturalists and the *veristi*, aimed at portraying only one view of reality in his fiction, without ever questioning what this view consisted of. Pirandello, on the other hand, mistrusted objective truth, and was more concerned with portraying a relativistic perspective in his works—one only has to think of the emergence of this perspective in *Il fu Mattia Pascal* [*The Late Mattia Pascal*] (1904) and *Uno, nessuno e centomila* [*One, No-One, One Hundred Thousand*] (1926). It is precisely Pirandello's doubts about objective reality that led to his deviation from *verismo*.

Despite this, what remains intriguing about the *verista* movement is how the movement, specifically Verga, appeared to be anticipating Pirandello's meta-literary technique. First of all, Verga creates an experimental approach to his narrative by creating the impression that he has withdrawn his role as Author from his works. One of the ways in which Verga achieves this is through his dialogic narrative technique, his "racconto dialogato" ["dialogued narrative"] or "dialogo raccontato" ["narrated dialogue"] (Russo 107), a technique which appears to be constructed not by the author, but by the voices of the characters.

Verga's narrative is, indeed, predominantly composed through the use of free indirect speech, a blend between direct and indirect speech. According to the linguist Giulio Herczeg, Verga's narrative contained more direct speech than indirect speech: "La novità del Verga consiste nel fatto che egli osa adoperare un discorso indiretto libero più vicino al diretto che non all'indiretto" ["Verga's originality consists in the fact that he dares to use a type of free indirect speech which is closer to direct speech than to indirect speech"] (28). The popular narrator in Verga's short stories represents the choral voice of the villagers: a voice which recounts the tales, independent of the author. As Gaetano Ragonese has indicated: "Chi parla non è più l'autore ma uno del popolo" ["The person speaking is no longer the author but one of the people"] (166), what Antonio Di Silvestro has called a "portavoce dell'anima folclorica del Villaggio" ["spokesperson of the village's folkloristic spirit"] (62). By giving the impression that his characters "live" in the works, telling their own stories in their own words, Verga appears to point the way to Pirandello's eventual six Characters, who would make their voices heard in the auditorium independently of their Author.

Verga's experimental style of writing develops through his use of impersonality, a technique he outlined in the preface to his *novella*, "L'amante di Gramigna" ["Gramigna's Lover"] (1880). Here, Verga reveals his intention to create a short story as though it were a "documento umano" ["human document"], composed of "parole semplici e pittoresche della narrazione popolare" ["simple and picturesque terms of popular narrative"] so that the reader is "faccia a faccia col fatto nudo e schietto, senza stare a cercarlo fra le linee del libro, attraverso la lente dello scrittore" (*Tutte le novelle* 191) ["confronted by the plain and simple facts rather than having to go searching for them between the lines with the lens of the writer"] (*Cavalleria rusticana and Other Stories* 93). Verga argued that "il trionfo

del romanzo" ["the triumph of the novel"] lies in "la sincerità della sua realtà" (192) ["the sincerity of its reality" (94)]. To achieve this, he felt he needed to see the action through his characters' eyes:

[L]a mano dell'artista rimarrà assolutamente invisibile, e il romanzo avrà l'impronta dell'avvenimento reale, e l'opera d'arte sembrerà *essersi fatta da sé*, aver maturato ed esser sorta spontanea come un fatto naturale, senza serbare alcun punto di contatto col suo autore. (192)

[[T]he hand of the artist will remain completely invisible. When that happens, it will carry the imprint of the real event, the work of art will seem to have created itself, to have grown spontaneously and come to fruition as though it were part of nature, without preserving any point of contact with its author (94).]

By thus removing the author's hand even further, Verga strengthens the illusion that he is absent from his narrative works and that the characters are recounting their own stories. It is therefore not by chance that Verga's use of impersonality has been associated with the theatre. The writer, Federico De Roberto, stressed in 1890 that "[I]mpersonalità non può conseguirsi che nel puro dialogo, e l'ideale della assoluta rappresentazione obbiettiva consiste nella *scena* come si scrive pel teatro" ["impersonality cannot be accomplished except in pure dialogue, and the ideal of absolute objective representation consists in the *scene* as is written for the theatre"] (4). In relation to Verga, Silvio D'Amico adds:

Per naturale forza di cose il Verga narratore, raccontando e commentando sempre meno, e dando ai suoi personaggi una libertà sempre maggiore, vale a dire lasciando ch'essi vivessero e dicessero tutto da sé, s'è trovato necessariamente alle soglie del Teatro (9).

[By natural force of circumstance Verga the storyteller, narrating and commenting less and less, and giving his characters an even greater freedom, that is to say leaving them to live and speak independently, unavoidably found himself at the doorstep of the Theatre.]

Verga himself linked his impersonal narrative technique with the theatre. In a letter to Nicola Scarano of March 12, 1915 about his narrative technique in *I Malavoglia*, Verga underlined that *veristi* writers aimed to "[d]ipingere il quadro coi colori adatti, in una parola, da cima a fondo, nella parlata degli attori e nella descrizione delle *scene* com'essi lo vedono, per vivere in loro e con loro" (*Lettere sparse*, emphasis mine) "[p]aint the picture with suitable colors, in other words, from top to bottom, in the actors' spoken language and in their description of the *scenes* as they see them, in order to live in them and with them". By removing "la mano dell'artista" (*Tutte le novelle* 192) ["the hand of the artist" (*Cavalleria rusticana and Other Stories* 94)] from the narrative and allowing the "actors" to execute their scenes independently, Verga produces a kind of "*effetto della rappresentazione*" ["*theatrical effect*"] (Blazina 67).

Significantly, once the characters become autonomous, Verga also appears to be experimenting with the meta-theatrical. As Pierluigi Pellini has remarked in relation to Pirandello:

Portare alle estreme conseguenze il principio dell'impersonalità "teatrale" significa aprire la strada ai più moderni esperimenti pirandelliani: quelli di Verga sono già, in parte, personaggi "senza autore", che non trovano un giudice autorevole in grado di dare senso alla loro esistenza (161).

[Taking the principle of "theatrical" impersonality to the extreme means opening the road to more modern Pirandellian experiments. The characters of Verga are already, in part, "without an author"; there is no authoritative judge to give meaning to their existence.]

To cite a few examples, in the opening extract from "Nedda," Verga's *bozzetto siciliano* [*Sicilian Sketch*], Verga depicts himself as both the narrator and character of the *novella*, sitting in his armchair

in front of the fireplace and reminiscing about the olive picker, whose story he recounts in the latter part of the tale:

E in una di coteste peregrinazioni vagabonde della spirito la fiamma che scoppiettava, troppo vicino forse, mi fece rivedere un'altra fiamma gigantesca che avevo visto ardere nell'immenso focolare della fattoria del Pino, alle falde dell'Etna. Pioveva, e il vento urlava incollerito; le venti o trenta donne che raccoglievano le ulive del podere facevano fumare le loro vesti bagnate dalla pioggia dinanzi al fuoco [...] Quando tutte furono stanche, venne la volta alle canzonette, *Nedda! – Nedda la varannisa!* Esclamarono parecchie. Dove s'è cacciata la *varannisa?* (*Tutte le novelle* 6-7).

[It was during one of these normal excursions of the soul that the flame flickered a little too closely perhaps, and brought back the vision of another gigantic flame I had once seen burning in the enormous fireplace at Piano, on the slopes of Etna. It was raining, the wind was howling angrily, and the twenty or thirty women employed to gather the olives on the farm were drying out their clothes, sodden by the rain, in front of the fire. [...] Once they were tired from dancing, it was time for the singing to begin, and several of the girls called out "Nedda! Nedda Varanisa! Where's Varannisa hidden herself?" (*Cavalleria rusticana and Other Stories* 2).]

Verga, in this passage, transitions from daydreaming about his time in the Sicilian countryside to recounting the main story, adopting the role of both narrator and character within the story. This recalls the way in which Pirandello would later depict himself meeting the peculiar character, Dottor Fileno, in "La tragedia di un personaggio" an indication of how Verga, in this early *novella*, seemed to be experimenting with a narrative technique which his successor would later develop further. In fact, according to Capuana, when Verga wrote "Nedda," perhaps the author himself was not aware of the essence of modernity in this short tale: "[F]orse non credeva d'aver trovato un nuovo filone nella miniera quasi intatta del romanzo italiano" ["Maybe he had not even realized that he had found a new sense of progression, almost intact, within the field of Italian narrative prose"] (117), a sense of progression which, I would argue, points forwards to Pirandello's *Six Characters*.

A similar impression is conveyed in "Fantasticheria" ["Picturesque Lives"]. In this short story, Verga reappears as a character as he recollects a trip to the fishing village of Aci Trezza with his aristocratic lady friend: "Una volta, mentre il treno passava vicino ad Aci-Trezza, voi, affacciandovi allo sportello del vagone, esclamaste: "Vorrei starci un mese laggiù!" (*Tutte le novelle* 121) ["Once, when the train was passing by Aci Trezza, you looked out of the carriage-window and exclaimed, 'I'd like to spend a month down there!'" (*Cavalleria rusticana and Other Stories* 39)]. Verga, in this tale, is once more both narrator and character as he reminisces this time of his fishing trip. What is striking in this story is how the fishermen will later return in *I Malavoglia*, forming a kind of story-within-a-story, just as other characters from his *Novelle rustiche* [*Rustic Tales*] (1882) re-emerge in the short story "Di là del mare" ["On the Other Side of the Sea"] (1883) (Lepschy 9-23). For example, in "Fantasticheria," Verga alludes to 'Ntoni in *I Malavoglia* who will leave his fishing village in search for a better life, only to be met with suffering and hardship:

Un dramma che qualche volta forse vi racconterò e di cui parmi tutto il nodo debba consistere in ciò: - che allorquando uno di quei piccoli, o più debole, o più incauto, o più egoista degli altri, volle staccarsi dal gruppo per vaghezza dell'ignoto, o per brama di meglio, o per curiosità di conoscere il mondo, il mondo da pesce vorace com'è, se lo ingoiò, e i suoi più prossimi con lui (*Tutte le novelle* 127-28).

[The drama of which I speak, which perhaps one day I shall unfold to you in its entirety, would seem to me to depend essentially on this: that whenever one of the underprivileged, being either weaker, or less cautious, or more selfish than the others, decided to break with his family out of a desire for the unknown, or an urge for a better life, or curiosity to know the

world, then the world, like the voracious fish that it is, swallowed him up along with his nearest and dearest (*Cavalleria rusticana and Other Stories* 45)]

It could be argued that these instances mark a point of departure for Pirandello's *Six Characters*. From as early as "Nedda," Verga was already experimenting with the meta-literary, anticipating Pirandello's "La tragedia di un personaggio." However, while Pirandello would later adopt a similar approach, unlike his predecessor he would push it forward and make significant innovations not just in his narrative, but also in his theatre.

### Verga and His Theatre

Not only might Verga's early narrative have inspired the development of Pirandello's meta-literature, but I would argue that Verga's theatre, equally, contributed to the development of Pirandello's views of art and reality. To some extent, it is somewhat unsurprising that Verga should have written for the theatre. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the popularity of the theatre soared and consequently the need for material became more pressing. As a flourishing writer, Verga perhaps felt obliged to write for this popular medium. Moreover, it could also be said that Verga's impersonal narrative technique inevitably led him to produce for the theatre, where the role of the author is entirely removed from the stage and what we see are characters performing their own drama, in their own words.

Though Verga's style of writing might have drawn him to the theatre, overall, he had a problematic relationship with it. Before the unprecedented success of his *Cavalleria rusticana* in 1884, Verga had a long history of failed attempts at staging plays, including *I nuovi tartufi* [*New Truffles*] (1865), *Rose caduche* [*Evanescent Flowers*] (1869), and *Onore* [*Honor*] (1869). Following *Cavalleria rusticana*, Verga produced *In portineria* [*The Inn*] (1885), *La Lupa* [*The She Wolf*] (1896), and *La caccia al lupo* [*The Wolf Hunt*] (1901), each based on an antecedent *novella*, and finally *Dal mio al tuo* [*From Yours to Mine*] which premièred in 1903.

In 1894, Verga elaborated on his doubts about writing for a theatre audience during an interview with Ugo Ojetti about his play, *Dal mio al tuo*:

Ho scritto pel teatro, ma non lo credo certamente una forma d'arte superiore al romanzo, anzi lo stimo una forma inferiore e primitiva, sopra tutto per alcune ragioni che dirò meccaniche. Due massimamente: la necessità dell'intermediario tra autore e pubblico, dell'attore; la necessità di scrivere non per un lettore ideale come avviene nel romanzo, ma per un pubblico radunato a folla così da dover pensare a una media di intelligenza e di gusto, a un *average reader*, come dicono gli inglesi (Ojetti 70-71).

[I have written for the theatre, but I certainly do not believe that it is a form of art superior to the novel. On the contrary, I consider it an inferior and primitive form, above all for several reasons which I will call mechanical. Two reasons above all: the need to have an intermediary between the author and public, that is the actor; and the need to write not for an ideal reader as occurs with the novel, but for an audience brought together in a crowd, in such a way that one must think of an average level of intelligence and taste, of an *average reader* as the English say.]

What is interesting about this passage is Verga's recognition of the importance of actors, and the crucial role they play in conveying the characters' drama to the audience, just as Pirandello would later do, especially in his critical essay, "Illustratori, attori e traduttori" (1908), produced in the period leading up to 1921. Indeed, this was still a time when the theatre, especially for the élite, was considered a main source of entertainment, and, therefore, Verga was no longer writing for an "ideal" reader of narrative prose but for a large crowd expecting to be entertained on a night out.

Furthermore, it seems that Verga had already thought hard about the kinds of collaborations involved in theatre four years prior to this. In a letter to the contemporary Italian writer, Felice Cameroni of April 20, 1890, Verga revealed the following:

Ahimè!, mi tenta ancora il sogno di questa forma dell'arte comunicativa ed efficacissima, la realizzazione di un pubblico intelligente e di una collaborazione perfetta tra autore e comici (Verga, *Lettere sparse* 244).

[Alas! The dream of this communicative and very effective form of art still tempts me: the realization of an intelligent audience and of a perfect collaboration between author and actors.]

From this, we can conclude that what drew Verga to the theatre was the artistic collaboration between author, actors, and an “intelligent” audience. In an earlier letter to Capuana of July 7, 1885, Verga had already explained what he meant by an intelligent audience. Here he detailed that his ideal spectators were “un pubblico scelto e intelligente, non numeroso, non guastato dalle coltellate della *Cavalleria rusticana* e che non è venuto in teatro per vedere mordere l'orecchio a compare Alfio” (Verga, *Carteggio Verga-Capuana* 242) [“a select and intelligent audience, not great in number, not tainted by the terrible stabbing in *Cavalleria rusticana* and that has not come to the theatre to see Compare Alfio's ear being bitten”], reproaching his own climatic duel in *Cavalleria rusticana* for having satisfied the less-refined tastes of contemporary audiences.

What is more, Verga described in this letter what kind of actor would participate in this ideal collaboration: an interpretation “dalla Duse o da una Duse maschio—l'Andò è troppo attore ancora” (Verga, *Carteggio Verga-Capuana* 242) [“by Duse or a male version of Duse—Andò is still too much of a theatrical actor”]. I would argue that here we come closer to understanding what tempted Verga to write for the theatre, and what might have “rubbed off” on Pirandello. If, as Verga revealed to Cameroni, the main temptation was that of writing for “un pubblico intelligente” [“an intelligent audience”] and forming “una collaborazione perfetta tra autore e comici” (Verga, *Lettere sparse* 244) [“a perfect collaboration between author and actors”], what Verga was actually saying—drawing from his letter to Capuana—was that what tempted him to produce plays was a small-sized audience, who did not expect to be entertained on a night out at the theatre, and a perfect collaboration between himself and his actors, or, more precisely, Duse.

In recognizing the complex collaborative processes involved when staging drama, Verga appears to be a playwright well ahead of his time, despite being predominantly known for his narrative prose. Moreover, Verga's thoughts and reflections appear to provide a basis from which Pirandello would later build in his *Six Characters*. The so-called “perfect collaboration” between the author's work and the interpretation of the performers indicates the kind of synergism that the Actors and Characters would eventually fail to achieve in *Six Characters*. However, it would not be until his successor, Pirandello, problematizes these collaborative processes in his ground-breaking play that we would be able to gain a unique insight into what Verga actually meant here, particularly in terms of finding the right performer to inhabit the right role.

### **Verga and His Muse**

Verga aimed to see the characters' drama through their eyes and convey their feelings in their own words, and in the figure of Eleonora Dusa he found an actress who did precisely that, only this time through her acting. In the words of Donatella Orecchia, both Verga and Duse were engaged in a “ricerca parallela” [“parallel search”] (127) for portraying reality in their art (De Francisci, “Verga and Duse” 41-55).

From Verga's correspondence, what emerges is that Duse was at the heart of his decision to produce *Cavalleria rusticana* for the stage. In a letter to the contemporary writer, Giuseppe Giacosa, dated October 8, 1883, Verga specifically reveals his intention to write a play for the *grande attrice*. He

asks whether she “[v]orrà e potrà recitare una mia cosa in un atto o due a Roma nel prossimo novembre” (Verga, *Lettere sparse* 146-47) “[w]ill want and able to perform something of mine in one or two acts in Rome next November”. Giacosa played the intermediary until Duse eventually accepted the lead role of Santuzza. The biographer Alfred Alexander has argued that once she took on this role, Verga felt the need to develop Santuzza’s character, which was only thinly sketched in the narrative, so as to give the actress “the opportunity to show her art” (110).

The première took place at the Teatro Carignano in Turin on January 14, 1884 under the direction of Cesare Rossi. Delighted with Duse’s opening performances, Verga praised how the actress “prese a cuore le mie parti” [“took my roles to heart”] in a letter to Gegè Primoli of January 24, 1884 (Verga, *Lettere sparse* 156). What is significant about these performances is how contemporary reviews and early accounts appear to anticipate the kind of fusion between art and reality which the Actors and Characters would fail to create in *Six Characters*. For instance, Duse was said to personify the role of Santuzza, moving her body just as the character would have done herself, so much so that Cesare Molinari has argued that it was the actress herself who actually *created* the part (72). The British theatre critic, Arthur Symons, points to her “unconscious hand” (131), which appeared to instinctively fold over Turiddu’s sleeve. Another critic, the German Herman Bang, also recollected how Duse in the role of Santuzza seemed to spontaneously twist her handkerchief while leaning against a wall (66). Duse herself admitted that, at the end of her performances, the most tired parts of her body were her hands (Piccini 98). In his article “Eleonora Duse: Actress Supreme,” first published in *The Century Magazine* shortly after the actress’s death in 1924, Pirandello himself (known by his contemporaries as “una Duse coi pantaloni” [“a Duse in trousers”] (Lopez 95)), called her hands “divine hands, that seemed to talk” (247).

The same kind of artistic fusion re-emerges in the second (and final) play which Duse interpreted for Verga, his *In portineria* (1885). Critics and audiences were mainly struck by her interpretation of Målia’s death scene. On December 2, 1886, the *Corriere della sera* praised the way in which “la Duse si abbandonò con inerte mollezza in braccio alla sorella” [“Duse let herself fall into her sister’s arms lifelessly”] and the following day, Boutet, in the same newspaper, wrote: “[M]orì come si muore [...] non si va più oltre” (Molinari 74) [“[S]he died as people do die [...] one cannot get better than this”]. A few days later, on 4 December, *L’Arte drammatica* revealed that Duse “è stata una tisichella incantevole [...] per i suoi sguardi, per i suoi sorrisi che morivano sulle labbra pallide” (*ibid.*) [“was an enchanting consumptive girl [...] with her gaze, with her smiles which died on her pale lips”]. In changing the audience’s initial unenthusiastic response, following the poor reception at the premiere on May 16, 1885 at the Teatro Manzoni in Milan starring Olga Lugo, Duse was able to “rescue” the play until she removed it from her repertoire, as Raffaello Barbiera puts it: “*In portineria* ebbe in Eleonora Duse un’interprete somma e una salvatrice almeno momentanea” (125) [“*In portineria* had in Eleonora Duse an outstanding interpreter and a savior, albeit temporary”].

As well as anticipating the artistic fusion that the Actors and Characters fail to achieve in *Six Characters*, these early accounts and theatre reviews of Duse’s performances anticipate Pirandello’s utopian view of the actor who truly embodies their characters, an embodiment of fiction and non-fiction we would have to wait until Pirandello’s *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* [*Tonight We Improvise*] (1930) and *Trovarsi* [*Finding Oneself*] (1932) to discover. From Pirandello’s article in *The Century Magazine* mentioned above, it is evident that Duse had a long-lasting impact on Pirandello’s developing views of the role of the actor. In this article, Pirandello opened his discussion by stressing that “[f]rom the very beginning of her long career Eleonora Duse had the one controlling thought—the ambition to disappear, to merge herself as a real person, in the character she brought to life on the stage”, what he considers to be “the first duty of the actor—that supreme renunciation of self” (244). He recalled the actress’s physiological transformations during her portrayals of women in her early repertoire, such as the lead roles in *La Dame aux camélias*, *Frou-Frou*, *Fedora*, and *Cavalleria rusticana*, noting her “facial expression free from every conventional device, and changing only in direct correspondence with real inner transformations of the soul” (274).



Though critics and scholars have tended to focus on Pirandello's early skepticism of actors whom he considered to be incapable of truly "becoming" their characters, as exemplified in *Six Characters*, Duse was one of the early exceptions to this rule. Pirandello's initial skepticism in regards to the role of the actor was encapsulated, above all, in the claim that art and reality were distinct entities: "[L]a vita o si scrive o si vive" (*Saggi, poesie, scritti vari* 1003) ["[L]ife is either written or lived"], as well as in his critical essay, "Illustratori, attori e traduttori" (1908). Here, Pirandello famously argued that actors' performances do not necessarily correspond with the playwright's original creation, leading a hypothetical author present at a rehearsal to want to shout out to the actor "No! così no!" (*Saggi, poesie, scritti vari* 216) ["No, not like that!"]. However, in this essay, he also acknowledged the potential of "un grande attore" ["a great actor"] capable of becoming "l'incarnazione piena e perfetta" ["the full and perfect incarnation"] of his character (*Saggi, poesie, scritti vari* 215), and I would argue that Pirandello first witnessed this perfect incarnation in Duse, particularly when performing her early repertoire, including the works by Verga (De Francisci, "Generations" 58-70).

Unfortunately for Pirandello, however, Duse never starred in any of his plays. From as early as 1887, he had attempted to persuade her to perform some of his early theatrical works, such as *Fatti che or son parole* [*Facts That Now Are Words*] (1887) and *Le popolane* [*The Village Women*] (1888)—two plays which are now lost—but his hopes were not fulfilled. Years later, as a mature writer, after seeing her performance in the film *Cenere* [*Ashes*] (1916), based on the 1904 novel by Grazia Deledda and directed by and starring Febo Mari, he was, once more, spurred to ask her to interpret the role of the mother in his *La vita che ti diedi* [*The Life I Gave You*] (1923). Duse declined the offer because of her inability to identify with the mother who, instead of grieving for her late son, continues to see her son alive in herself as well as in his partner pregnant with his child. As she confessed to a close companion and biographer Olga Signorelli, she could only interpret roles with which she empathized: "[S]e a me muore una persona cara io devo piangere, disperarmi, ma poi a poco a poco la ritrovo *sul piano spirituale*" ["[I]f somebody close to me dies, I have to cry, tear myself apart, but then, very slowly, I find them again *on a spiritual level*"] (Branca, "Divina Duse"). Instead, Pirandello would have to wait until his encounter with Marta Abba in 1925 to find the actress who could bring to life the artistic fusion, he had originally witnessed in the *divina* Duse. In the words of Claudio Vicentini:

La Duse aveva formato la propria arte lavorando sui testi di Verga, di Dumas e di Ibsen, diventandone l'attrice esemplare. E nello stesso modo, ora, Marta Abba avrebbe potuto sviluppare i modi della propria recitazione misurandosi con le opere di Pirandello, realizzandosi compiutamente come interprete ideale delle nuove forme della sua drammaturgia (159).

[Duse had learnt her craft through working with the texts by Verga, Dumas and Ibsen, becoming their exemplary actress. And now, in the same way, Marta Abba could develop her own acting technique by pitting herself against the works of Pirandello, realizing her potential entirely as the ideal interpreter of the new forms associated with his drama.]

## Conclusion

I hope that this contribution can go some way in situating the early influences of Pirandello's *Six Characters*. First and foremost, Verga's narrative paved the way for a new meta-literary technique that produced the effect that his characters were "without an author," and, in so doing, became a precursor to Pirandello's "La tragedia di un personaggio." The foregoing analysis has showed that Verga's impersonal artistic technique led him naturally to the theatre, where the "mano dell'artista" ["the hand of the artist"] is entirely removed and the characters are left to live their drama independently on stage, just like the six Characters would later do in 1921. Verga's theatre develops further the moment he discovers his muse, Eleonora Duse. Duse's approach to her early repertoire, which included Verga's *Cavalleria rusticana* and (for a short time) *In portineria*, seemed to anticipate the kind of artistic fusion the Actors and Characters are unable to achieve in *Six Characters*—a merging of art and reality which

Pirandello greatly admired and would eventually encapsulate in his *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* and *Trovarsi*. So, as we look forward to this year's centenary to *Six Characters*, I hope this article will inspire us to look back at all the trajectories that have led us here and reconsider the impact these naturalistic artists had in the making of his groundbreaking play.

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